STUDY

# Refugee Returns & Migration Dynamics after Assad

June 2025

Published in partnership with Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Lebanon, this study assesses returns by refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the wake of the fall of the Assad regime as well as broader migration dynamics in and around Syria.

Summary: Main takeaways

- **Returns since regime's collapse:** 1.7 million displaced Syrians (mostly IDPs) have returned to origin communities in Syria since the Assad regime fell in December 2024, according to UNHCR. The UN refugee agency projects another 1.5 million refugees and 2 million IDPs will return before the end of the year. However, barriers to return (such as security concerns, socio-economic instability and property destruction) and uncertainty about the future mean that returns so far reflect a fraction of the total displaced population. To understand why, ETANA conducted surveys with over 200 returnees, refugees, IDPs and in situ residents in and around Syria between February and April 2025.

- **Push & pull factors:** ETANA's polling among refugees in the region and Europe found an equal proportion (38%) who said they were and were not considering return to Syria. Those considering return said push factors in host countries (such as rising costs of living and xenophobia) were a significant consideration, but that the pull factor of the regime's fall was the primary reason they changed their mind in recent months. Those not considering return cited a lack of trust in new authorities and uncertainty about security and living conditions. Notably, no pull factors independent of push factors were compelling enough to encourage return, nor were economic considerations returnees' primary determining factor.

- **Return assessment:** Long-term stability in Syria that creates a conducive environment for returns cannot be achieved without redressing core political and social grievances in a genuine transitional process. It is crucial to address economic factors (such as reconstruction and economic rehabilitation) and improve the availability of basic services (including education and healthcare). However, even with the regime gone, the protracted displacement of millions of refugees and IDPs remains also an issue of security, rights and accountability.

- **After violence on Syria's coast:** Recent events in Syria, including the sectarianized violence that erupted in Tartous and Latakia in March 2025, established a marked line in the sand, particularly for Syria's minority communities. Polling amongst refugees from Syria's coast who fled to Lebanon (after the massacres in March) found that only half were considering return in the foreseeable future and none felt that returning to Syria in the current circumstances was safe. The vast majority desired security and political stability

in Syria before considering return— improvements in economic conditions did not factor into any of the respondents' considerations for return.

- ▪ **Risk of new displacements:** Although parsing minorities from the broader Syria body politic is a rightly contentious topic, return and emigration intentions are increasingly sectarianized. While most Sunni participants felt safe and described an improving security situation with broadly "equal" treatment of different communities, other communities' perceptions were significantly different. Minority communities are less trusting of interim authorities and generally feel less safe than before. High percentages of participants—particularly among Alawis—said they would consider leaving Syria if things do not change for the better.
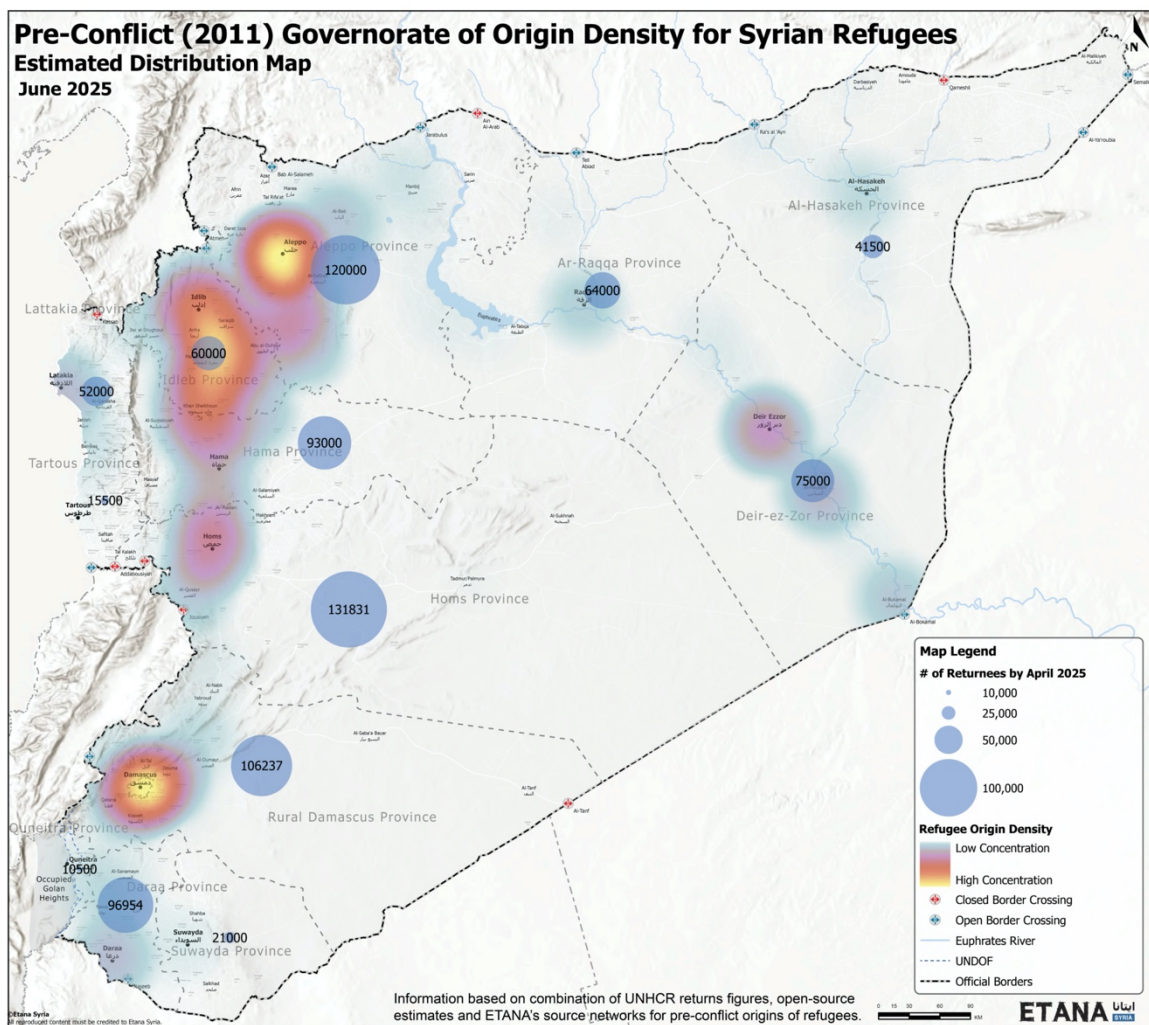
This map shows the density of pre-conflict (i.e. pre-2011) origin areas of Syrian refugees, aggregated by governorate and the number of recent (i.e. post-December 2024) returnees by governorate. The information represented here relies on a combination of UNHCR returns figures, open-source estimates and ETANA's own networks for refugees' pre-conflict origins.

Background

For years, Bashar al-Assad's regime presented the most sustained and serious obstacle to the safe, voluntary and dignified returns of millions of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) who fled their homes during the course of Syria's post-2011 uprising and conflict.

Generally regarded as the primary cause for much of the post-2011 displacement that followed, the regime quite explicitly sought to erase or eject populations regarded as undesirable, through a combination of "exterminatory" detentions, "kneel or starve" surrender agreements, and forcible displacements from former opposition-held territory brought back under regime control through unimaginable levels of violence. Material policies following periods of active conflict in these areas, such as property confiscations, an explicitly securitized returns system and punitive "reconstruction" plans applied in former opposition-held communities were designed, wholly or in part, to protract the displacement of millions already outside the country—or even to effectively forbid their return as long as the regime survived.

It was a strategy that seemed to pay off for Assad: with growing international fatigue over Syria's protracted conflict and domestic pressures, regional and international normalization efforts gained ground in 2024 effectively overlooking the regime's role in displacing approximately half the country's population in favor of more strategic and pragmatic concerns, including impractical ambitions for regime divestment from Iran, countering the multi-billion-dollar regional Captagon trade (itself created and facilitated by the regime to position itself as a regional broker) and creating an environment conducive for returns under the regime itself.

Despite the ambitions of regional and international actors pursuing varying levels of normalization with the regime, for displaced Syrians, the complete lack of meaningful regime behavioral change meant very few were considering going home: UNHCR monitoring of return intentions amongst refugees in neighboring countries in June 2024 found that around a third of refugees hoped to return to Syria one day, whereas just 1.7 percent of refugees expressed an intention to return within the coming 12 months. Some refugees—weeks and even days before Operation Deterring Aggression, the offensive led by Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) that ultimately saw Assad flee the country on 8th December 2024—were beginning to talk about never seeing Syria again.

With the regime gone, everything changed. Returnees were an important part of the unbridled hope and celebration that immediately followed Assad's exit from the country. Hundreds of thousands of IDPs who had been living in the sprawling, impoverished IDP camps along the Syrian-Turkish border in north-west Syria and other areas of the country joined return caravans bound for their origin communities further south. Long-time refugees—including activists, journalists and others who fled the regime's early onslaughts against the uprising in 2011 and 2012—participated in formative demonstrations and civil society organizing calling to rebuild Syria anew. Ordinary Syrians from around the country came back temporarily from Europe and Jordan, Lebanon and other neighboring countries to check on homes and reunite with family members not seen in years.
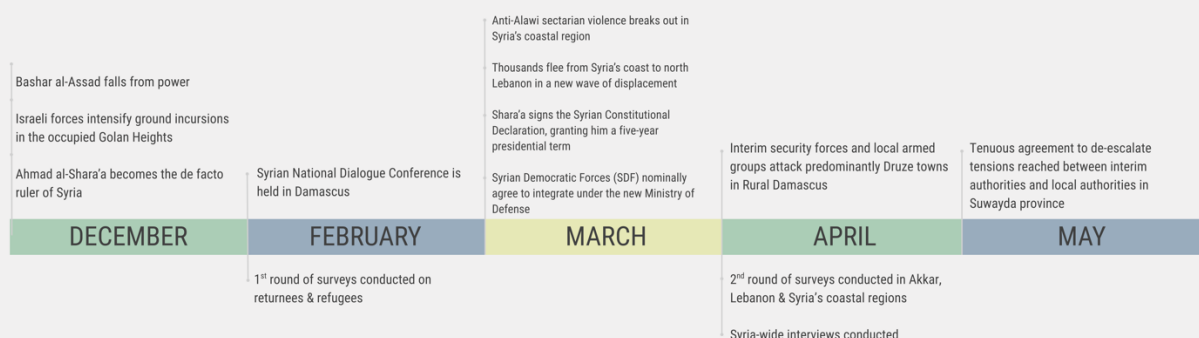
If anything, these post-Assad realities confirmed the uncomfortable facts repeated by Syrians for years: that with the regime and its security apparatus in place unchanged, return to Syria

could never be considered safe. And while the immediate period since the regime's fall saw a notable number of returns compared with the final months of regime rule, Syrians are not going home in numbers that would resemble a systemic change of the return status quo—i.e. that the collapse of the regime meant everyone could go home. While the regime has gone, it would appear there are not yet compelling pull factors (in terms of the economy, security situation or services and infrastructure landscape) to encourage more to return. Clearly, the reality is more complex, in turn raising questions about how Syrians consider returns under the new interim authorities in Damascus, and what needs to change for Syrians uncertain about the future to go home in a way that is genuinely safe, voluntary and dignified.

There are systemic, material explanations left over from the days of the regime—an economy in tatters, neglected and badly damaged infrastructure, billions of dollars in damage and destruction to displaced Syrians' former homes and communities—but some of the answers also lie in the uncertain trajectory of Syria's political transition. Some good-faith steps are being taken by the international community as a sign of support for this new chapter in a post-Assad Syria, including perhaps most significantly US President Donald Trump's unexpected announcement to lift sanctions, which was celebrated by Syrians across the country and the diaspora as a sign of meaningful change for the better. Days later, the EU also announced it would lift its economic sanctions on Syria while continuing to monitor "developments on the ground, including progress on accountability with regard to recent violence outbreaks." But despite encouraging steps by external actors, the initial months of Syria's transitional process under the auspices of the new authorities in Damascus has been fraught and plagued by outbreaks of violence.

There is growing concern about the authoritarian, exclusive mode of governance being pursued by interim President Ahmad al- Shara'a and his inner circle in the People's Palace in Damascus. While the hallmarks of a transitional process have taken place—a National Dialogue Conference, a Constitutional Declaration, and interim government formation—all point to rushed, non- consultative decision-making that has consolidated the control of al-Shara'a and his closest advisors (many of whom are themselves linked to HTS). At best, there have been compelling optics of a transitional process and inclusiveness, but little meaningful substance behind the façade.

Syria Timeline: December 2024 - May 2025

DECEMBER	FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY
Bashar al-Assad falls from power Israeli forces intensify ground incursions in the occupied Golan Heights Ahmad al-Shara'a becomes the de facto ruler of Syria	Syrian National Dialogue Conference is held in Damascus	Anti-Alawi sectarian violence breaks out in Syria's coastal region Thousands flee from Syria's coast to north Lebanon in a new wave of displacement Shara'a signs the Syrian Constitutional Declaration, granting him a five-year presidential term Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) nominally agree to integrate under the new Ministry of Defense	Interim security forces and local armed groups attack predominantly Druze towns in Rural Damascus	Tenuous agreement to de-escalate tensions reached between interim authorities and local authorities in Suwayda province
	1st round of surveys conducted on returnees & refugees		2nd round of surveys conducted in Akkar, Lebanon & Syria's coastal regions Syria-wide interviews conducted	

Events on Syria's coast in March this year—when a small-scale regime-backed insurgency prompted armed clashes, sectarianized reprisals and village-to-village massacres by government-backed security forces leading to the killings of more than a thousand civilians— seriously undermined minority communities' trust in interim authorities and sense of security. On one hand, it was expected that sectarianism and sectarianized politics was always going to play a major role in Syria's post-Assad transition—not least because of the way the Assad regime exploited sectarianism to control the country through divide-and-rule policies, but also because of the Islamist and Salafi-jihadi make-up of the new authorities. However, on the other hand, the prospects for Syria's stability and social cohesion for the long-term depends on the country's pluralism being reflected by national and local authorities and equal rights afforded to all Syrians regardless of their sectarian, geographical or political affiliations.

The study that follows aims to collate, analyze and understand the findings from a broad range of survey samples and question sets. It is set out in four over-arching sections: the first assesses the scale and composition of post-Assad returns; the second polls the return intentions of refugees waiting to see what happens next in Syria from the increasingly uncertain refuge of neighboring countries and/or Europe; and the third and fourth sections look at the scale of internal and external displacements since interim authorities took power in Damascus (particularly in the wake of the sectarianized violence unleashed on Syria's coast in March 2025) before surveying the views and experiences of all of Syria's major religious and ethno-sectarian groups as well as their perspectives on emigration. In a sense these sections communicate the different stages of Syria's post-Assad transition so far: the euphoria in the wake of Assad's exit, the shocking violence on the coast, and the increasingly cautious hope and new fears that followed.

Methodology

Based on research conducted between December 2024 and April 2025, the following study relies on a combination of desk research, in-depth key informant interviews and multiple survey rounds conducted with recent returnees and displaced populations in and around Syria. Starting in February 2025, ETANA's research teams inside and outside Syria conducted multiple rounds of surveys and key informant (KI) interviews, outlined in the table below.
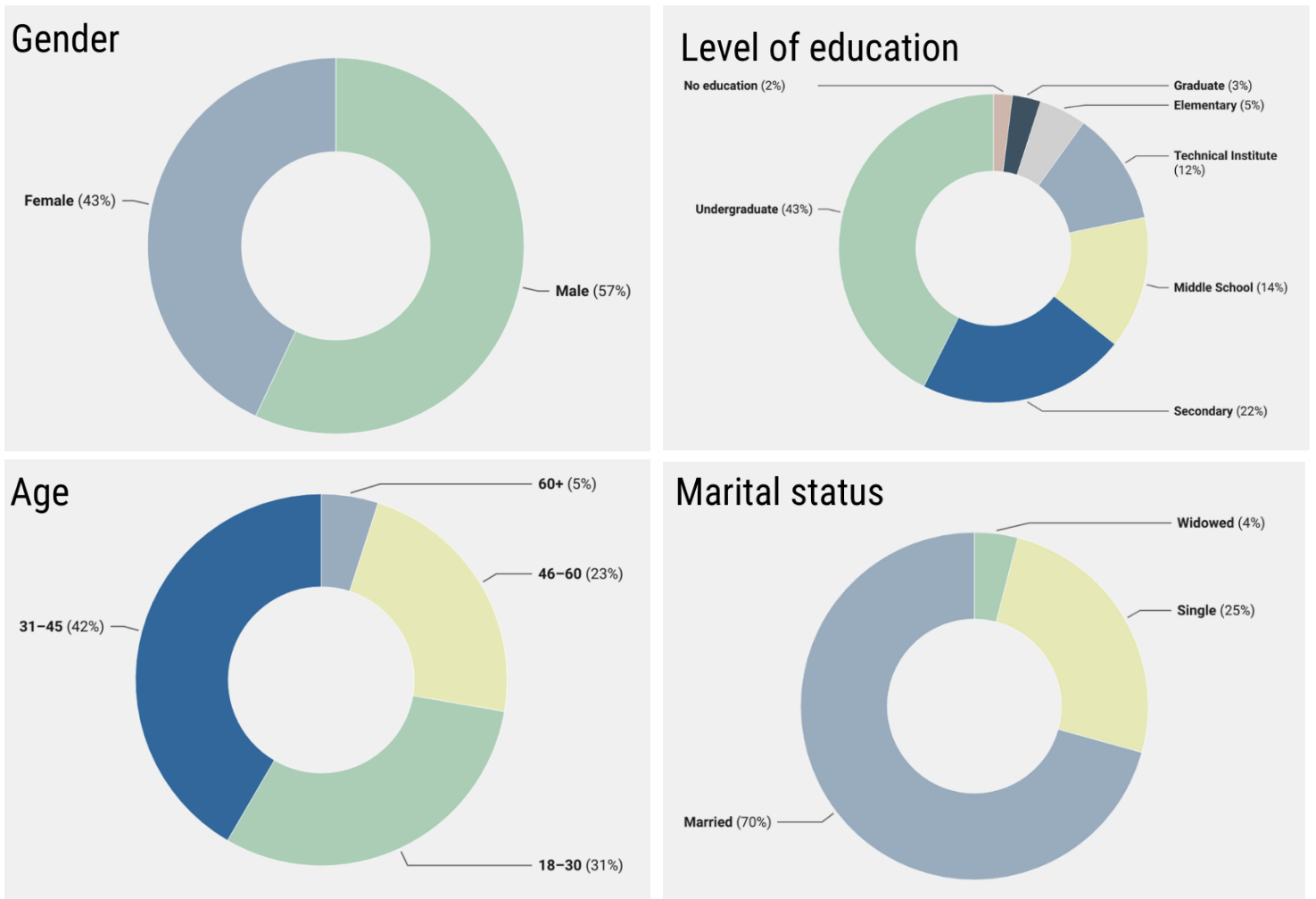
Table 1: ETANA's six survey and key informant interview sets conducted for this study

#	Methodology	Code	Month (2025)	Targeted population	Participants
1	Survey	S1	February	Returnees since December 2024	70
2	Survey	S2	February	Syrian refugees remaining outside Syria	29
3	KI interviews	KI3	March	Residents of Syria's coast	10
4	Survey	S4	March-April	Syrian refugees displaced to Akkar	25
5	KI interviews	KI5	April		10
6	KI interviews	KI6	April	Sectarian/confessional groups	72

The total survey sample reached was too small to be a truly quantitative analysis, the qualitative, non-exhaustive research was instead designed to introduce nuance into the discussion around returns.

Across all of the above surveys and key informant interviews, ETANA's sample consisted of:

- 216 participants in all, including 70 recent returnees, 64 refugees and 82 Syrians (not recent returnees) inside the country;

- 57% male and 43% female participants, although the research team reached a roughly 50-50 gender balance in three research rounds (as well as a predominantly female sample when interviewing residents and IDPs on Syria's coast (KI3);

- A demographic predominantly educated above or beyond the level of secondary school;

- A broadly representative age demographic sample, with nearly one-third made up of 18 to 30-year-olds;

- And a broadly balanced sample of participants from all of Syria's 14 governorates, including refugees and IDPs from those areas as well as in situ residents who were never displaced at any point in the post-2011 conflict.

Figure 1: Mean demographics across ETANA's cumulative survey sample.

Gender
- Female (43%)
- Male (57%)

Level of education
- No education (2%)
- Graduate (3%)
- Elementary (5%)
- Technical Institute (12%)
- Middle School (14%)
- Secondary (22%)
- Undergraduate (43%)

Age
- 60+ (5%)
- 46–60 (23%)
- 31–45 (42%)
- 18–30 (31%)

Marital status
- Widowed (4%)
- Single (25%)
- Married (70%)

Hope for a new Syria: Post-Assad returns

As of late May, UNHCR announced that 507,672 and 1.2 million IDPs returned to their homes since 8th December 2024. Taking place in the span of a few months following the fall of the Assad regime, these returns dwarfed year-by-year totals of refugee and IDP returns recorded by UNHCR between January 2016 and July 2024.

In late February, ETANA conducted interviews with research teams in the north-east, north-west, south-west and Homs to understand how returns were taking place and to what extent regulations and procedures underpinning post-Assad returns changed when compared with practices under the former regime. Several notable trends emerged from these interviews:

- **Initial return demographics:** All research teams noted a new trend of whole families returning together, with most returnees travelling in family groups. This tracks with UNHCR's own monitoring of recent returns, which found nearly 50-50 male/female returns. By contrast, when hundreds of thousands of Syrians fled the war in Lebanon in late 2024, the majority of returnees were women and children, with many male relatives staying behind rather than risk enforced military conscription or potentially dangerous interactions with regime authorities.

- **Required documents:** Syrians returning to Syria must be able to prove their Syrian citizenship or, in the case of Palestinian refugees, *maktoum* and *ajanib* Kurds and other stateless populations in Syria, past habitual residency in the country. This is generally done through presentation of a Syrian passport or ID card; in the absence of these documents, returnees intending to go back to Syria were able to obtain ID documents from Syrian diplomatic representations abroad to prove citizenship. There were no reports of systemic denials at border crossings beyond some scattered, individual cases: for example, researchers provided a second-hand report of one case of a Syrian man being denied entry to the country after he paid $3,000 for a flight from Türkiye to Damascus International Airport but was unable to prove his citizenship. ETANA could not independently verify the details of this story.

- **Official vs. unofficial crossings:** Most returns took place through official border crossings with Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye—a trend that in itself communicates a lessening of fear of interaction with official authorities since the regime's fall. During displacements and returns from Lebanon last autumn, an ETANA survey found that 12% of participants entered Syria informally, although the proportion of formal and informal crossings was believed to be significantly higher because military-age males and potentially wanted persons who were crossing aimed to reduce or avoid interactions with regime authorities during return. At the same time, some regional particularities were reported: in western Homs's Al-Qusayr region, most returnees travelled back into Syria via unofficial crossings as opposed to official crossings. While this stretch of the Syrian-Lebanese border has historically been more porous, this trend may also be because Syrian families avoid Lebanese border crossings to not pay prohibitive overstayed residency fees upheld by Lebanese authorities for some categories of refugees.

- **End to regime-era restrictions & violations:** Under the former regime, return was a highly securitized process, with wanted lists, reconciliation and settling status forms and post-return interrogations and/or arbitrary arrests used to gather information and punish perceived dissidents out of the regime's reach until crossing the border. Many of these abusive and exploitative practices that had become commonplace under the regime—in addition to the use of extractive bribes paid to border authorities and regime-affiliated checkpoints after crossings—have been stopped. Non-security-related legislation previously used to pursue former refugees, such as Law 18/2014 (amended by Ministry of Interior circular 342/2019) on "illegal exit," are not being used. As a result, Syrians appear to feel safer about returning and that the process itself (at least on the Syrian side of the border) is a less expensive endeavor than in the past, one of the reasons why whole families are returning in larger numbers than before.

- **Security procedures:** Similarly, research teams reported no security screening at border crossings or security scrutiny for returnees related to their origin community, wartime activities or imputed or real political affiliations—with the exception of some regime-affiliated individuals accused of involvement in past abuses. Individuals required to settle their status (for example, as a former army, police or security member) are requested to present themselves at the local Criminal Security branch in their area of return. At the same time, it is expected that refugees and IDPs from minorities (including Shia and Alawis) may not be returning for the time being due to fears of sectarianized security scrutiny from interim authorities, affiliated security forces and allied armed factions

- **Fees & bribes:** Research teams in all areas reported that returnees were not expected to pay fees or bribes at official border crossings, although there were still sizeable costs in host countries. In Türkiye, for example, Syrians intending to return to Syria must settle all outstanding bills with government departments; those wishing to return temporarily apply for a travel permit that can cost anywhere between $350 and $500 depending on the length of the visit. Even so, these costs can be preferable for some returning refugees when compared with the rising cost of living in Türkiye—one push factor identified by researchers in north-west Syria for returns there.

Surveying amongst recent returnees

To better understand who was returning, from where and why, ETANA's research team conducted surveys with 70 returnees who had returned to Syria from neighboring countries or further afield, largely following the collapse of the Assad regime.

Figure 2: Demographics for the (S1) survey sample

Gender

Female (49%)
Male (51%)

Level of education

Elementary school (11%)
Technical institute (16%)
Secondary school (21%)
University (23%)
Middle school (29%)

Age

Age	%
18-30	23%
31-45	46%
46-60	27%
60+	4%

Marital status

Widowed (3%)
Divorced (1%)
Single (13%)
Married (83%)

Province of origin

Damascus (3%)
Idlib (6%)
Aleppo (7%)
Hama (7%)
Tartous (7%)
Deir Ezzor (7%)
Daraa (7%)
Latakia (7%)
Rif Dimashq (11%)
Homs (9%)
Al-Hasakeh (7%)
Raqqa (7%)
Suwayda (7%)
Quneitra (7%)

The (S1) survey sample included an even, five-person (7%) distribution of participants from all governorates in Syria and achieved an almost 50-50 distribution of men and women as well as a broad range of ages and levels of education. A significant majority of participants returned after the fall of the regime in December 2024; just 14% returned before that event based on individualized political or socio-economic circumstances. The largest proportion of the interviewed returnees (40%) had been in Türkiye before returning to Syria, followed by 31% returning from Lebanon, 19% from Jordan and 10% from Iraq or the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI).

A majority of the sample (56%) had been displaced outside Syria for 10 years or more, meaning the sample reflected a segment of the historic displacements that took place in Syria between 2011 and 2014, at a time when regime violence (including detention, siege tactics and bombardments) transformed the initial civil uprising into an all-out, nationwide armed conflict that saw the emergence of extremist groups Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS as key players in the war. All in all, the average length of displacement across all participants was nine years, indicative of the kind of protracted displacement from Syria, experienced by a majority of refugees from Syria, that UNHCR defines as a displacement context "in which at least 25,000 refugees from the same country had been living in exile for more than five consecutive years."

Push & pull factors

Several academic and civil society studies (including surveying with refugees) conducted over the years of Syria's displacement crisis presaged the status quo in which refugees and IDPs now find themselves. This is particularly crucial when it comes to push and pull factors, with displaced Syrians "pushed and pulled" by hopes to return denied for years and pressures to do so by host countries versus the reality of life in Syria after 14 years of conflict and unrest.

A 2023 study, for example, found that in Lebanon Syrian refugees' return intentions were primarily driven by conditions at home rather than in host countries (even somewhere like Lebanon where Syrians face myriad challenges), with a host of factors (safety, socio-economics, access to services and social networks) considered during this decision-making process. An economic and social analysis by the World Bank in 2019, studying refugees in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, defined return as complex and multifaceted rather than a single, lineal event; simulations of return scenarios conducted with refugees found that security was the most important driver of return but that service restoration was also critical. More recently, the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) conducted more than 3,000 surveys with Syrians inside and outside the country (including recent returnees), arguing at the time (before the regime's fall) that "without systemic changes to the regime and its security apparatus as well as socioeconomic conditions inside the country, refugees and IDPs will not return to the country in any significant way."

Evidently, these findings were made somewhat historical by the fact they were conducted and published before the regime fell, however they draw several lessons that appear to ring true today. ETANA's research for this study, both with returnees (explored in this section) and refugees still considering what to do, followed broadly similar lines.

In ETANA's own surveying amongst returnees, the vast majority of respondents (86%) stated that they returned after the fall of the Assad regime; almost all made clear in response to follow-up questions that the most significant pull factor to return to Syria was the regime's fall. These participants explained that the fall of the regime meant an end to persecution, fear of arbitrary arrest and detention, being wanted for mandatory military service, and forced conscription into the regime's army. For participants from Idlib, it also meant an end to the threat of regime and Russian bombardments. Other present-day pull factors that were mentioned included a sense of national duty, love of one's country, hope for a better future, a desire to rebuild one's home, and desire to return to one's family. To put it in the simplest terms, the fall of the regime meant that most refugees' primary reason for fleeing the country in the first place changed. However,

the new absence of the regime and its security apparatus does not suddenly mean that returns to Syria are safe, or that all of the basic protection thresholds required by UNHCR for a conducive returns environment have yet been met.
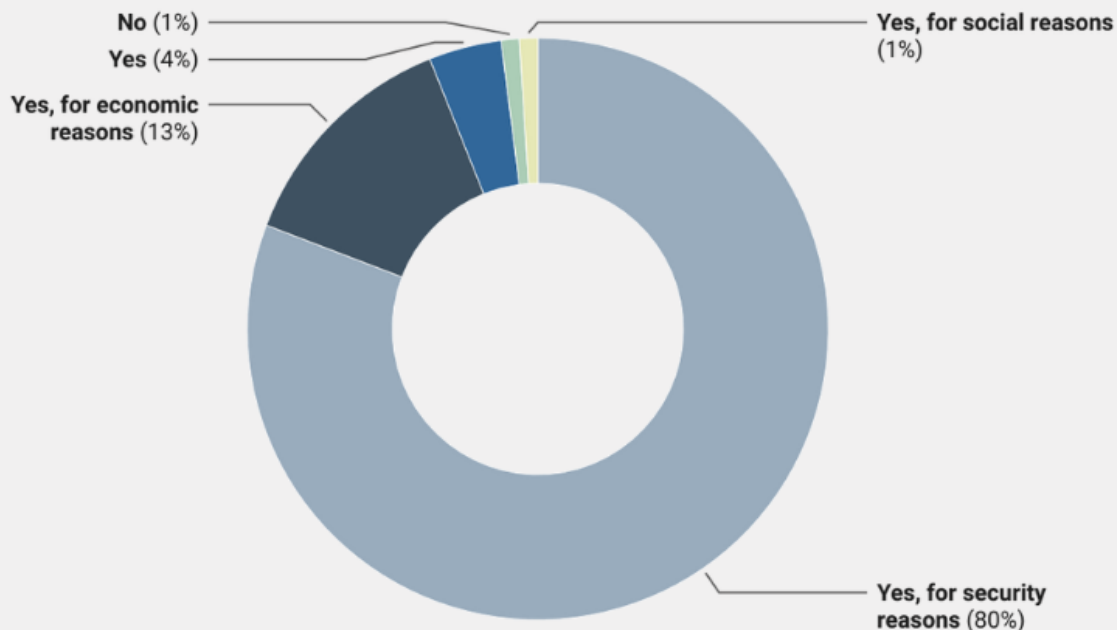

The reason I left Syria no longer exists. We returned as soon as we had the opportunity to settle permanently in [Homs]. What encouraged me to return was, of course, the fall of the regime, the readiness of people to do anything to help, and my longing for relatives I hadn't seen in about 11 years. There was no chance to consider [return] before. Even thinking about it felt like just a dream.

An 18-30-year old woman from Homs describing her decision to return

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The systemic political change of recent months provided a systemic change in the circumstances of refugees who fled outside after 2011. Almost all (99%) participants who returned after the fall of the regime said they were previously reluctant to return to Syria, with 80% explaining that security reasons were the reason they did not intend to return in the past—another correlation between protracted displacement and the survival/continuation of the Assad regime. Most of the security concerns were related to threats from the Assad regime, including fears of arbitrary arrest and enforced disappearance, being wanted by the regime for either security reasons of mandatory military service, or the regime's crimes against civilians. This might go some way toward explaining why so few refugees conducted "go-and-see" visits to Syria before they returned: of the 60 respondents who returned after the regime fell, only 15 (21%) made such visits, mostly with one family member visiting beforehand before the rest followed. One respondent from Raqqa displaced to Lebanon said that conscription by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) previously prevented him from returning to Syria.

Only 13% of respondents who returned after the fall of the regime cited economic and/or services-related reasons for not returning before the fall of the regime and did not mention security concerns at all.

Were there any previous reasons that made you reluctant to return to Syria?

No (1%)

Yes (4%)

Yes, for economic reasons (13%)

Yes, for social reasons (1%)

Yes, for security reasons (80%)

Similarly, roughly one quarter (24%) mentioned socio-economic factors in informing a future decision to return, although the overwhelming majority of this group referred to push factors in host countries rather than pull factors in Syria.

The answer of a 31-45-year-old male shop owner from Quneitra was indicative of this trend, explaining how: "The fall of the regime, better security and the end of persecution made my return possible. The situation improved, and I also lost my job abroad"—in effect, conditions in his host country deteriorated while the political changes in Syria created pull factors that had not existed beforehand.

A merchant from Latakia, on the other hand, described a return informed more by socio-economic pull factors than push factors: "I missed Syria and wanted to be there to run my business and properties."

Others took a more balanced view between push factors and pull factors. An 18-30-year-old male worker from Raqqa, who had been living in Lebanon for a year before returning in February 2025, stated: "There were no job opportunities left [in Lebanon], and the fall of the regime made me hopeful of finding better opportunities in Syria."

As such, very few people returned based on socio-economic pull factors in Syria. Instead, push factors from host countries provided an important—albeit secondary—reason to return to Syria (after considering the newly absent risk of detention, other regime abuses and security reasons more broadly). Almost three-quarters (70%) of participants stated that push factors influenced their decision to return to Syria. Push factors from host countries included:

- Social and economic conditions;
- High cost of living in the host country (specifically in Lebanon & Turkey);
- Fears of deportation, security harassment from General Security in Lebanon, racism in Lebanon, lack of access to schools for Syrian children in Lebanon;
- Residency applications being rejected in Türkiye;
- Racial discrimination in Türkiye, kids being assaulted, racism;
- Lack of job opportunities.

By comparison, 21 survey respondents (30% of the total sample) said that push factors in their host country were not a consideration for their decision to return to Syria. These respondents lived in the following host countries:

- Türkiye: 9 (43%);
- KRI: 4 (19%);
- Jordan: 6 (29%);
- Lebanon: 2 (10%).

Finally, just one participant cited only pull factors—"the desire to return"—informing their decision. Otherwise, return was a more complex, hybrid interplay between push and pull factors.

These [push] factors accounted for about 30% of the reason for our return. We always wanted to return. We just wanted the process [of the Assad regime's downfall] to be quicker.

A female teacher from Homs describes her view of push & pull factors when considering her return

Voluntariness of returns

Returns to Syria since December last year have been almost exclusively self-organized and therefore broadly voluntary—as opposed to coerced or forced returns perpetrated by host countries' border authorities or security forces, for example.

Human rights groups have documented forced returns from all neighboring countries since 2011, although these practices have been most common, and the legal or extra-legal infrastructure facilitating them more advanced, in Lebanon and Türkiye.

There was never any pressure, but to be fair, the situation in Türkiye is not encouraging to stay—the conditions are very difficult, and the cost of living is high. The refusal of my wife's and daughter's residency applications can be considered a form of pressure, which played a role in my decision to return to Syria.

A 31-45-year-old man from Homs describing the reasons behind his recent return to Syria

Almost all participants (94%) described their return journey as voluntary. Although the remaining three participants described their journeys as being involuntary, they all referred to either socio-economic push factors from host countries or political pull factors in Syria influencing their decision to return, rather than the use of coercion or force by actors other than themselves:

- One returned to Idlib before the fall of the regime due to the high cost of living and rent in Türkiye;

- One returned after the fall of the regime to Idlib due to feeling mistreated in Türkiye and the poor economic situation;

- One returned after the fall of the regime to Aleppo due to the liberation of the country and hopes for a better life, so it was not clear why this individual did not view their return to Syria as voluntary since no explicit push factors in the host country were mentioned.

Conditions after return

Conducting post-returns monitoring while the regime was still in power was a thorny, complex issue. UN and humanitarian agencies were effectively forbidden from doing so by the regime's security apparatus and as such there was no independent returns monitoring mechanism in place; this gave ample space for abuses against returnees (including detentions and *mouraja'a*, security reviews, interrogations that more often than not resulted in detention at a later date).

Nowadays, post-return monitoring has become significantly easier, although it is still early to be drawing significant, forward-looking conclusions and projections about the nature of returns—particularly in the absence of that independent monitoring mechanism.

Of all survey participants, the vast majority (84%) stated that they did plan to stay in Syria permanently, while one person described it as "most likely." Only four participants people said they were unsure; three said no that they did not plan to stay permanently.

Undoubtedly, the ability to find work will sustain individuals' decisions to stay after return. So far, the picture of post-return employment is unclear. Of the 34 male respondents, half had found some sort of job in Syria, while half had not. Of the 31 female respondents, there were only 13 who had indicated having an outside job/vocation (i.e. not housewife or unemployed) before returning to Syria. Upon their return to Syria, none of them had yet found a job despite many actively looking for opportunities: for example, one former government employee trying to return to her previous job said that it was extremely difficult given the bureaucracy and delays and that she had not yet been successful.

Waiting to see: Refugees' return intentions

In addition to the 1.7 million returns so far reported by UNHCR, the UN's refugee agency is forecasting the return of up to 1.5 million refugees from Jordan, Lebanon, Türkiye, Iraq and Egypt, alongside two million IDPs, this year. Even then, however, returns represent a fraction of the total numbers of displaced Syrians inside and outside the country.

UNHCR has, over the years, conducted regular (annual) surveying amongst refugees to assess the return intentions of refugees in neighboring countries. UNHCR monitoring of return intentions amongst refugee and IDP populations in Syria and neighboring countries in June 2024 showed that around a third of refugees hoped to return to Syria one day, whereas just 1.7 percent of refugees expressed an intention to return within the coming 12 months.

Earlier in 2025, at the same time as its survey with returnees, ETANA conducted its own returns intentions surveying amongst 29 refugees still residing in neighboring or European countries for the purpose of qualitative insights into return considerations. This sample included 12 participants in Türkiye (41%), six in Jordan (21%), six in Germany (21%) and five in Lebanon (17%). Across all participants, a significant majority (70%) had been displaced outside Syria's borders for 10 years or more.

Figure 3: Demographics for the (S2) survey sample.

Age

60+ (3%)
46-60 (17%)
18-30 (28%)
31-45 (52%)

Marital status

Single (41%)
Married (59%)
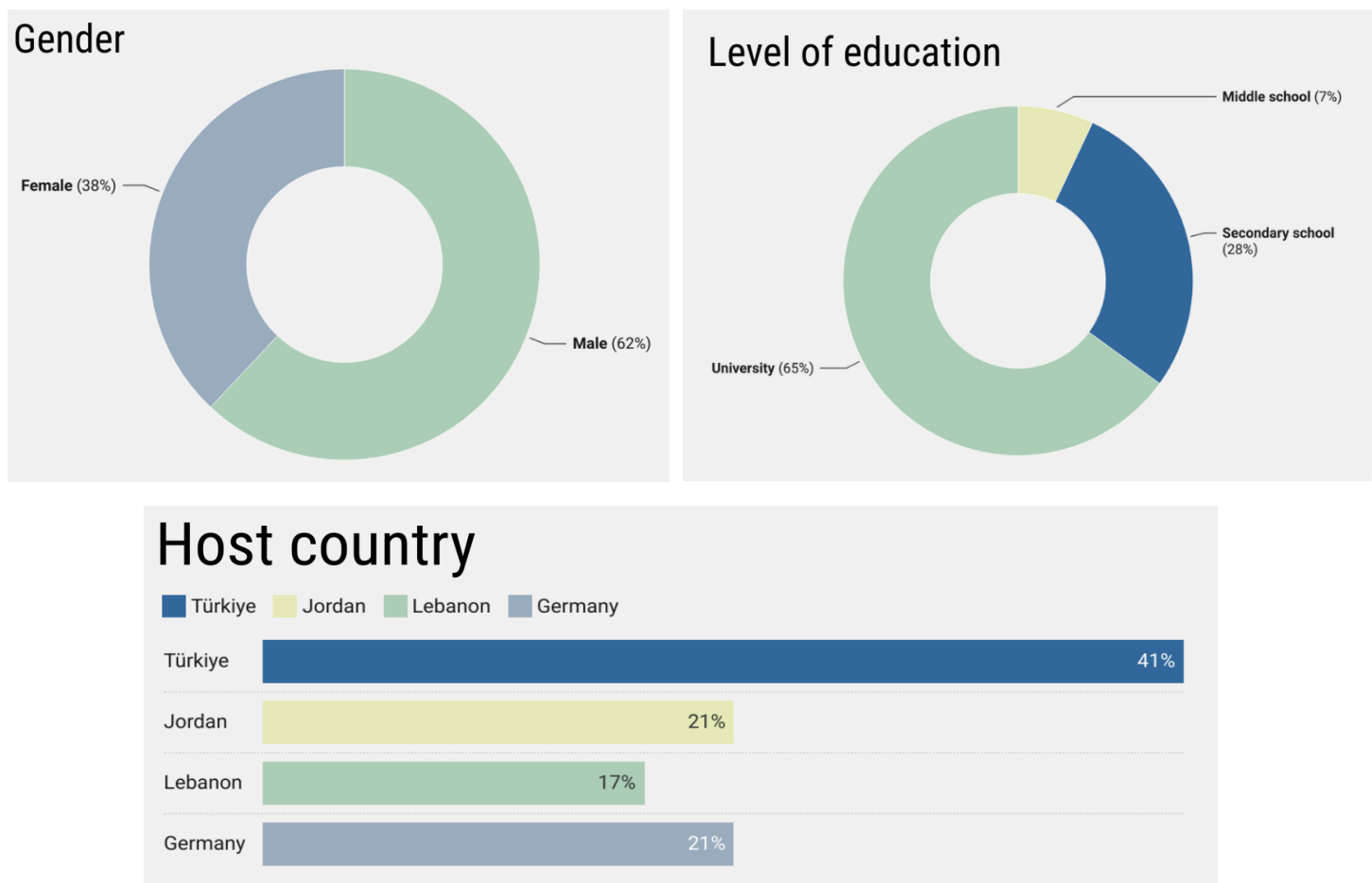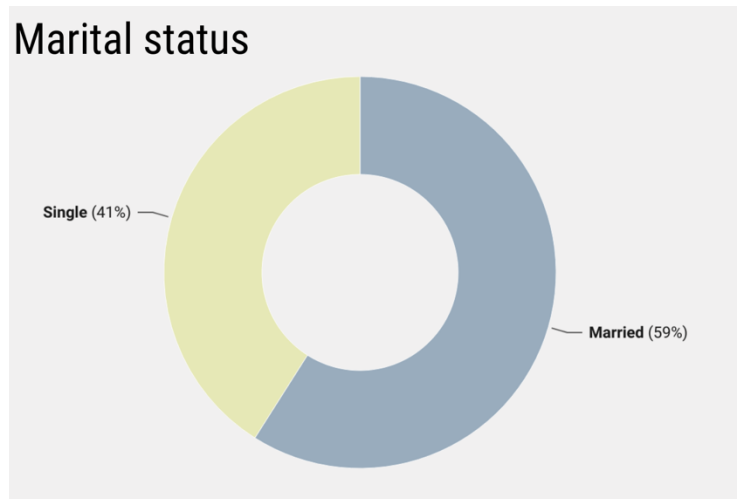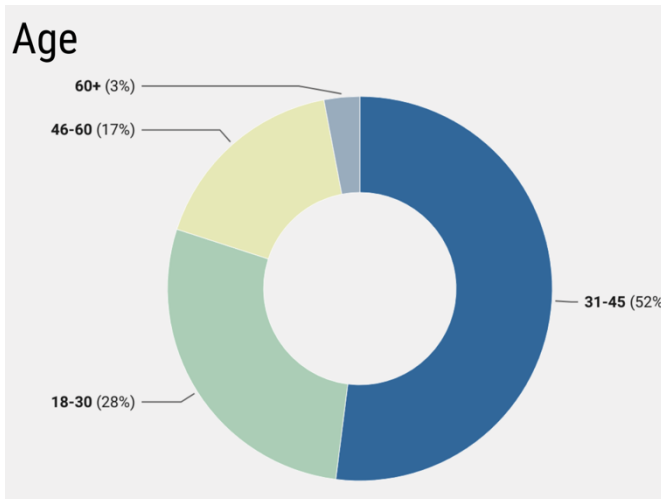
'Do you plan to return to Syria soon or in the foreseeable future?'

Arguably the most crucial question in the survey asked participants about their intentions to return to Syria (or not) in the foreseeable future. Interestingly, participants were equally divided in their answers—38% said "yes," they were planning to return; 38% answered "no"; and a further 24% said they were "unsure."

Of the 11 (38%) participants who answered "yes," six were in Türkiye, three in Jordan and two in Germany. The two participants in Germany cited xenophobia and differences in cultural and religious values for their reasons to leave Germany and return to Syria. One, a single, 18-30-year-old male originally from Daraa, explained his reasoning: "Because no matter what a person does here, people will still see them as an unwelcome refugee." The other, a single, 18-30-year-old male originally from Deir Ezzor, cited "concerns about the future for my children in Germany in terms of religion and moral values."

In terms of gender disaggregation, eight participants who said "yes" were male and included unemployed individuals, casual laborers, a journalist and a medical equipment engineer; the three women who provided the same answer included housewives and one hairdresser. Their reasons for wanting to return to Syria varied, including and mix of push and pull factors, such as:

Do you plan to return to Syria soon or in the forseeable future?

- Unsure (24%)
- No (38%)
- Yes (38%)
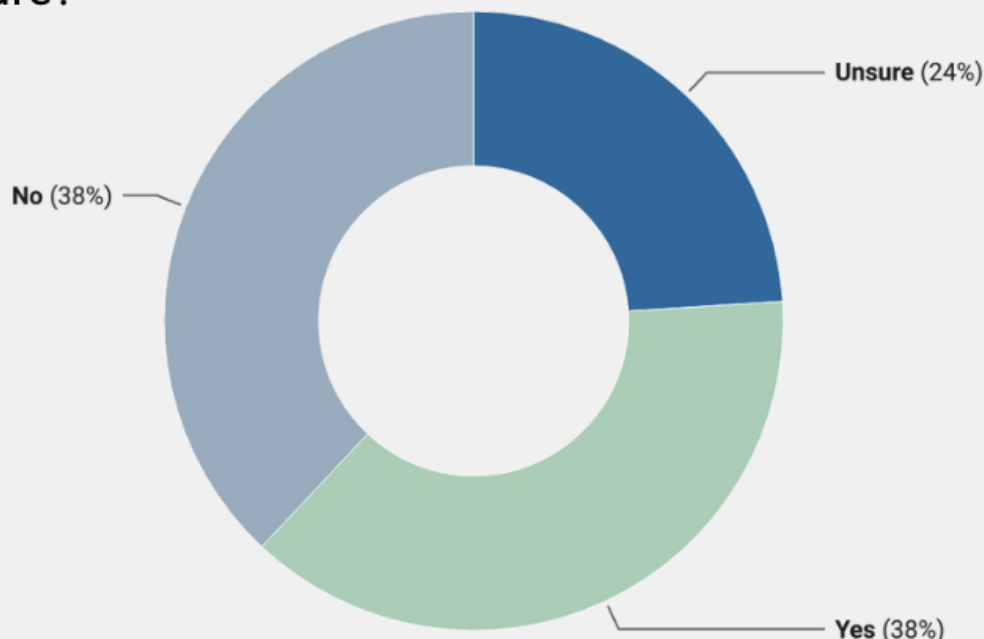
Of the total survey respondents, 11 (38%) also said "no" that they did not plan to return soon or in the foreseeable future. Of these, five were in Lebanon, three in Türkiye, two in Jordan and one in Germany. In terms of gender disaggregation, five were men and included casual workers and a student; the other five were women who were either employed or unemployed.

The reasons that they gave for not planning to return to Syria anytime soon included:

- Lack of trust in the new regime in Syria;
- Lack of safety in Syria;
- Uncertainty regarding living conditions and safety in Syria;
- Lack of links to Syria;
- Children in Turkish schools & speak Turkish.

Finally, seven of the total (24%) were "unsure" about their plans to return to Syria anytime soon. Notably, these respondents were mainly in Germany or Türkiye and tended to hail from a more professional background. The four male respondents were either doctors or civil engineering students. The three women included teachers, housewives and an app developer.

Timeframes

One fifth (21%) of participants expressed a willingness to return in the next 12 months. However, 38% said they were either planning to travel between 1-3 years or three or more years. Another 10 participants said they were "unsure." Two participants said they would never return.

What is the timeframe you are considering for returning?

Never (7%)

1-3 years (10%)

Within 1 year (21%)

Unsure (34%)

More than 1 year (28%)
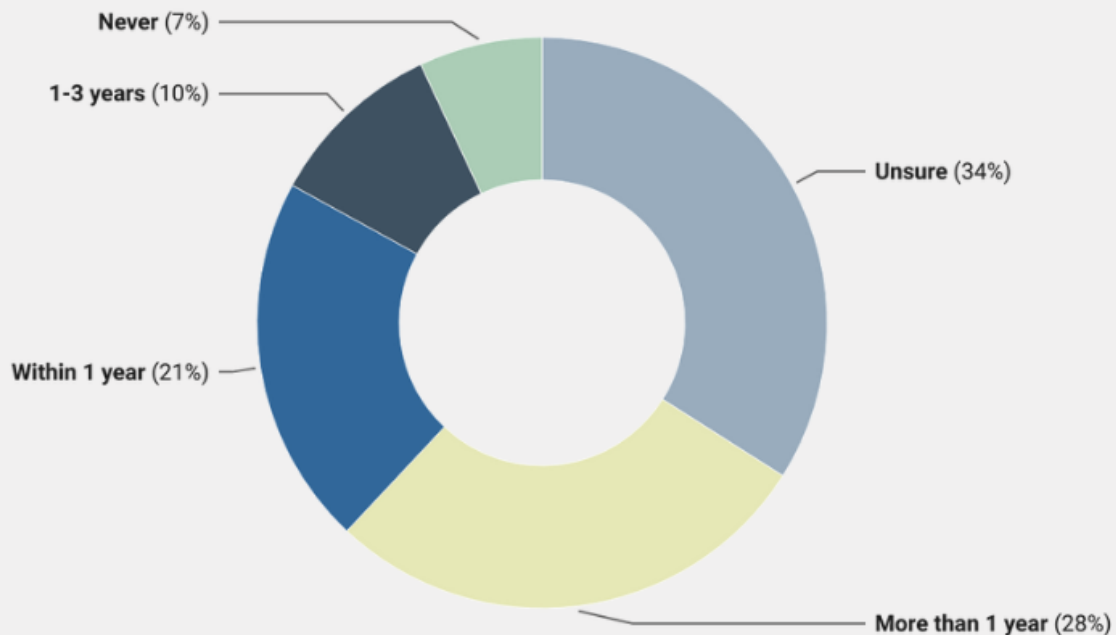
Widespread feelings of unsafety

An emerging narrative—particularly in neighboring countries but Europe as well—suggests that with the regime gone, Syria is finally safe for returns. However, a significant majority of Syrians themselves disagree.

Across all refugee participants, 76% said that they did not think it was safe to return to Syria in the current situation. The reasons they gave focused heavily on security instability first (with the lack of stability, weapons proliferation, weak state institutions and reprisals repeatedly mentioned) followed by economic conditions (including the lack of basic services in origin communities, poor education services and harsh living conditions). One participant from the north-east also pointed to the SDF's ongoing control of Raqqa as a reason he did not plan to return. If anything, the lack of certainty about what comes next underwrote many participants' responses.

My thinking has not changed due to the instability in Syria at the moment. Returning is only possible as a visit. Going back to live in Syria at the moment is impossible. The general situation is volatile, and the security situation is unstable, which is why we have witnessed some violations on the coast.

A 30-45 year-old woman in Germany

On the other hand, 24% said that they did think it was safe to return to Syria. These participants mainly cited that the country was safe now without the Assad regime's violations—because this meant no more airstrikes, arbitrary arrests, checkpoints or military conscription. As one participant said: "What we fled from is now gone for good. So why should we stay away from our country?" The other reason was family and friends encouraging respondents to return: "I will be going back to my community, family and relatives," one participant said.

Security vs. economy and services

As with the (S1) results, economic factors did not provide a significant reason for participants to consider returning—unless they involved socio-economic conditions in host countries. However, the findings differed here when it came to prospective returns.

More than half of participants did not parse a specific consideration that was the most important when considering return; while 7% cited the risk of further conflict and security, and 3% cited the economy, as their most important consideration, 66% cited a "combination of all the above" list (which also included housing, the fall of the regime and establishing a stable life outside Syria). This again speaks to the multi-faceted decision-making process that goes into return.

In response to the question, "Do you feel that you will be able to find a job upon returning?", marginally more participants were pessimistic than optimistic: 38% said "no" while 31% said "yes."

Another 55% stated that they believed the level of services in their origin community was sufficient to support their return and reintegration after return.

Housing

Another crucial factor for Syrian refugees is housing. While conflict-era damage and destruction in Syria since 2011 was vast, the former regime also weaponized the housing, land and property (HLP) sphere in the country with the aim of entrenching the displacement of individuals and communities viewed as dissident or insufficiently trustworthy to live under a supposedly post-conflict Assadist system.

Just under half (48%) of participants said their property was intact. However—a similar number (45%)—said their property was destroyed and a further 7% described their property as in need of repair.

In response to the question, "Do you have documents proving ownership or previous residence in this property?", 69% said they did have documentation as opposed to 7% who did not. Although the percentage of refugees without documentation of their properties is believed to be much higher, based on several studies conducted amongst refugees in recent years, this should serve as a reminder for the need for flexible, human-centered property restitution mechanisms that allow refugees to provide alternative modes of property verification (including electronic copies of documents).

Integration & settlement elsewhere

Of the total respondents, a minority (28%) said "yes" they preferred permanent integration in their current host country rather than returning to Syria. This sentiment was highest in Jordan, where three participants preferred permanent integration; one participant each in Germany, Lebanon and Türkiye also expressed this sentiment. The participants in Türkiye caveated that they preferred integrating into their host country for now but planned to return to Syria eventually. This could belie a desire for stability and the right to remain in the short to medium-term, before return to Syria is deemed safe enough.

The majority (69%) said they did not want to permanently settle outside Syria. Of these, nine were based in Türkiye, three in Jordan, two in Germany and one in Lebanon. Some of the caveats that they gave about their return were a need to stay in the host country until their children's education was completed or a desire to return to Syria only once the situation improves (including when more job opportunities are available).

Citizenship & socio-economic conditions in host countries

Protracted displacement is not just about socio-economic conditions. Refugees' rootedness in a host country can depend on their access to legal status (or even citizenship) as well as other factors. Neighboring countries, by and large, imposed increasing restrictions on refugees' access to legal residency since 2011. With the notable exception of Türkiye, which has provided citizenship to tens of thousands of Syrian refugees, Syrians' best hope of a stable, permanent future outside the country remains via citizenship is in Europe.

Indeed, refugee-participants access to citizenship seems to have influenced their position on return. In total, 31% of participants were citizens—including seven in Türkiye & two in Germany. Of that number, seven participants described their economic situation as between "excellent" and "good," with most of them either not planning to return to Syria soon or unsure. Only one respondent (a citizen in Türkiye) described his economic situation as below average; he planned to go back to Syria soon.

Legal residency, on the other hand, can make refugees' life easier in displacement—making it easier to move around without a fear of checkpoints, for example—but not necessarily a greater sense of rootedness or socio-economic stability. Just 10% of survey participants were legal residents in their host country (although alongside naturalized citizens, the number of legal residents was 44%), including: five in Jordan, four in Germany and three in Lebanon. Even so, legal residents had more varied answers regarding their perceived economic situation and plans to return.

- "Good" economic situation (4): Two not returning soon; one planning to return soon; one unsure.
- "Average" economic situation (4): One not returning soon; two planning to return soon; one unsure.
- "Poor" economic situation (2): One not returning soon; one planning to return soon.
- "Unstable" economic situation (2): One not returning soon; one unsure.

New displacements under post-Assad authorities

The numbers of refugees and IDPs returning to origin communities in recent months has prompted some important shifts in language, tone and even programming with regards to returns to Syria.

UNHCR's current positioning is instructive. UNHCR's December 2024 position paper on returns to Syria, published in mid – January 2025, stated that "in view of the many challenges facing Syria's population," which included humanitarian crisis, high levels of internal displacement and widespread destruction and damage to shelter and critical infrastructure, "UNHCR is not promoting large-scale voluntary repatriation to Syria." There has been a slight shift in agency language since then. UNHCR's operational framework for the year noted that "based on the numbers of Syrians returning home [...] and explicit requests from refugees in host countries to be supported to return," the agency announced it was "shifting to a mode of facilitation of voluntary refugee return." What this means in practice is support in host countries and at the point of return: preparations in host countries, counselling, protection services, return grants to aid refugees to organize their return, and additional requirements for reintegration programs for both refugees and IDPs.

But in spite of the optimism of the immediate post-Assad moment following Bashar al-Assad's exit from the country and the collapse of the former regime in December 2024, Syria's uncertain transition has seen at least one wave of significant displacement. This indicates—as with the status quo before—Syria is not yet a fully stabilized or definitively conducive returns context at present. People are going back; more are expected to. But at the same time, others—at least according to ETANA's survey findings—are either thinking about leaving the country or actively preparing to do so.

Displacements during the regime's collapse

The rapid collapse of the regime precipitated displacements of IDPs fleeing rapidly changing frontlines in the north -west: one million IDPs (including 155,000 people experiencing secondary displacement) were forced to flee their homes, with the most affected areas being Aleppo (542,600 IDPs), Hama (347,100) and Homs (26,000). Large numbers of these new IDPs are believed to have returned home, with Aleppo ranking as one of the top governorates for IDP returns since late 2024.

Within these numbers were sectarian and political displacements of individuals fearful of advancing Islamist and former opposition groups fighting under the HTS-led Operation Deterring Aggression, whether because they were Alawis (or from other minority communities) fearful of reprisals or because of their connections to the regime. As a result, convoys of civilians, regime loyalists and former army, security apparatus and government members were seen heading from Syrian cities towards the coast in early to mid-December, the beginning of a kind of geographical/sectarian homogenization that has continued in different forms months after the fall of the regime. Assad regime figures' retreat to Syria's coastal areas during the fall of the regime reinforced sectarian narratives and deepened resentment against the Alawi community in the process, which came to be viewed—by many outright interim government supporters, at the very least—as inseparable from the Assad regime (despite the longstanding grievances

within the Alawi community itself vis-à-vis the regime and its decades-long policy of sectarian instrumentalization).

Displacements after violence on Syria's coast in March 2025

Arguably the most significant post-Assad displacement to date—in terms of its implications and the nature of the violence that preceded it, though not in numbers—followed the outbreak of a regime-backed insurgency in Tartous and Latakia in early March. After regime remnant forces ambushed General Security troops near Jableh late on 7th March and launched a series of attacks along the coast in the days after, interim authorities mobilized a huge force—estimated to consist of 70,000 regular and irregular fighters—to combat the latent regime insurgency. While hundreds of security forces and pro-regime fighters were killed, by far the highest toll was inflicted against local civilians after security forces under the new Ministry of Defense, Islamist factions affiliated with HTS and irregular fighters perpetrated indiscriminate aerial bombardments, extra-judicial killings, field executions and community-based massacres targeting mostly Alawi communities up and down the coast. Initial estimates in the immediate aftermath suggested up to 1,500 civilian casualties. Displacements were immediate, with civilians initially fleeing armed violence in and around their communities and then the explicitly sectarianized reprisals that followed. These included IDPs, fleeing violence hotspots, massacres and fears of incoming security forces and factions, who moved to other areas within the coast, but also growing numbers of refugees as the violence escalated (see table below). Anti-Alawi violence has continued sporadically since then, also spreading to other areas, including Damascus: in April, ACLED recorded 20 "attacks and arrest events involving civilians from the [Alawi] community, resulting in 31 fatalities."

Table 2: Total numbers of IDPs and refugees displaced by violence on Syria's coast

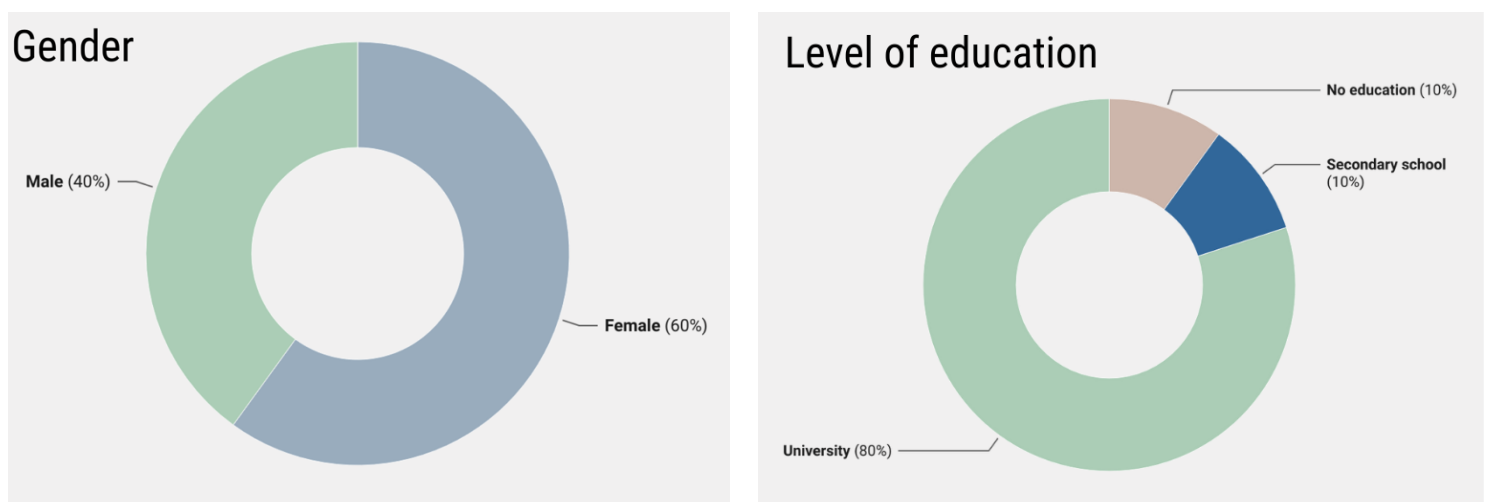| Nature of displacement	Destination	Numbers of displaced	Date of statistics (2025)
IDPs	Within coastal provinces	37,000	Late March
IDPs	Hmeimim military base, Jableh	c.8,000	Mid-March
Refugees	North and Akkar governorates (Lebanon)	35,900	May

Methodology

In response, ETANA conducted surveys and key informant interviews with different communities in and around the coast. This included 10 key informant interviews with IDPs and in situ residents of coastal areas (KI3) and then surveys (S4) as well as key informant interviews (KI5) with refugees from the coast who had crossed into northern Lebanon's Akkar Governorate (just across the Syrian-Lebanese border from Tartous province):

- The (KI3) sample on the coast was majority-female, with a 60% female and 40% male breakdown. Most (60%) of participants were between the ages of 18 and 30 years' old; a significant majority (70%) were Alawi while the rest were Sunni, an important consideration given that the violence on the coast largely targeted and affected Alawi communities. Almost all (90%) participants came from various areas of Syria's two coastal provinces—Latakia (50%) and Tartous (including 30% from Baniyas and 10% from the Tartous countryside)—in addition to a small segment (10%) from rural Aleppo. Participants were asked about their experiences of displacement (if any) from March
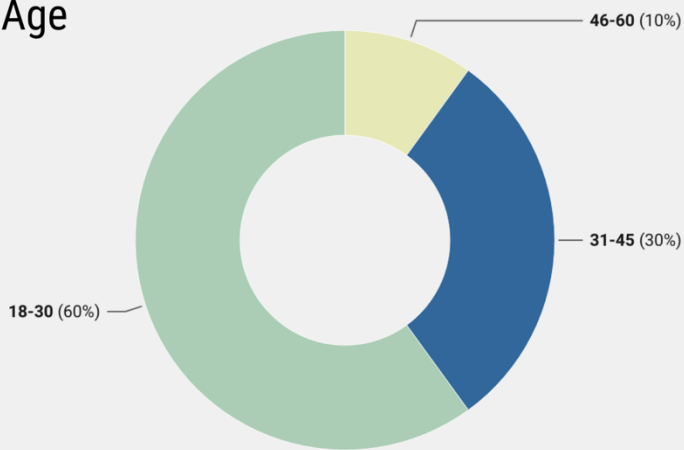
onwards, their feelings of safety in origin or host communities, and their intentions to either stay, return or leave altogether.

▪ Surveys in north Lebanon's Akkar (S4) included a marginal female majority, with 52% female and 48% male participants reached. There was a more mixed educational profile than other survey rounds, with 12% having received no education in addition to 32% who studied up to university-level or higher. Age demographics were also relatively mixed: roughly one-third were aged between 18 and 30 years' old in addition to another one-third aged between 31 and 45 years' old; 12% were aged over 60. The survey also reached a mixed geographical profile: two-thirds came from Homs (reflective of the numbers of IDPs from Homs who were residing on the coast at the time of the violence, whether because of post 2011 and post-8th December displacements); about half that number hailed from the coastal provinces of Latakia and Tartous. This somewhat harder-to-define sample arguably reflected the nature of the displacement: beyond the fact that it broadly targeted the Alawi community, violence was, in a sense, indiscriminate, with pro-government fighters moving from village to village and killing men, women and children because of their sect as opposed to expressly seeking out individuals. Indiscriminate violence begat random displacement: individuals, families and/or whole villages fled together.

▪ Key informant interviews in Akkar, Lebanon (KI5) reached a generally younger, more educated sample. There was absolute gender parity across the sample; 70% were aged between 18 and 30 years' old; 70% were educated to university-level or higher. Again, the most participants came from Homs (70%) followed by the Homs countryside (20%) and Safita in rural Tartous (10%). Similarly to KI3, participants were asked about their experiences of displacement to Lebanon, their experiences with Lebanese authorities and host communities, and their intentions to either stay, return or emigrate elsewhere.
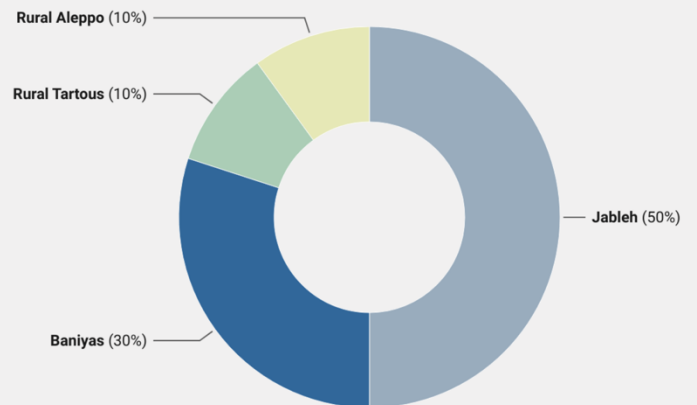
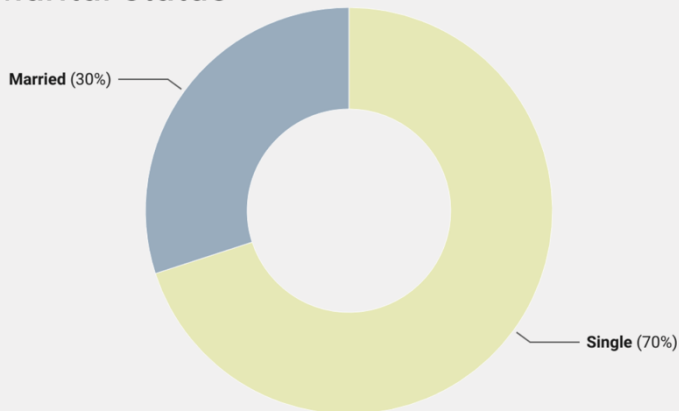**Figure 4: Demographics for the (KI3) sample**

Gender: Male (40%), Female (60%)

Level of education: No education (10%), Secondary school (10%), University (80%)

Age

- 46-60 (10%)
- 31-45 (30%)
- 18-30 (60%)

Region of origin

- Rural Aleppo (10%)
- Rural Tartous (10%)
- Jableh (50%)
- Baniyas (30%)

Marital status

- Married (30%)
- Single (70%)

Religious/sectarian identity

- Sunni (30%)
- Alawite (70%)
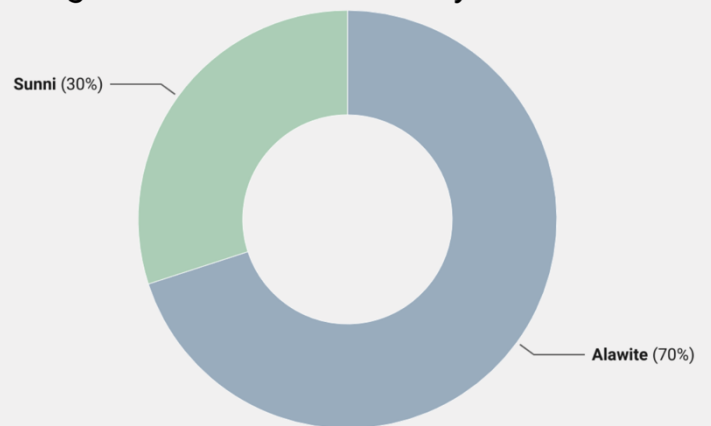
Figure 5: Demographics for the (S4) survey sample

Gender

- Male (48%)
- Female (52%)

Level of education

- No education (12%)
- Elementary school (4%)
- Middle school (12%)
- Secondary school (16%)
- Technical institute (24%)
- University (32%)

Age

- 60+ (12%)
- 46-60 (20%)
- 31-45 (36%)
- 18-30 (32%)

Province of origin

- Latakia (8%)
- Aleppo (4%)
- Tartous (28%)
- Homs (60%)
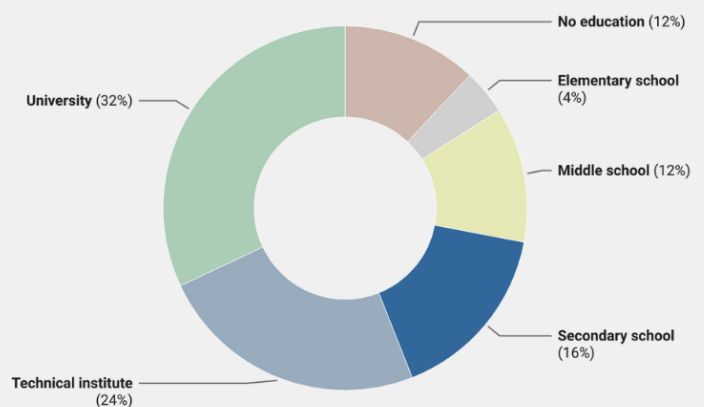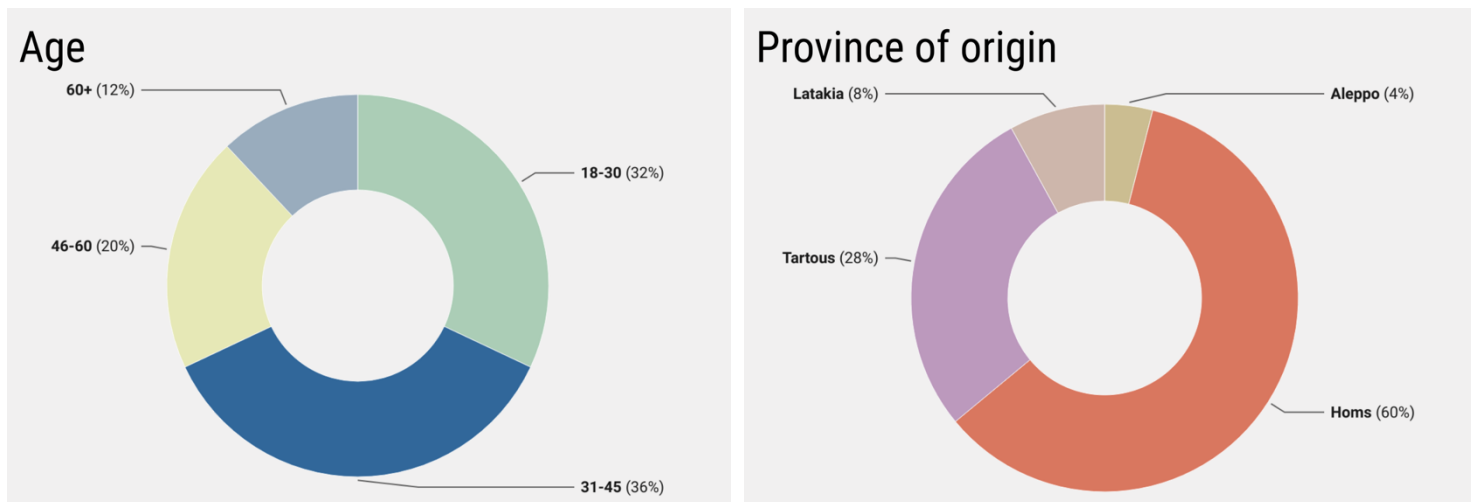
Figure 6: Demographics for the (KI5) sample

Gender

- Female (50%)
- Male (50%)

Level of education

- Middle school (10%)
- Secondary school (10%)
- Technical institute (10%)
- University (70%)

Age

Age	Percentage
18-30	70%
31-45	20%
46-60	10%
60+	0%

Marital status

Single (50%) — — Married (50%)

Region of origin

Rural Homs (20%) —

Safita (Tartous) (10%) —

— Homs (70%)
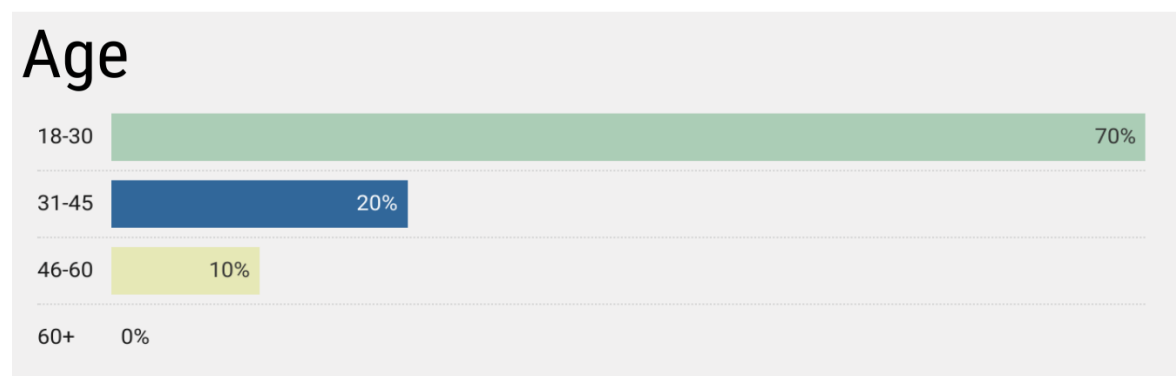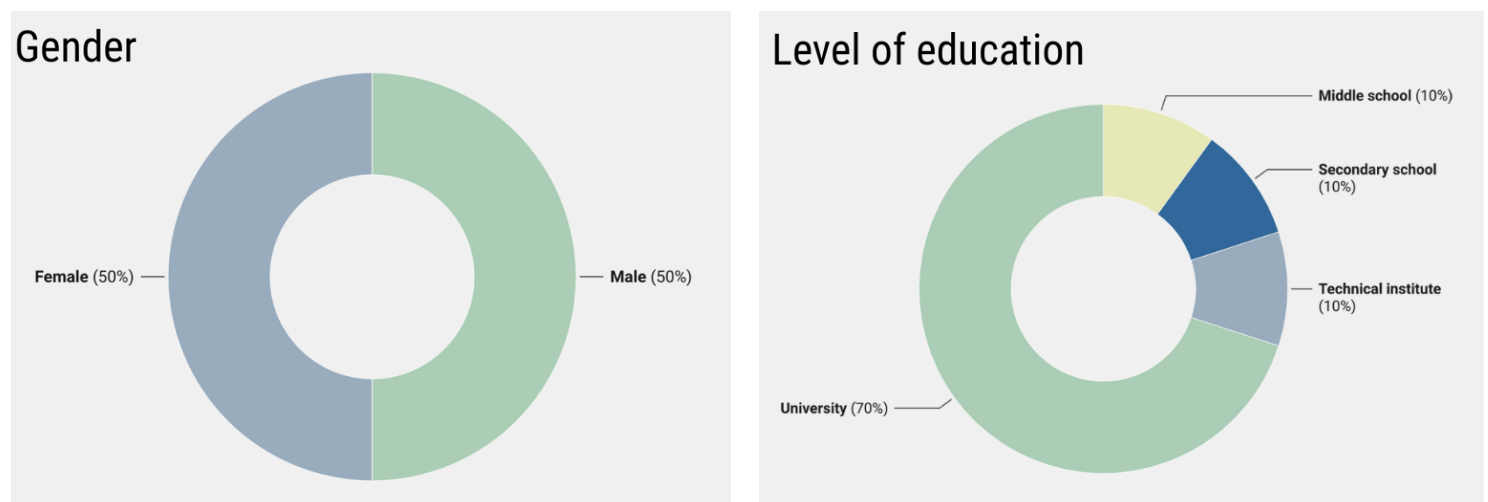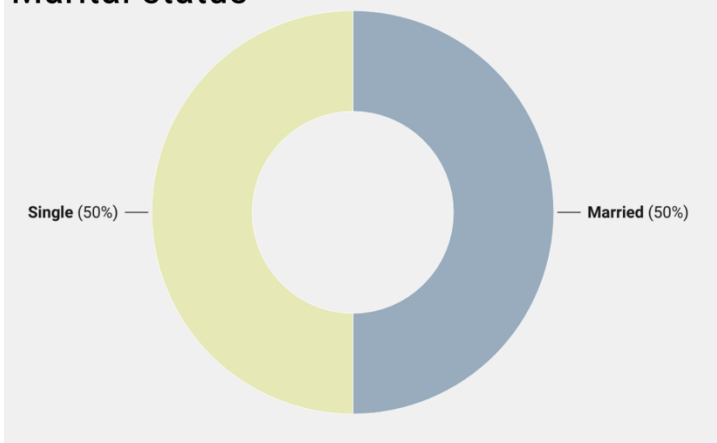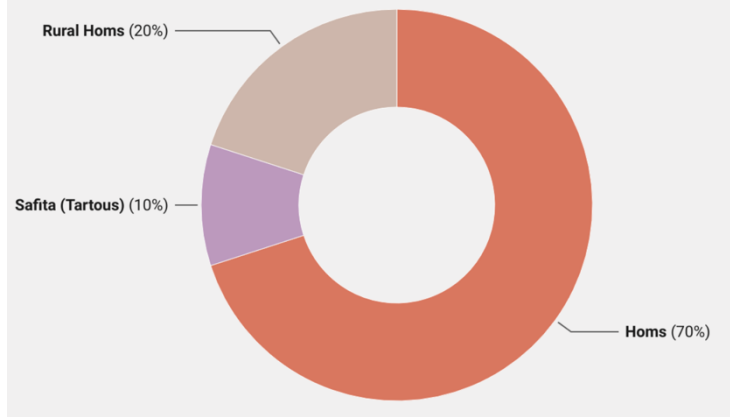
Flight, return & emigration

Of the 10 key informants based in coastal provinces interviewed by ETANA (KI3), half were displaced internally within Latakia or Tartous, with 30% saying they were displaced with family and/or friends and another 20% saying they were displaced as individuals. An overwhelming majority—90%—indicated there had been violence in their village or area. A further 80% stated that first-degree relatives and/or friends had suffered "direct consequences" of the violence, with participants describing displacements, killings, physical assaults and property destructions. UNHCR similarly noted among refugees how "many report[ed] to have directly witnessed friends and family being killed," with "flight and now displacement [exacerbating] underlying health conditions, while children show signs of trauma." These are factors that—whether because of health issues or material considerations (like the loss of property)—could protract displacement long after violence actually ended.

Indeed, when participants were asked if they considered conditions safe for return to their origin communities, half said it was still not safe, citing kidnappings, murders and/or the risk of harassment from security forces as reasons for staying away for the time being. This perception is supported by the fact that violations—including killings—continued long after the official end of military operations on the coast and the formation of two committees meant to investigate the events and rebuild civil peace and stability in affected areas.

There were similarly mixed responses regarding intentions to stay in Syria-long term. Half of key informants still residing within coastal provinces (KI3) stated that they were considering long-term resettlement outside their origin area (in another area of Syria). A further 60% said they were thinking about emigrating from Syria altogether.

Those participants considering leaving Syria described places they would like to go—with Brazil, Egypt, Germany, the Gulf and Lebanon all mentioned as possibilities. These were mentioned either because of feasibility (Egypt and Lebanon), a desirable socioeconomic situation (the Gulf) or because of historic or post-2011 migratory links (as in Brazil and Germany) whereby participants had relatives or knew people already abroad.

At the same time, many also acknowledged the financial and bureaucratic hurdles involved in even leaving Syria for a neighboring country, never mind settling somewhere legally—a highly

restrictive status quo that post-2011 displacements and the chaos of the war in Syria helped to create in the first place.

A 31-45-year-old Alawi woman from Tartous, who worked at a law firm, said she hoped to leave for "any safe place that I can reach [...] but I don't know if I'll be able to due to financial and social reasons."

A young male Alawi taxi driver from Baniyas meanwhile expressed the open-ended combination of hope and desperation that can follow that initial decision to leave:

Honestly, I would go anywhere—although I would prefer a foreign country, not an Arab country. I'm trying to secure a visa anywhere, and later, if that works out, I will try to bring my mother and sister out of Syria.

Refugees from the coast in Lebanon

While around 51,000 IDPs were displaced internally within coastal provinces or other areas of the country, tens of thousands (mostly Alawi) refugees fled the country altogether. Some 11,000 refugees were reported to have crossed from Syria's coast to northern Lebanon by mid-March, with many crossing the Al-Kabir River into Akkar Governorate. However, displacements continued in the weeks after while numbers rose further as UNHCR and the Red Cross successfully registered more new arrivals: as a result, one month after the initial outbreak of violence, UNHCR Lebanon counted "nearly 30,000 people" recently arrived in Lebanon, including 6,216 Syrian families and 365 Lebanese families, "with further arrivals expected" at the time. The latest UN figures count 35,900 refugees who arrived to the North and Akkar governorates in northern Lebanon.

There is something darkly ironic about these latest displacements that stands in stark contrast to the past experience of Syrian refugees in Lebanon who fled the Assad regime. New refugees largely fled violence perpetrated by interim authorities and their allies (effectively, HTS and allied groups) and mostly came from minority communities (and the Alawi community in particular); under the regime, post-2011 displacements of predominantly rural, peri-urban and urban Sunni communities were perpetrated by the Syrian army and pro-regime militias (including Shia and Alawi militias backed by the regime, Russia and, particularly, Iran).

In another strange, inverse repetition of regime-era practices, there is a belief among some interim government supporters that refugees' flight indicated some sort of sectarianized opposition to interim authorities (if not actual support for the Assad regime), whereas the regime's security apparatus took a similar view of the displacement of refugees who in the past would rather flee the country than live under regime rule.

In a sense, the world appears to have turned upside down between the Assad and post-Assad eras, with similarly politicized and sectarianized displacement dynamics from the post-2011 conflict under Assad repeated only that the trends are now inversed.

This inversion bears the hallmarks of retribution—one group regards itself as the victim of abuses and so commits retributive abuses against another group held responsible. Indeed, the choices taken by interim authorities in Damascus have entrenched these perceptions amongst IDPs and refugees since March: horrendously violent retributions on the coast in March were broadly seen as sectarian reprisals for the Alawi community's imputed support for the regime insurgency (and the regime more broadly), thereby playing into delicate sectarian divisions first sowed by the regime as opposed to an intentional and concerted effort to respond differently and try to heal the sectarian wounds of the past.

To better understand these dynamics, ETANA's research team conducted surveys (S4) and interviews (KI5) in Akkar to chart the displacement experiences and return intentions of 35 refugees part of this broader displacement towards Lebanon in March. Refugees surveyed were not just from the coast: S4 reached participants from Homs (60%) and Aleppo (4%) as well as Latakia (8%) and Tartous (28%); KI5 mostly reached participants from Homs or the Homs countryside (70% and 20% respectively) and Safita in Tartous (10%).

If anything, however, the question-sets prompted challenging questions for interim authorities about how to ameliorate conditions regarding minority communities, rebuild trust with those communities, and address violations that have taken place so far—all factors that might encourage refugees to come home provided there are genuine conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified returns. One-third of refugees in S4 said they did not plan to return to Syria in the foreseeable future; 60% of refugees in KI5 said they would not return "within the next month or in the near future."

Instead, KI5 participants were predominantly negative when asked about how they felt about return in the present circumstances: 52% said that returning could pose a threat to their personal safety and security, while 44% said the situation remained too unstable to consider return. Several participants even went as far as saying they would never go home (or at least not under the current political status quo).

One participant, originally from Homs, said:

No, never. I want nothing to do with Syria.

A 31-45 year-old laborer, originally from Homs, who fled to Akkar

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When asked what needed to change for him to change his mind, the man—like other participants in both S4 and KI5 mentioned maximalist, systemic changes about the very nature of the post-Assad Syrian government and state. He called for: "The end of jihadist Islamic rule and the departure of Ahmad al-Shara'a, as everything that is happening now takes place with his knowledge," before emphasizing the importance of "establishment of an Arab Syrian republic that guarantees the rights of all citizens."

Other participants demanded everything from the establishment of a "civil state," equality for all citizens and the departure of HTS from power to more day-to-day, community-level security

concerns. About one third of participants answering this question focused on this latter point. For example, a university student originally from Homs demanded the "return of security and safety [and] ending cases of abduction, killing, massacres and sectarian rhetoric" as prerequisites for him feeling safe enough to return. Another student from the Homs countryside put it in stark terms:

I will consider returning when my family is not in immediate danger.

A student from the Homs countryside

Beyond security concerns and political fears, material considerations presented another fundamental barrier to return. In the Akkar survey (S4), participants were asked: "Is your original home still intact?" Less than one quarter (24%) of participants were able to say yes; everyone else—just over three quarters of the total sample—answered that their homes had been burned down, looted, seized or demolished, or that they were forced to sign over ownership.

Is your original home still intact?

Yes (24%)

No (76%)
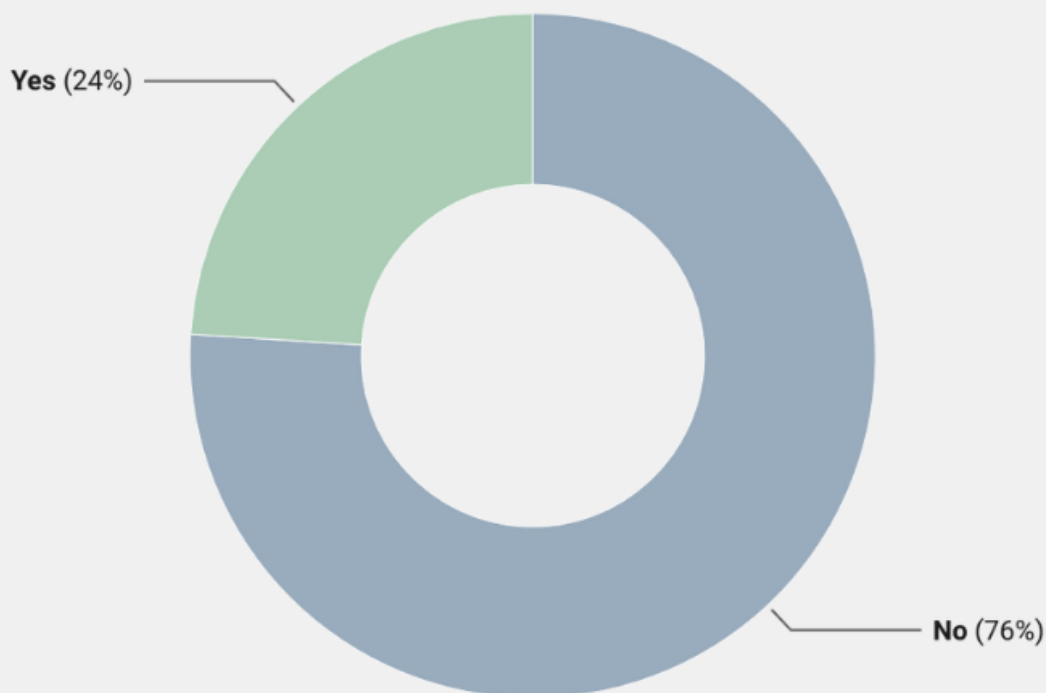
Perhaps unsurprisingly then, when asked what would be necessary for things to change, 88% of S4 participants said security and political stability, 8% said justice and accountability, and 4% said freedom of expression and guarantees of civil rights—evidence that Syria's displacement context is still tied to political, security and rights-based push factors, but now being demanded of the new authorities in Damascus rather than the former regime under Assad.

However, what remains overwhelmingly true of both (former and present-day) political status quos is that an amelioration in economic conditions alone would not provide a sufficient enough pull factor to yield mass returns of Syrian refugees from neighboring countries or Europe, although economic aspects play a central role.

Growing fears: Community-based return & emigration intentions

Talking about "minorities" in Syria has, historically speaking, always been a complex and contentious issue. Criticism of, say, the sectarian make-up of the Assadist state, in which Alawis or other minority members were often prioritized for sensitive and senior positions, would be enough for an individual to encounter the harsher iterations of the regime security apparatus because it spoke to one of the foundations of the regime itself.

From the outset of the post-2011 uprising, however, pro-opposition Syrians also sought to construct a new "post-sectarian" identity as part of an imagined inclusive nation-state free of the Assads, something that was communicated in the famous anti-Assad chant of that time: "One, one, the Syrian people are one!"

In the wake of Assad's ouster, too, Syrians have sought to maintain this identity, rankling at statements from European and other western officials concerning minorities. If nothing else, these tensions speak to the myriad harms from decades of "divide-and-rule" policies by Syria's two Assadist presidents.

However, given the nature of Syria's current political transition—from the rule of a sectarianized predominantly Alawi-led regime system to an interim system dominated by Sunni Islamists—the differences in experiences and intentions between communities can be extremely stark. At the very least, violence on the coast represented a marked line in the sand for Syria's minorities on the one hand and refugees and IDPs potentially considering return on the other.
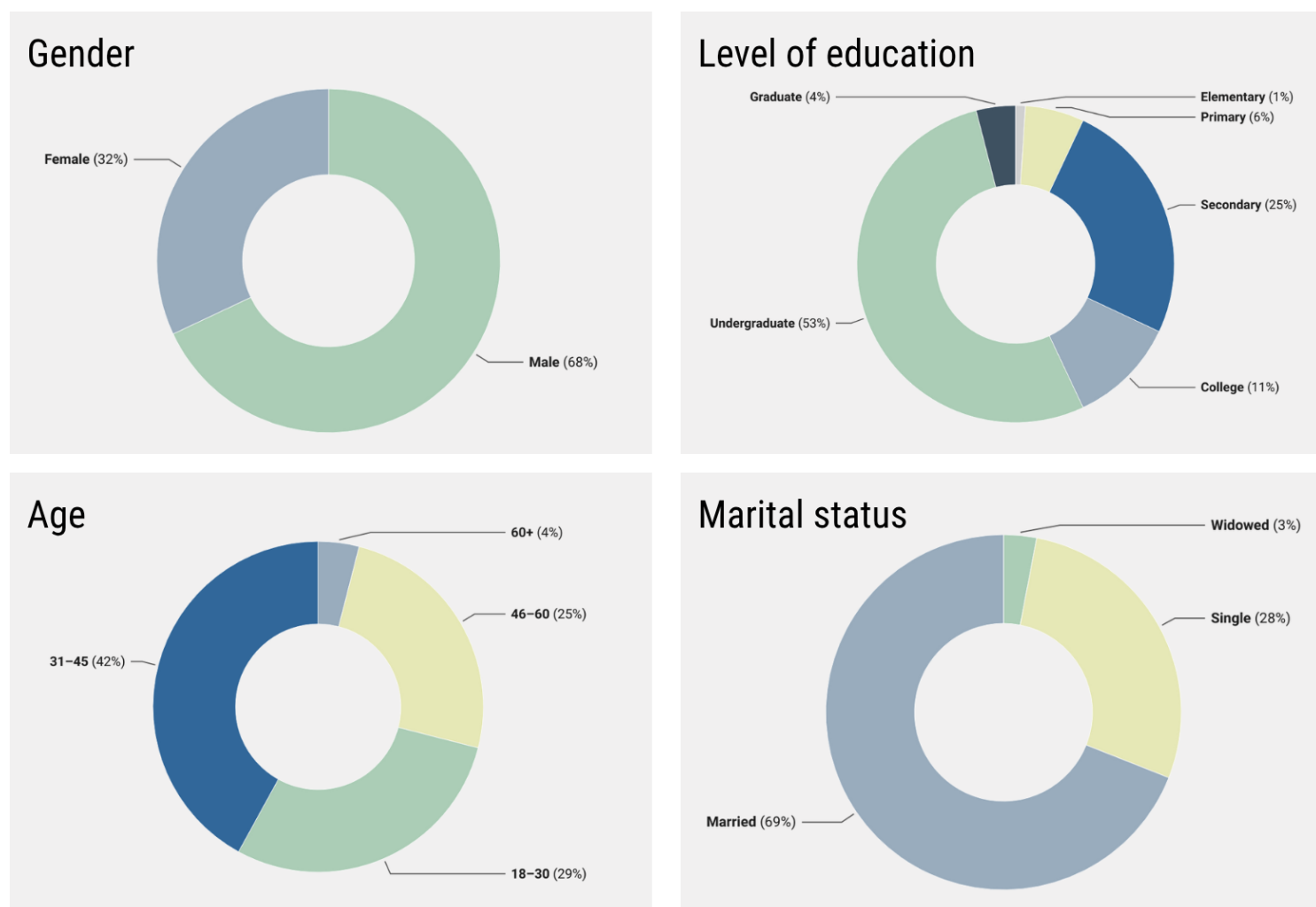
Although this increasingly widespread perception of interim authorities' capability and willingness to perpetrate such violence, carried out with impunity against those they perceive as dissenters or internal "enemies within," may not be as immediately existential for Syria's Sunni majority, several participants made clear that they are fearful of what could come next.

Methodology

In the wake of the violence and displacements in March, ETANA commissioned surveys (KI6) amongst all of Syria's major religious, ethno-sectarian and confessional groups around the country (Alawi, Christian, Druze, Ismaili, Shia, Sunni, Sunni – Circassian, Sunni – Kurdish, and Sunni – Turkmen) to tentatively assess the return and displacement intentions of different community members.

Polling responses from 72 individuals meant this was not intended as an exhaustive study, but rather an indicative cross-section of Syrian society used to answer key, cross-cutting issues related to Syria's current displacement and return context.

For example, how significantly had the events on the coast impacted individuals' plans to stay in a post-Assad Syria under the current interim authorities? What were their concerns about staying? And were people planning to leave?

Figure 7: Demographics for the (KI6) sample

Gender
- Female (32%)
- Male (68%)

Level of education
- Graduate (4%)
- Elementary (1%)
- Primary (6%)
- Secondary (25%)
- College (11%)
- Undergraduate (53%)

Age
- 60+ (4%)
- 46–60 (25%)
- 31–45 (42%)
- 18–30 (29%)

Marital status
- Widowed (3%)
- Single (28%)
- Married (69%)

Feelings of safety & security

In fact, increasing push factors and decreasing return intentions were witnessed throughout the surveys—trends that are expected to continue as interim authorities appear intent on pushing forward with plans to disarm rival armed groups and/or ethno-sectarian communities resistant to HTS-led power consolidation across the country with interim President Ahmad al-Shara'a at the helm.

Perhaps unsurprisingly—given the sense of Sunni triumphalism in some quarters of Syrian society in the wake of the regime's fall as well as HTS-led interim authorities implicit efforts to enfranchise and consolidate the support of a peri-urban and rural conservative Sunni constituency—Sunni participants tended to feel safer, more trusting of interim authorities, and less aware of discriminatory governance policies on sectarian lines.

The following survey responses from a Sunni man from Idlib city indicated this trend:

Do you feel safe in your place of residence—for yourself and your family? What are your specific concerns, if any?

I feel safe, and [I] thank God for bringing us the state of security and stability we are experiencing now.

Can you provide examples of sectarian or discriminatory policies, or security measures, taken by the caretaker authorities that have affected you or those around you, such as employment, services, security, economy, or living conditions?

In Idlib, there is no form of oppression towards civilians. Everyone lives in safety without any mistreatment from any authority.

Do you feel that the caretaker authorities, including the security forces, practice any form of discrimination against minorities?

No, in Jisr al-Shughour, we have some villages that are entirely Christian, and we haven't heard of any violations by the authorities against them. They practice their religious rituals without any disturbance. Even our Druze brothers in the villages live peacefully without any issues; I have several friends among them.

Have the recent developments in Syria, including the recent acts of violence on the coast, changed your perspective on the caretaker authorities?

Yes, positively. The authorities have been wise, and here I'm speaking about General Security, not the reinforcements that came from factions in the north to the coast, which acted individually.

Did the recent developments in Syria, including the recent acts of violence on the coast, make you consider leaving your current place of residence, leaving the province you're living in, or leaving Syria?

No, never. We feel safe in Idlib province, thank God.

Of the 36 total Sunni participants surveyed, 75% said they felt safe in their local community and 75% said they felt the security situation had improved since December—significantly higher percentages than the 54% and 42% average percentages (across all groups) who responded in the same way to the two questions respectively.

Sunni participants who did not feel safe expressed political opposition to the current trajectory taken by interim authorities—and security concerns about where that trajectory ultimately might lead.

A young man training as a lawyer from Darayya described fears emanating from "one-color rule" and "repeated violations […] and the spread of a mentality of revenge."

"How can we convince [interim authorities] that the people from Darayya who were displaced to [regime-held areas of] Rural Damascus are not supporters of the regime?" he asked, referring to historic displacements from his hometown. "Our fears are growing about the spread of violence and revenge against anyone who tries to criticize [interim authorities'] policies or actions."

A public sector employee from Al-Maidan in central Damascus said he did not feel safe because of "actions carried out by certain factions and individuals in Damascus without there being any deterrence or accountability." He also warned about the "existence of some religiously extreme groups that impose their beliefs on everyone—for example, expressing disapproval towards women who do not wear the hijab."

A young housewife from Damascus said that this lack of accountability had negatively impacted her view of interim authorities. "I've always seen the interim authorities as a group of armed extremist factions that took control of the government through international agreement without any administrative or political experience."

One interesting and significant difference formed between Sunnis and Sunni Kurds, a division that can be understood along political and geographical lines. Although Kurds form part of Syria's Sunni religious-sectarian majority, they are an ethnic minority distributed (mainly) in north-west and north-east Syria. Kurdish participants' responses tended to align more with other minorities' feelings of insecurity and fear of interim authorities (or at the very least some allied factions, particularly those from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army).

Yes, the northern factions have treated the Kurds as a minority, labeling them as terrorist entities. There is discrimination in treatment. The authorities in the western countryside of Aleppo do not treat us properly, and there have been many violations—such as taking crops or homes from owners who are based in areas controlled by Kurdish forces.

An 18-year-old Kurdish man from Aleppo

By contrast, 80% of Alawi participants said they felt unsafe while 90% said they felt the security situation had deteriorated.

Collectively, other minority groups polled higher feelings of risk and insecurity. Responses among Druze participants were more mixed: just over half (56%) said they felt safe (although

several qualified this by saying things like they felt personally safe but worried about family members, or that they felt safe during the day but not at night); 44% said the security situation had improved compared with 30% who said it had deteriorated and 22% who said it was unchanged. (The fact that this survey was conducted before the recent armed clashes and sectarianized anti-Druze violence in Jaramana, Sahnaya and Suwayda means that a different picture would be expected if the survey were conducted again now.)

Discrimination & sectarian inequalities

Responses to later questions appeared to support the theory that events in Syria since early 2025 (including the violence on the coast in March) deleteriously impacted Syrians' trust in interim authorities and intentions to stay in the country or perhaps consider flight outside.

When asked if they felt that interim authorities, including security forces, practice any form of discrimination against minorities, 54% of participants said yes, 33% said no and 10% said they did not know.

Continuing a trend from previous questions, Sunni participants generally highlighted less discrimination. By and large, they tended to refer to an "equality in treatment" exercised by interim authorities towards different geographical or ethno-sectarian communities; those who noted any discrimination mainly said it was because of people's affiliation or stance towards the Assad regime and/or Hezbollah.

However, responses from minority groups told a radically different story. Alawi, Christian, Druze and Ismaili participants recounted first-hand (or second-hand) experiences of abuse at checkpoints, discrimination in public sector workplaces, punitive property confiscations and the threat of violence.

A middle-aged female caterer from Tartous recounted stories of discrimination from neighbors and friends "especially at checkpoints where people are asked about their religion."

"If someone is Alawi, they are insulted or cursed. I have not personally encountered any such situation, however," she said, adding tellingly, "because I haven't been leaving the house lately […] due to the lack of security."

While another Alawi participant, a 31-45-year-old teacher from rural Latakia, also described checkpoints as sites of discrimination and fear, she explained the many layers of discrimination at work: as an Alawi suspected of having pro-regime sympathies or affiliations and as a woman who, because of misogynistic, patriarchal and religious policies from interim authorities, felt she had "no value, except in the context of my own home":

The checkpoints change, so there are no guarantees in general, and that means there's caution. The authorities may act in a way that does not seem discriminatory, but people discriminate. There is a mentality of the victor and the defeated, and in the end, the people at the checkpoints are just regular individuals.

I haven't faced direct discrimination—except in certain cases. I face issues when expressing my opinion or participating in collective work. Previously, I was involved in many [civil] initiatives, but today, those around me feel the need to hide my identity and avoid [me] appearing publicly so as not to ruin the initiative due to my sectarian identity [as an Alawi].

Ultimately, I do not feel that the authorities treat everyone equally. Instead, they treat some as victors with grievances and others as remnants of the former regime or people who were silent about the truth. In the best case, you can secure your safety as long as you do not criticize the government or the authorities.

Furthermore, the authorities today are for religious men and men in general. As a woman, I feel that I have no value except in the context of my own home. The authorities, through the head of the Women's Affairs Office, discriminated against women when she spoke about a woman's inability to perform certain tasks.

A 31-45-year-old self-employed civil engineer from Tartous described how, in the post-Assad Syria, "justice is selective, not transitional."

"For example with businessmen affiliated with the former regime," he said, "if they are Alawi, their property is confiscated; but if they are Sunni, they are allowed to work."

A 31-45-year-old Druze female doctor from Jaramana agreed on the lack of equality. "Logically," she explained, "we should be citizens with equal rights, but in reality, [the authorities] do not view us as equal citizens. There is marginalization at the political level, and those working in this field face harassment from supporters of the new authorities."

Changing perspectives of interim authorities

When asked if recent developments in Syria, including the recent acts of violence on the coast, had changed their perspective of interim authorities, 63% said that yes, it had negatively changed their perspective while 28% said no, 6% said yes (positive change), and 4% said they were unsure.

Among those who described a negative change in perspective, members of different minority groups expressed feelings of shock, betrayal and fear about the future.

A middle-aged Christian woman from Tartous said she initially "expected better behavior" from interim authorities and allied armed groups—something that was shattered by the events on the coast. "[The new authorities] claimed after the fall of the regime that they came with love and peace, but their actions were the opposite."

As someone who supported the fall of the regime and felt excited about the possibilities for a new Syria, this 31-45-year-old Alawi man, also from Tartous, described feeling "betrayed":

I feel betrayed. I'd placed my trust in the current authorities, believing that massacres would not occur, thinking they were mere illusions planted by the previous regime. Unfortunately, they came true, right before the eyes of the current authorities and under their supervision. Even General Security participated in the massacres. I feel completely let down, and now even my friends are mocking me.

A 31-45-year-old Ismaili man from Salamiyeh, which has had its own (albeit less violent) tensions with interim authorities since December, took a more cautious stance:

My perspective has changed slightly. I expected from the beginning that there would be violations and abuses during the transitional period. However, I didn't expect them to be this widespread or for the state to be incapable of controlling them. What happened raises doubts about the ability to control the factions that do not like the government's moderate rhetoric, and what happened in the coast has had an impact on all of Syria, weakening trust in [interim authorities'] ability to control weapons and violence.

And it was this point in particular—on the precedents established by the coast—that transgressed sectarian-based divisions within the survey sample. As quoted previously, a Sunni man from Al-Maidan in central Damascus stated that the events on the coast made him fearful of the future, even as a Sunni, because they demonstrated to him the levels of violence interim authorities were willing to deploy against perceived enemies or dissidents under the new status quo:

I fear for my family and for my life, because what happened on the coast could happen [anywhere]. In the coast, even Muslims were subjected to violence, not just the Alawi brothers. I would now consider any country where I can get entry permission, even with few job opportunities.
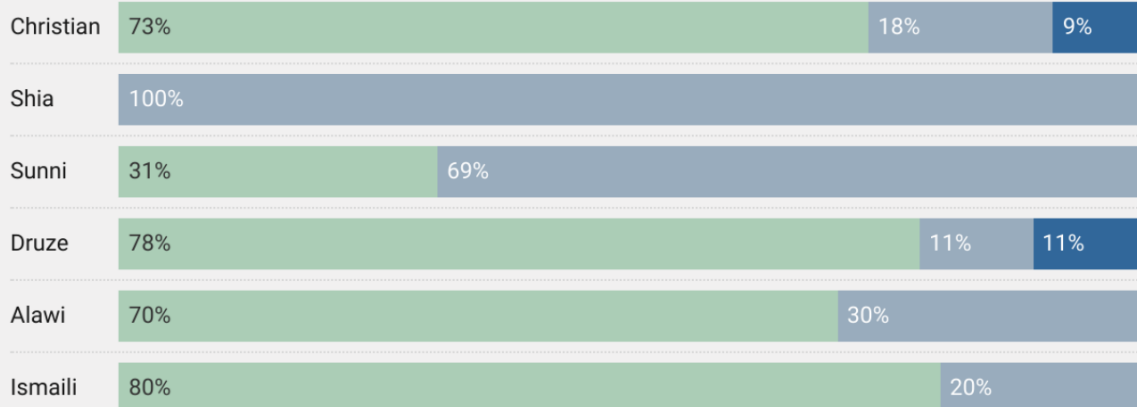
Emigration intentions

Deteriorating feelings of safety and security, awareness of sectarianized governance, and decreasing levels of trust in authorities is prompting Syrians to consider leaving the country—including those who had not fled their homes at any point since 2011.
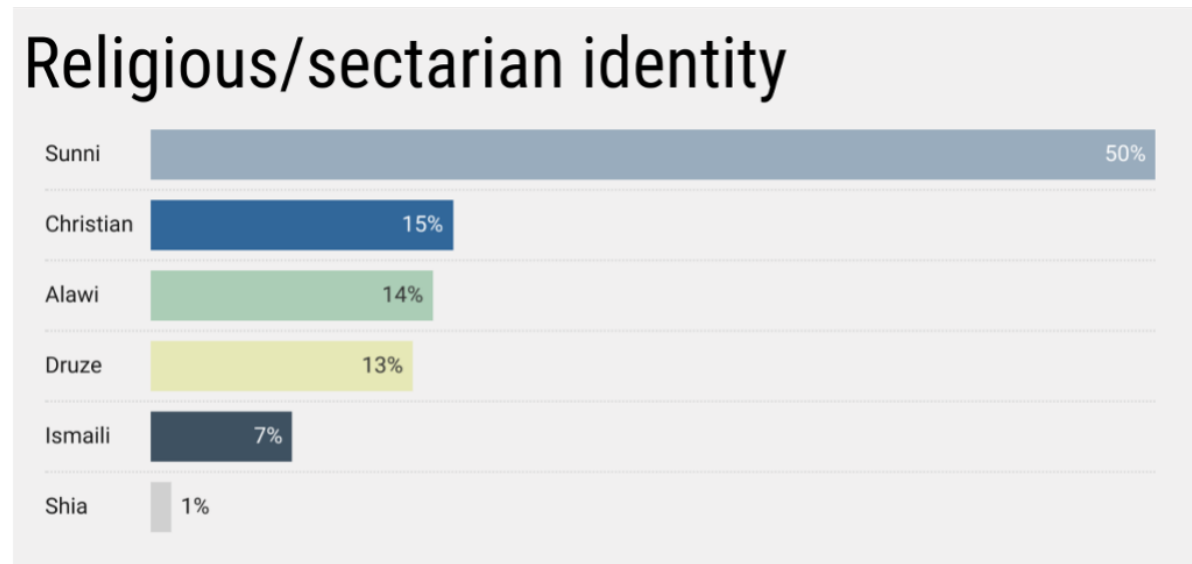
The chart above indicates the religious affiliation of the (KI6) sample: Sunnis made up half of the sample and a range of different communities represented minority-percentages of the remaining 50%. When asked if the same recent developments had made them consider leaving their current place of residence, home province or the country altogether, on average, 53% of participants said yes and 46% said no. However, as with the previous question, there were marked and significant disparities between different ethno-sectarian and religious groups in answer to these questions.

Did recent developments, including recent violence on the coast, make you consider leaving your current place of residence, province of origin or Syria altogether?

Legend: ■ Yes ■ No ■ Unclear

Community	Yes	No	Unclear
Christian	73%	18%	9%
Shia		100%	
Sunni	31%	69%	
Druze	78%	11%	11%
Alawi	70%	30%	
Ismaili	80%	20%	

As the chart above indicates, emigration intentions all stood around the three-quarters mark for all minority communities (with the exception of one Shia participant who expressed no consideration to leave their current place of residence, province of origin or Syria. By comparison, just one-third of Sunni participants expressed a similar desire.

Assessment

Return to Syria remains a multi-faceted, complex consideration for the millions of Syrians who remain displaced. Under Assad, Syrians were primarily concerned about security risks—posed by the regime's security apparatus and the never-ending specter of continued conflict and repression—and then, secondly, a range of more humanitarian-focused concerns, including economic stability, living conditions, service provision, infrastructure and shelter. Although the nature of their fears has changed with the removal of the regime's security apparatus, refugees and IDPs are still concerned about security and stability, but in a way that is integrated with these other, interrelated concerns. As such, pull factors need to be addressed together, in a holistic way. Outside assistance to improve Syria's tattered economy might remedy refugees' fears about employment or a decrease in the quality-of-life experienced in neighboring countries, but refugees fearful of renewed conflict, individualized persecution or the state of a destroyed or badly damaged home in Syria might well still temper their medium-term intentions to return. By the same token, reconstruction might remedy the protracted displacement of refugees dispossessed by the regime or made homeless by conflict damage, but it would not improve the broader transitional justice and human rights landscape without concerted intersectional approaches toward that end.

Hence, there is an over-arching need for caution for the time being and well-intentioned policymaking that centres first and foremost the desires, intentions and rights of Syrians themselves—whether resident, refugee, IDP or returnee. With regards to interim authorities and Syria's current political transition, donor states should, for example, seek to harness the new civil society landscape in Syria and consider working wherever possible with grass-roots, local-level associations, CSOs and NGOs, in addition to interim ministries, and remain cognizant of the fact that engagements with institutions and entities that do not meet conflict-sensitivity standards risk emboldening repressive or exclusionary policies and ultimately contributing to further instability, and possibly displacements, in the future. Similarly, states should continue to explore avenues of cooperation with interim authorities (beyond sanctions relief) responsive to positive or negative behavioral change and center human rights within that framework—without limiting these behavioral thresholds to concerns only about the treatment of women and minorities. When engaging with neighboring states, western states should also take care that the new impetus towards returns does not make way for deportation campaigns or other abuses of refugee rights.