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**About the Research Project**

This briefing paper summarizes the findings of a longer research report entitled *An Uncertain Homecoming: Views of Syrian Refugees in Jordan on Return, Justice, and Coexistence*. Through in-depth qualitative interviews with Syrian refugees in Jordan, the study explores the challenges that Syrians will face in returning home and rebuilding relationships once the conflict in their country ends and the role that justice can play in these processes. The study stresses the importance of amplifying the voices of Syrian refugees, calling attention to their stories, and incorporating them in discussions about building a sustainable peace in Syria.

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## An Uncertain Homecoming

### Views of Syrian Refugees in Jordan on Return, Justice, and Coexistence

**Introduction**

The protracted conflict in Syria continues to have serious and widespread ill effects on the lives of Syrian individuals, households, and communities. The majority of the Syrian population has been tremendously affected by the war, including women, children, and elderly, with millions having been forced to leave behind their life projects, memories, hopes, and dreams in search of protection and safety. For Syrian refugees, very basic needs, such as food, health services, education, water, utilities, and sanitation, had become unattainable and staying alive meant leaving their lives behind to escape the constant risk of shelling, artillery strikes, abduction, enforced disappearance, exploitation, forced displacement, and violence. Most have sought refuge in neighboring countries, including Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, and beyond the region, in Europe and elsewhere.

This briefing paper presents findings from a study exploring the impact of the conflict and displacement on Syrian refugees in Jordan and the potential for justice and coexistence among Syrian communities. The study aims to provide a better understanding of the experiences of Syrian refugees, including the harms and losses they have suffered, both individually and collectively, and their expectations, concerns, and priorities for potential durable solutions to their displacement, including the conditions that would facilitate return to their country and communities and help them to overcome divisions, rebuild relationships, and promote justice.

The study provides insights into the challenges that refugees will likely face in a post-war Syria. It focuses primarily on three geographical areas: Daraa, Homs, and Swayda. Daraa and Homs are two of four governorates where the majority of Syrian refugees in Syria’s neighboring host countries originate,<sup>1</sup> and where the majority of refugees in Jordan, if they return, are most likely to return, in addition to rural Damascus and Aleppo. Further, the overwhelming majority of refugees from Daraa and Homs are Sunni Muslim, which means that should they return, they will live among, or in close proximity to, communities belonging to minority sects (such as Alawite and Shi’a) that are overwhelmingly perceived as pro-government and largely hostile to Sunnis.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR data for refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon shows that the majority (63.7% or 1.3 million persons) originate from four governorates: Aleppo (17.2%), Homs (17.5%), Daraa (16.7%), and Rural Damascus (12.2%); UNHCR, “Comprehensive Protection and Solution Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return To Syria,” February 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/ar/documents/download/63223>

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While all refugees have common experiences of displacement and violence, the details of where they came from and who they are provide a more accurate and specific picture of why they were forced to leave their homes and what they feel they need to return.

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The range of Syrian refugees' experiences and views are shaped in important ways by where the refugees came from and who they are—in other words, by their place of origin and their identity, which are, of course, connected. The findings of this study are, therefore, presented according to the geographical areas where refugees had lived in Syria, as well as their gender, age, and faith. While all refugees have common experiences of displacement and violence, the details of where they came from and who they are provide a more accurate and specific picture of why they were forced to leave their homes and what they feel they need to return.

The study first presents the views of refugees according to their place of origin in Syria—Daraa, Homs, and Swayda. Regarding return, interviewees from all areas expressed a common concern about safety and security, especially fears of arrest and detention, punitive or retaliatory acts, indiscriminate shelling, physical destruction, sectarian divisions, and perceived demographic changes. Refugees also articulated skepticism about the possibility of achieving justice, although some spoke about the need for truth, reform, accountability, compensation, divine justice, and housing, land, and property.

Views on future coexistence were more varied. For refugees from Daraa's Bosra al-Sham and Homs, concerns centered around Sunni-Shi'a and Sunni-Alawite relations. Among refugees from Daraa and Swayda, concerns also had to do with relations between Sunni and Druze. In each case, their concerns were shaped by their perceptions of group roles in the violence, political dynamics, and their experiences during displacement.

The study then looks at how gender and age have shaped refugees' experiences and views. Children and youth spoke about safety and security, sectarian divisions, and especially the trauma caused by what they had seen and experienced. Men spoke about their fear of arrest, detention, torture, and forced conscription, in particular, while women related their traumas and responsibilities, family relationships, and economic challenges, as well as their resilience and new social roles.

The study also examines how intersectional vulnerabilities among different groups, including minorities, have affected the views of refugees, revealing similar concerns about safety and security and distrust of the state or fear of armed opposition groups. For some, security meant removing the current regime and holding its members accountable or dismantling militias and armed groups. Some said they could not forgive those who supported the opposition, which they perceived as causing the destruction of the country.

Finally, the study reviews refugee experiences in Jordan (their host country) and the implications for return, justice, and coexistence. Many Syrians fled to Jordan because of its social, cultural, and religious similarities to their own country and the fact that they already had family members there. Nevertheless, they have faced a range of challenges, including social and economic exclusion, tensions with host communities, and restrictive state policies. While these leave refugees vulnerable as a whole, particular groups, such as Palestinian refugees, are especially marginalized. Refugees in camps, regardless of their identities, often feel trapped and excluded. At the same time, refugees both inside and outside of camps have shown their resilience in the face of hardship.

The concerns raised by the refugees interviewed for this study are pressing, particularly after Syrian government forces, backed by the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran, retook most of the country last year, including three key areas in Syria: Eastern Ghouta,<sup>2</sup> the southern Damascus areas of al-Hajar al-Aswad and Yarmouk Camp,<sup>3</sup> and the governorate of Daraa.<sup>4</sup> The current regime, which is run by a feared and notorious security system, is winning the war militarily but has offered no acknowledgment of committing crimes or abuses and therefore no reform agenda for its security institutions, making it extremely difficult—if not impossible—for refugees to return to their homeland in the short term. One of the most common concerns among refugees interviewed for this study was the risk of being subjected to arbitrary arrest, after which one's fate becomes uncertain and, in many cases, unknown.

Such fears voiced by refugees about return are well founded, with credible reports of various security branches arbitrarily arresting returnees,<sup>5</sup> including in areas that fell under government control in 2018, such as Daraa.<sup>6</sup> These arrests have taken place despite, for example, local agreements in the Daraa governorate between armed opposition groups and the government and/or pro-government authorities intended to a large extent to settle the status of individuals and protect them from being arbitrarily arrested.

Despite the continued lack of security, the government's retaking of most parts of the country has been used by some host countries as a pretext to call for the large-scale return of refugees. Another unfortunate push factor is the dwindling funding provided for refugees by the international community,<sup>7</sup> despite the position of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) that present conditions in Syria are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity.

The focus on coexistence in this study attempts to show the extent of the challenges by illustrating the feelings of hatred and enmity resulting from violence and violations and the need to identify adequate steps for return that would allow refugees to feel safe in going back to their homes and living in close proximity to, or among, members of "hostile" community groups. Refugees' lack of trust in government authorities and armed opposition groups means that they look cynically at the so-called reconciliation agreements reached between government and/or pro-government authorities and armed opposition groups and community leaders in areas under or formerly under the control of armed opposition groups.

There was a general sense among interviewees that the change to government control has brought a situation of victor's justice and that there will be no justice in Syria, particularly as long as the regime, which they consider the main perpetrator in the conflict, remains in power. The findings of this study, which include refugees' fear of return and the challenges

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2 By mid-April 2018, all anti-government forces had left Eastern Ghouta after a military offensive that began on February 18, 2018.

3 By May 21, 2018, the Syrian government had regained full control of Damascus for the first time since 2012 after its armed forces recaptured the Yarmouk Camp in southern Damascus.

4 By the end of July 2018, the Syrian government regained full control of the governorate of Daraa after a six-week offensive.

5 Anchal Vohra, "A Deadly Welcome Awaits Syria's Returning Refugees," *ForeignPolicy.com*, February 6, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/06/a-deadly-welcome-awaits-syrias-returning-refugees/>

6 Interviews conducted on November 29, 2018, and February 3, 2019, with a lawyer and a human rights activist who monitor the situation of arbitrary arrests in Daraa.

7 Ana V. Ibáñez Prieto, "UNICEF Slashes Services to Syrian Refugees Due to Shortfall," *The Jordan Times*, September 8, 2018, [www.jordantimes.com/news/local/unicef-slashes-services-syrian-refugees-due-shortfall](http://www.jordantimes.com/news/local/unicef-slashes-services-syrian-refugees-due-shortfall)

to future coexistence and lasting peace, demonstrate the need for forms of justice to be adopted nationally and internationally to address war crimes and crimes against humanity that have taken place in Syria.

### Methodology

This study is part of an ICTJ research project into the views, expectations, and priorities of Syrian refugees for future coexistence and justice in Syria should they return one day. In 2017, a first phase of this project was conducted in Lebanon and the findings published in a report titled *Not Without Dignity: Views of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon on Displacement, Conditions of Return, and Coexistence*.<sup>8</sup> This study complements the previous report on Lebanon but examines a wider range of refugee experiences and views. It is based on empirical and qualitative research in Jordan, primarily in the central and northern governorates of Amman, Irbid, Madaba, Mafraq, Sahab, and Zarqa as well as al-Za'atari refugee camp and informal camps. It is based on interviews with refugees conducted by two bilingual (Arabic and English) consultants from April 11 to June 12, 2018.

In total, 121 Syrian refugees were interviewed, including 32 refugees from Daraa, 21 from Damascus (including 4 from Yarmouk camp), 20 from Homs, 11 from Swayda, eight from Hama, seven from Idlib, six from Eastern Ghouta, five from Aleppo, five from Quneitra, two from Rif Dimashq, one from Hasaka, one from Tartus, one from Latakia, and one from Daraa camp. Sixty-four interviewees were male and 57 were females. Ages ranged from 18 to 75 years. Religious affiliations included 101 Sunni Muslims, 11 Druze, three Ismaelites, two Alawites, and two Christians. Interviewees included six Palestinian refugees from Syria, six Bedouins, five Circassians, two Kurds, two Rifa'ites, and one Chichnian.

Interviewees included university students, members of the media, civil society activists, humanitarian aid workers, defected Syrian soldiers, defected members of the Syrian government, a former member of an opposition armed group, current and former members of political parties, chiefs of tribal communities, activists, educators, lawyers, doctors, bloggers, manual laborers, and housewives. A large number of interviewees were living in poverty or extreme poverty, unemployed, and dependent on assistance and humanitarian aid.

Interviews with refugees focused on the following areas: the harms and losses that led to their displacement and the hardships they have suffered in their host country; the conditions that would allow for their return to Syria, integration in the host country, or resettlement in a third country; the measures or support that would facilitate their return, integration, or resettlement in Syria; the types of changes and divisions within Syrian communities; understandings of coexistence and justice; and the potential role of external actors in supporting durable solutions and reconciliation.

Each interview ranged in length from one to four hours. Some were followed up with a second session, to ensure the validity and the value of the findings. This study is not a survey but a set of qualitative interviews that address the complexities of refugee experiences, circumstances, and views on the future. Interviews were conducted rigorously and minimized bias. For example, by not using terms such as “reconciliation” or “transitional justice” unless the respondents themselves used them first, the interviews took an open-ended approach in order to avoid leading with pre-determined ideas, measures, or proposals.

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8 Rim El Gantri and Karim El Mufti, *Not Without Dignity: Views of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon on Displacement, Conditions of Return, and Coexistence*, New York: ICTJ, 2017.

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Given the trauma experienced by many of the interview subjects, interviews were conducted at length with sensitivity, establishing appropriate relationships between the researchers and interviewees. In order to prioritize the respondents' comfort level and minimize any risks to them, interviews were held in different places, including private homes, camp tents, local offices of NGOs, and more public places, such as cafes and universities.

This study also complements other work being done on the experiences and views of Syrian refugees in the major countries of asylum, including a 2017 Oxfam report on the perceptions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon based on focus group discussions and a broader survey, but not focusing on issues of reconciliation and justice or using in-depth individual interviews;<sup>9</sup> a CARE International 2017 survey of Syrian refugees and host households in Jordan, which also does not focus on reconciliation and justice;<sup>10</sup> a 2018 Hague Institute for Innovation of Law study, based primarily on surveys of 1,800 Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, on their justice needs and experiences;<sup>11</sup> and a 2018 study by the Carnegie Middle East Center on the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan for returning based primarily on focus group discussions.<sup>12</sup>

This ICTJ research study is based on in-depth qualitative interviews with individuals, which allows for their personal views and stories to be spotlighted. In addition, and partly as a result of the methodology, these stories demonstrate the complicated and nuanced nature of the relationships among individuals, families, religious and ethnic groups, government institutions, and nonstate groups and the immense challenges that efforts to rebuild those relationships and establish coexistence will undoubtedly face in the aftermath of the Syrian war.

### Summary of Findings

The findings of this study into refugee views on return, justice, and coexistence showed that the decision to voluntarily return to Syria and peacefully coexist with other communities, including minorities, is not only linked to the progress of high-level talks between the government and opposition parties and their respective allies in Geneva and Astana. It is also strongly linked to the sense of security at the local level and refugees' willingness, or lack of it, to live side-by-side with other communities perceived as hostile.

Refugees interviewed in Jordan highlighted safety and security as their most immediate concerns regarding return. They fear arrest, detention, torture, forced disappearance, abduction, forced conscription, gender-based violence, and indiscriminate shelling. They have a deep distrust of state institutions, armed actors, and foreign powers, and must deal with the psychological difficulties of returning to places of violence and loss. Refugees also have significant economic concerns related to return, particularly around housing, employment, and physical infrastructure. In Jordan, economic exclusion and vulnerability compound these obstacles.

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9 Nour Shawaf and Francesca El Asmar, "We're Not There Yet:" *Voices of Refugees from Syria in Lebanon*, Oxfam Research Reports, Oxfam, May 2017.

10 CARE International, *7 Years into Exile: How Urban Syrian Refugees, Vulnerable Jordanians and Other Refugees in Jordan Are Being Impacted by the Syria Crisis*, June 2017.

11 Hague Institute for Innovation of Law, *Justice Needs of Syrian Refugees: Legal Problems in Daily Life*, The Hague: HIL, 2018.

12 Maha Yahya with Jean Kassir and Khalil el-Hariri, *Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Return Home*, Beirut: Carnegie Middle East Center, 2018.

One of the clearest findings of this study is the complexity of the challenges that Syrians will face in rebuilding social relationships after the war. Refugees interviewed highlighted sectarian divisions based on distrust, intolerance, and even hatred of other groups. They spoke of personal and family relationships coming undone, as well as tensions with host communities in the form of discrimination, exploitation, and harassment. Refugees pointed to the needs for regime change, reform of state security institutions, and dismantling of non-state armed groups, and a hope for justice in the form of accountability, truth about disappeared or abducted loved ones, and return of land and property.

Refugees articulated widespread skepticism that justice would be achieved and a lack of awareness about their rights to make justice claims. At the same time, however, they exhibited a powerful resilience. Whether it is in entering the labor market for the first time, overturning traditional gender roles, or starting education programs for children in camps, refugees demonstrated their independence and agency. In efforts to find durable solutions, pursue justice, and foster coexistence, refugees must be part of the process.

### **Views on Return**

Some issues that refugees spoke about cut across geography and identity. For example, their main concern regarding return was generally the level of safety and security in Syria, although the particularities of what constituted security varied. Most refugees from Bosra al-Sham, in Daraa, said they feared return even after the war due to the risk of retaliatory measures by the government, such as arrest and detention, for avoiding military service or retaliatory measures by opposition armed groups for not having supported them. Refugees from Bosr al-Harir, in Daraa, also feared return because of the risks of both indiscriminate shelling of their homes and arrest and detention.

Interviewees from both areas said that in order to make Syria safe for return, there needed to be regime change (for example, that the Assad regime should be “removed by the roots” or “uprooted top to bottom”), international intervention, or an internationally sponsored agreement. Refugees also spoke about the need for adequate information about the security situation to make a decision about return.

Due to government shelling of their town, refugees from Bosr al-Harir also spoke of the damage to their homes as a primary obstacle to return, while those from Homs also pointed to the general physical destruction caused by the war. Refugees from Homs were concerned about return because of both their distrust of the government institutions that they felt were responsible for their displacement and insecurity related to sectarian divisions that had led to abductions and summary killings between once peacefully coexisting neighbors, leading some to voice a desire to resettle elsewhere.

In Swayda, armed groups and gangs are involved in drug dealing, smuggling, and abductions. Most interviewees from there did not want to return after the war because they do not believe that the security situation will improve, because they fear punitive measures for avoiding military service or deserting jobs in the public sector, or because of the bad economic situation.

### **Views on Justice**

For the vast human rights violations committed during the war, refugees frequently expressed a desire to see justice but also a deep skepticism that it would ever be achieved. They pointed to the difficulty of determining truth and responsibility for alleged crimes, lack of trust in government institutions and in the international community’s commit-

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Those refugees who spoke about specific justice outcomes highlighted the need for the truth about what had happened to relatives and friends who had been forcibly disappeared or detained and the need to reform state security institutions.

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ment to accountability, the regime’s recapturing of most of the territory from armed opposition groups leading to “victor’s justice,” and the limits of compensation in the face of the massive injustices suffered by Syrians.

Those who did speak about specific justice outcomes highlighted the need for the truth about what had happened to relatives and friends who had been forcibly disappeared or detained and the need to reform state security institutions. For the most part, the few who talked about compensation did not believe that it could make up for or replace the losses and harms they had suffered or that it would be feasible given the massive number of victims. Many of those who believed justice could happen focused on accountability, while many referred to religion and divine justice. Others looked to local mediators to promote justice and coexistence. Interviewees were often unaware of justice elements such as reparation; therefore, they did not demand such things.

Refugees who had lost housing, land, and property often said that guarantees for restoring and rebuilding damaged property were crucial for return. Some did not know the current status of their property, while others knew that their property had been destroyed or that it was now in the hands of the regime or opposition groups or occupied by internally displaced persons. The 2018 property law that allows the Syrian state to create redevelopment zones under the pretext of urban planning is generally understood to be aimed at confiscating the property of refugees, internally displaced persons, and residents seen to be opposed to the regime without due process or compensation.<sup>13</sup> Most refugees interviewed for this study were unaware of the new law, but those who were believed it was intended to prevent them from returning to Syria. Refugees also spoke about the difficulty of obtaining the documents needed to prove ownership.

**Views on Coexistence**

Refugee views on the potential for peaceful coexistence varied widely, often depending on where they came from in Syria, demonstrating the complexity of social relations amid the war. In Bosra al-Sham, for example, Shi’a Muslims are generally perceived by Sunnis to be pro-government and foreign Shi’a armed groups—including from Lebanon and Iraq—are seen to have played a significant role in the war. Some refugees made no distinction between civilians and combatants when they assigned blame for the violence collectively to the Shi’a. Despite the widespread view that the Sunni and Shi’a formed one community in Syria before the uprising, some Sunni interviewees said that their relationships with Shi’a had come to a permanent end, blaming them for instigating the violence and informing on others to the authorities. They spoke of a lack of trust and sometimes hatred. Most Shi’a residents of Bosra al-Sham fled in March 2015, and some refugees from there said they did not want them to return. Others had more conciliatory views, refusing to blame an entire group for the actions of a few, believing that coexistence had existed in the past and could return eventually.

In Homs, which had previously been religiously and ethnically diverse, sectarian tensions, particularly between Sunni Muslims on one side and Alawite and Shi’a Muslims on the

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<sup>13</sup> Law No. 10 of 2018 was passed by the Syrian parliament (or People’s Assembly) on March 19, 2018. The full text of the law in Arabic can be accessed at Syria’s official website for the Prime Ministry: <https://bit.ly/2qIRGci>.

other, has led to brutal acts of violence between neighbors—including abductions and summary killings. The resulting trust deficit will make the city and the governorate one of the most challenging contexts for coexistence and return. As a result of forced displacement, many in the Sunni community felt that significant demographic changes had taken place. Refugees from there expressed a range of views about the potential for coexistence, often clearly influenced by their community's or their personal experiences with members of other groups.

Some said that they could coexist given their positive interactions with other groups; others worried about the intentions of other groups. Some said that they could live with the other side but would never again engage in economic activity with them. Some said they could never coexist with “hostile” communities and, therefore, are seeking resettlement in a third country. This was expressed particularly by some interviewees who could not see themselves going back to Homs, where many Alawites and Shi'a are now living. Some refugees spoke about the potential to coexist in ways that illustrate the economic implications of divided communities.

Given the proximity of Bosr al-Harir to Swayda, Sunni refugees from Bosr framed their views on coexistence in terms of Sunni relationships with Shi'a in Daraa and Druze in Swayda. While some referred to the Druze negatively, others reported that their views of members of that minority had improved based on their interactions with Druze from Swayda as internally displaced persons and refugees.

Refugees from Swayda said obstacles to coexistence between the people of Swayda and Daraa included mutual lack of trust, fear that displaced populations and armed groups would spread violence, intolerance toward Druze religious beliefs, and blame for the perceived support of the government. However, as elsewhere, some did believe that coexistence was possible. Some refugees from Swayda expressed concerns over Islamist armed groups that were still operating in Daraa, which may have since been exacerbated by attacks by the Islamic State in Iraq and Sham (ISIS) in Swayda on July 25, 2018, during which approximately 200 people were killed and 30 individuals, mainly women and children, were taken hostage.<sup>14</sup>

### **Views According to Age and Gender**

Age and gender also shaped the experiences and views of refugees. As Syrians, thousands of children and youth have been killed, detained, and subjected to torture and enforced disappearance. Many have been injured and traumatized, lost beloved ones, participated in violence, and forced to flee their homes. The stories of young people revealed some of the traumas they had endured and the horrific violence they had seen. As with adults, young refugees were concerned about the security situation back in Syria.

Some wished to resettle in another country because they did not think that they would be safe back in Syria and they did not want to stay in Jordan, where they felt discriminated against. Again, similar to adults, young refugees called for justice for certain crimes but did not think it was likely to happen. Their stories also revealed the sectarian divisions resulting from the war, the end of personal relationships, and even hatred. They spoke of both a weary willingness to coexist and an outright refusal to do so.

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14 The attack occurred two months after these interviews were conducted.



Men and women have been affected in particular ways by the conflict. In addition to the harms caused by indiscriminate attacks and bombings, adult males have been targeted for a wide range of abuses, including detention, torture, enforced disappearance, and forcible conscription. Interviews reflected the large number of individuals who have been detained during the conflict and the lack of information about why they were detained, where they are being held, and whether they are dead or alive. Male interviewees said they feared arrest, torture, and conscription if they returned. In terms of justice, men prioritized regime change, institutional reform, international guarantees, and information about those who were forcibly disappeared and/or abducted.

Women and girls have also been subjected to government arrest, detention, torture, enforced disappearance, sexual abuse, and abduction by nonstate armed groups. Shelling and bombing of residential areas have killed and injured thousands of women in their homes, while sieges have restricted their access to food and medicine. Women have also been subjected to summary killings. Women who survived the violence and loss of loved ones have had to deal with their trauma and in many cases assume sole responsibility for protecting their children.

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All women interviewees faced economic challenges in displacement, and most said they would not want to return to Syria even after the war, because their homes were destroyed, they would have no income, and they feared for the safety of their families and the psychological distress of returning to a place where they had experienced such trauma and loss.

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Many women who before the war had been restricted to the traditional role of housewife lost their family breadwinner and had to become the sole financial provider. Many spoke about the importance of retaining their independence and access to new roles, regardless of where they settle after the war. A number of women whose husbands were either killed or went missing said that the conflict had changed their relationships with their family members, usually for the worse, particularly while being displaced.

All women interviewees faced economic challenges in displacement, and most said they would not want to return to Syria even after the war, because their homes were destroyed, they would have no income, and they feared for the safety of their families and the psychological distress of returning to a place where they had experienced such trauma and loss.

Most did not believe there was going to be justice in Syria, though some felt that regime change and accountability should be pursued.

### **Intersectional Vulnerabilities**

Refugees who were members of minority groups—including Circassian, Ismaelite, Alawite, Rifa'ite, Chichnian, and Armenian Christian refugees—recounted experiences that suggest how the harms and vulnerabilities of violence and displacement affect a wide range of identities. They spoke about living through shelling, shooting, gender-based violence and other forms of insecurity, losing loved ones, and material losses, and growing sectarian divisions that had created mistrust, fear, and hatred. They worried about the risk of being conscripted into the military and narrated the suffering caused by deprivation of resources, such as food, water, and electricity. Many refugees told stories of multiple displacements in and outside of Syria on their way to Jordan.

Refugees from a range of groups pointed to safety and security as the most important condition for return, although this often meant different things to different people. For some, safety and security meant removing the current regime and holding its members accountable. For others, it meant the dismantling of all militias and armed groups, in-

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cluding those supported by foreign states. Some said they could not forgive those who had supported the opposition, which they perceived as having caused the destruction of the country. Interviewees also emphasized the need to abolish mandatory military conscription and end arbitrary detention, abductions, and other state policies.

While many voiced similar feelings of distrust and pessimism toward the Syrian state, some expressed their exhaustion and fatigue with the conflict and its hardships, saying they would be willing to return to Syria even under the Assad regime. Some who supported the regime felt that those who had backed and mobilized the revolution were traitors and should be punished—blaming them for the conflict, instability, and sectarianism.

Under current conditions, many members of minority groups felt that overcoming the divisions among different groups of Syrians would be impossible. Because they perceived the demographic map of Syria as having drastically changed, some expressed serious concerns about going back to their original neighborhoods or towns, where new social structures would exacerbate post-conflict tensions. This affected some interviewees' thoughts about return.

**Experiences in Jordan**

While the violence, abuse, and deprivation that forced Syrians to flee their country are critical to shaping refugee views on justice and coexistence, so too are their experiences outside the country. During periods of displacement, individuals are often vulnerable to additional injustices, which has implications for relationships among groups. Many refugees went to Jordan because they felt it was the most similar to Syria, socially, culturally, and religiously. Many also had family members living there whom they could count on to facilitate their arrival and integration.

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In Jordan, refugees have faced a wide range of challenges, including social and economic exclusion from and tensions with host communities—especially in areas such as education and employment—as well as restrictive state policies, discrimination, domestic violence, and mental health problems.

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In Jordan, however, refugees have faced a wide range of challenges in both host communities and refugee camps. These include social and economic exclusion from and tensions with host communities—especially in areas such as education and employment—as well as restrictive state policies, discrimination, domestic violence, and mental health problems. Accessing fundamental rights is a constant challenge, and refugees face numerous barriers to work, health care, and education. Interviewees felt highly vulnerable. They felt that their dignity had been undermined.

Women refugees spoke about the lack of protection in the public sphere and within the house, leading to gender-based violence and domestic violence. They told of incidents of intimidation and exploitation in their workplaces and schools and on public transportation.

For refugee children and youth, the education infrastructure cannot meet their needs, while some parents spoke of episodes of harassment, bullying, and discrimination against their children. Interviewees said that they were perceived by Jordanians as competitors over scarce jobs and resources and as burdens on the system, who were dependent on assistance and humanitarian aid.

Due to their ethnic or political backgrounds, some refugee populations in Jordan are particularly vulnerable. Palestinian refugees from Syria, for example, were forced for the second time to cross borders in search of shelter and protection. They provide an example of a marginalized group facing compounded struggle. Refugees in camps expressed general

feelings of entrapment and exclusion, with limited access to the outside world and limited opportunities to meet and live with the Jordanian population.

At the same time, refugees in both host communities and camps have shown resilience in adapting to and overcoming new challenges and taking on new roles. Participating in the labor market and contributing to the household, for example, has given some women a new feeling of agency and shifted their traditional gender roles.

## Recommendations

### Recommendations to Prevent Involuntary Returns

- **Jordan** and **other host countries** must uphold the right to voluntary return and respect the principle of nonrefoulement.
- **Jordan** and **other host countries**, the **Syrian government**, the **international community**, and civil society actors should seek to provide refugees with sufficient information to enable them to make informed decisions about when to return. These include sufficient information about the security situation in the intended area of return; the status of the refugees' homes and/or other property in terms of material damages and occupation by internally displaced persons and/or individuals belonging to Syrian or other communities perceived as hostile to the returning refugee; if houses are damaged, the available shelter in the intended area of return; and the status of operating schools and hospitals, the basic services that are provided, and the work opportunities in the intended area of return.
- The **international community** and **donor states** should continue to provide funds to the United Nations and other programs that support refugees' basic needs in host countries, in order to avoid situations whereby refugees are compelled to return while conditions are not conducive to safe and dignified return, due to an inability to access basic services and/or meet their families' basic needs in their host country.
- **Jordan**, **civil society**, and the **international community** should recognize the exclusion, vulnerability, and challenges faced by refugees while in Jordan and how these experiences shape their decisions regarding return and resettlement and the potential for coexistence; support social cohesion programs that aim to mitigate tensions between refugee populations and host communities by changing misperceptions and recognizing the positive role that refugees can play in society; help refugees to overcome barriers to work, health care, and education; and recognize the particular vulnerabilities of certain groups, such as refugees in camps and Palestinian refugees from Syria.

### Recommendations to Facilitate Refugees' Voluntary Return to Syria

- **Host countries**, the **Syrian government**, the **international community**, and **civil society** must prioritize the safety and security of refugees when they return to Syria, taking into account their specific fears depending on their particular destinations within the country. Particularly where local agreements exist or a change to government control has occurred, this should include measures guaranteeing protections from violence related to political and/or sectarian divisions and arbitrary arrests and other retaliatory measures, including abductions and summary killings.
- The **Syrian government** should allow the United Nations and other specialized international organizations to be fully engaged in the process of refugee return; to monitor,

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track, and assess populations within Syria; to regularly collect and verify population data at the community level; and to provide humanitarian key stakeholders with information and indicators to address priority needs and required humanitarian interventions.

- The **Syrian government** should provide returnees with services required to facilitate their settlement, such as food, water, sanitation, education, health care, and housing. It should ensure a fair distribution of aid for returnees based on need, without discrimination; and prioritize the reconstruction of schools, power, water supplies, and other infrastructure and social services in Syria, again without discrimination and based on objective needs assessments.
- The **international community** should exercise its pressure either bilaterally or through existing UN-sponsored political processes to reach a settlement that guarantees conditions that will facilitate voluntary, safe, and informed return.
- All **stakeholders** involved in the political process, including the constitutional process, must ensure that any political agreement or constitution—whether transitional or permanent—includes specific guarantees addressing the refugee crisis by seeking to grant refugees the right to choose whether to return to their areas of residence and/or areas of origin in Syria.
- All **stakeholders** involved in the political process, including the constitutional process, should ensure that a new constitution must commit any future political leadership to a massive reform of state institutions, particularly security institutions, and to clearly define their role and limit their mandate, given the vast powers presently granted to state security branches that have terrorized Syrians. With the lack of clarity on when the political process, including the constitutional process, will move forward, plans on reforming the security institutions should start without delay as this is directly linked to a safe return of refugees as well as their willingness to return.

#### Recommendations on Justice

- The **international community** and **donors** should support transitional justice processes that include the participation of refugee and diaspora communities.
- The **international community** and **parties to the political process** should ensure that any political settlement does not grant impunity to those responsible for the most egregious and systematic crimes, regardless of their political affiliation—for example, those in charge of notorious detention centers where tens of thousands of people have been subjected to enforced disappearances.
- The **international community** should only sponsor a political settlement guaranteeing that detailed and sufficient information is provided to the families of those forcibly disappeared and abducted, mass graves are identified and protected, and mechanisms for DNA identification of victims are put in place with a timeframe for implementation. The **international community** should pressure the Syrian government to agree to fully cooperate in such a process.
- **Donors** and **international NGOs** must work and support local civil society groups to raise awareness among refugees about their rights to compensation and restitution and other potential justice claims, given the high number of refugees who lack basic knowledge about their rights as victims of human rights violations.

- The **Syrian government**, the **international community**, and **civil society** actors should seek to facilitate the restitution and restoration of housing, land, and property lost or damaged during the war and displacement, according to best practices and international standards; help refugees to obtain the documents necessary to prove ownership of property; and advocate the annulment or amendment of laws that allow the Syrian government to confiscate and redevelop residents' property without due process.

#### Recommendations on Coexistence

- **Donors** and **international organizations** should support awareness-raising programs on dignified coexistence processes targeting local actors and refugees, particularly those who lost family members, and hear what they need in order to coexist with communities perceived as "hostile."
- The **Syrian government** should allow international and Syrian NGOs that are specialized in transitional justice issues and conflict resolution to access the areas where refugees are returning.
- The **Syrian government** should set up measures to prevent situations where returning refugees find their homes occupied by others, particularly if from communities perceived as hostile, to prevent further distressing situations for returnees and to avoid exacerbating feelings of enmity that may undermine the potential for coexistence, particularly in demographically mixed areas.
- **States that have influence in Syria** should support the creation of revenge-detering mechanisms to avoid sectarian or other acts of violence against returnees and/or against those who did not leave Syria, regardless of their religious or political affiliation.
- The **international community** must adopt a bottom-up approach to peacebuilding by fully engaging local civil society organizations, refugees, and community leaders and members and prioritizing listening to and addressing local needs.
- **Donors, international and local NGOs**, and the **Syrian government** should seek to provide reconciliation methods that address the long-term emotional needs of those within the internally displaced and refugee communities and those who remained in Syria.
- The **international community** and **civil society** actors should support women in facing the economic challenges related to displacement, return, and resettlement, including their new roles as family breadwinners; the social challenges of mending family relationships damaged by violence and displacement; and the psychological challenges of dealing with loss and enforced disappearance of loved ones. They should ensure that the provision of support to women helps them to retain the independence and access to new roles that were established during displacement.
- The **international community** and **civil society** actors should help to address the trauma suffered by children and youth during the war and displacement, including witnessing and being involved in violence in Syria and suffering discrimination and exclusion in Jordan; provide psychosocial support and assistance in accessing education both now and on their return or resettlement; and provide spaces for young people to talk about their experiences, and support their participation in campaigns against the normalization of violence and civic education initiatives that provide positive experiences.

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