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UNHCR's Failure to Uphold its Responsibility to the Displaced Syrians

Introduction

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is the lead UN agency on refugee issues—of most concern for the displaced Syrians. As the responsible agency, UNCHR is mandated with managing the entire refugee return process. The Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) is a civil society group representing the views and concerns of displaced Syrians and takes a keen interest in UNHCR's work due to its critical importance to Syria's refugee and IDP population. SACD has a number of urgent concerns about the refugee and IDP returns response and the role of UNHCR within it.

First and foremost, SACD maintains that displacement in Syria is a political issue. Over half of the prewar population are displaced and some of the most pernicious reasons for displacement and barriers to return involve political and structural changes within Syria that only a successful peace process, political agreement and transition can deliver. Simply treating refugee return as a humanitarian issue to be managed by UNCHR is a recipe for disaster. There is a need for a range of political actors to take on a greater role within the refugee and IDP file to ensure humanitarian actors are not being asked to undertake political work.

However, the SACD maintains that UNHCR is failing in its humanitarian responsibility to displaced Syrians. This paper will raise a number of urgent concerns about the way UNHCR is approaching refugee and IDP returns in Syria and draw on SACD's own research to highlight the risks. Failure to act to change the course of work and information around Syria's vast displacement crisis now, will have a devastating impact on the region and may have deadly consequences for individuals.

Key concerns about UNHCR's returns work

- Failure to engage with Syria's displaced when setting returns strategy, thresholds, and programming.
- Significant shift in protection thresholds and returns strategy without consultation, evidence base for doing so, or reasonable explanation of why degrading the thresholds benefits Syria's displaced
- Inability and failure to access and monitor protection concerns, conditions, and thresholds in potential areas of return, or to



access and monitor returnees.

- Failure to highlight the limitations and concerns around protection and gaps in access and operational space to political actors and states in order to inform returns discourse and policies.
- Failure to communicate accurate and timely information to potential returnees about conditions, insecurity, and access limitations, leading to ill-informed returns decisions which therefore cannot be considered to be voluntary.
- Ambiguous communications, facilitation of returns, and project proposals which encourage premature returns into an environment with no reasonable expectation of protection.

The UNHCR is failing to act in accordance with its own strategies or its duty of care to the displaced Syrians. The first half of this briefing paper will offer analysis of UNHCR's own information and SACD's research which illustrate the agency's failures of responsibility to the displaced Syrians described in the points above.

The second half and the attached Annex, will offer the SACD's own findings from their original research on the fate of returnees and people from the so-called "reconciliation agreement areas." Two reports – "Fear, Repression and Vengeance: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians"¹ and "Between Hammer and Anvil: Motives and Experiences of Syrians Forced to Return to Assad-held Areas"² - for which the SACD interviewed some 280 returnees and people from "reconciliation areas" have documented a stark reality awaiting returnees, which UNHCR is completely failing to report on. These findings highlight the danger in the current gaps in UNHCR's approach.

Monitoring and Access

- Failure to report accurately, promptly and comprehensively on the security threats, arbitrary arrests, forced recruitment, harassment, extortion, lack of basic services and other forms of abuse suffered by a significant number of refugees and IDPs who returned to Assad-held areas to date;
- Failure to transparently report on UNHCR's lack of access to monitor conditions in potential return areas or the condition of returnees in the large majority of Assad-held areas and inform the relevant international bodies and facilitate appropriate political or policy discussions affecting displaced Syrians;

¹ Find "Fear, Repression and Vengeance: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians" here: www.syacd.org

² Find "Between Hammer and Anvil: Motives and Experiences of Syrians Forced to Return to Assad-held Areas" here: www.syacd.org



- Failure to include a comprehensive, detailed and contextually-aware reporting on its own protection thresholds in its regular reports, including Operational Updates and other UN reporting tools such as HNAP Returnee Overview, thus contributing to a skewed, misleading picture on the situation awaiting returnees, which has serious consequences many who lack basic information on the reality in Assad-held areas before making the decision to return;
- Failure to clearly communicate to the relevant international bodies that it has no way to ensure that returnees are not persecuted by the regime, which should be an absolute minimum before any conversation on the return of the displaced occurs.

In February 2018, the UNHCR released its 'Comprehensive Protection Solutions Strategy: Protection thresholds and parameters for refugee return in Syria (CPSS)' which promulgates that UNHCR's engagement on return during Phase 1 is limited to planning, monitoring, counselling, advocacy, and **ongoing analysis of obstacles to and conditions necessary for return, and identifying the necessary actions to address them** (emphasis by SACD). The basis to measure if the conditions for return have improved for the Phase 2 (when conditions have substantially changed and large-scale voluntary repatriation can be facilitated by UNHCR and partners) to become possible are the 22 protection thresholds defined in the same document and outline basic standards and conditions which must be met to protect the safety, dignity, and rights of returnees.

In March 2019, the UNHCR released a Regional Operational Framework document, wherein the UNHCR highlights that "Access of humanitarian actors, including to areas of return, remains selective and restricted in certain parts of the country, and generally highly regulated, thereby limiting inter alia, the ability to assess conditions and safety in these areas."

UNHCR's reporting tools, designed to provide granular information and analysis of obstacles and conditions for return, and identifying the necessary actions to address them, simply do not exist. Its monthly Operational Update,³ itself geared towards member states and donors, sets out various sets of numbers, including those of "spontaneous returns," different ways that the agency is helping the refugees and returnees, with a heavy emphasis on the donor-driven language of "impact: and not a single mention of specific obstacles to return or reality facing those forced to return due to difficult living conditions or anti-refugees sentiment in host countries. It speaks of gathering information at the community level to inform on gaps in infrastructure and services, and "other recent developments" that may have an impact on Syrians' return, but such document is not publicly available or accessible by the displaced Syrians. It indicates that such a document compiles laws that Assad's

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<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR%20Syria%27s%20Operational%20Update%20October%202019%20.pdf>



regime has passed to supposedly “facilitate” return without monitoring their implementation or impact on refugees intentions. It makes no mention of the series of discriminatory laws and decrees passed by the regime aiming to strip the displaced Syrians of their properties and tenancy rights, such as Law 10 or Law 6.

Most importantly, the Operational Update nor any of the other UNHCR’s public documents does not make a single mention of the security risks for returnees or its lack of access to monitor and report on its own protection thresholds in the majority of Assad-held areas.

- Failure to clearly communicate to the relevant international bodies that it has no way to ensure that returnees are not persecuted by the regime, which should be an absolute minimum before any conversation on the return of the displaced occurs.
- Consistent failure to inform the displaced people through its own public communication of the reality in Assad-held areas, instead sending mixed messages which give an impression that it is safe to return, thus directly encouraging premature and uninformed returns, which often lead to persecution and suffering of returnees;

Monitoring and Access

Monitoring and Access

In the case of IDPs returning from Rukban to the so-called IDP shelters in Homs, where individuals are detained until they can be cleared by security services or provide local guarantors to facilitate their release, the UNHCR does not have access to returnees and SACD has recorded an ongoing environment of abuse and protection concerns.⁴ These concerns were amplified after the UNHCR took part in facilitated returns from the camp in recent months, and, despite the aid agency still being deprived of access, a Russian researcher was able to interview returnees inside the so-called shelters under duress.⁵ This lack of access and lack of information to potential returnees from Rukban is causing premature and unsafe returns to take place.

UNHCR's Regional Operational Framework document highlights the need to utilize Communication with Communities (CWC) as an “integral part of planning, essential and relevant to all sectors and both Phases 1 and 2.” However, SACD's research suggests that the majority of returnees are depending on information from family and friends and social media and are not aware of, or receiving, information on returns conditions and thresholds from UNHCR. UNHCR’s refugee-facing websites and Facebook pages in Lebanon and Turkey do not mention either the protection thresholds or conditions on the ground in Syria.

⁴ Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban described detention, torture, death in “IDP shelters”
<https://medium.com/@SACD/displaced-syrians-forced-to-return-to-assad-held-areas-from-rukban-tell-their-stories-b4b76f9ffe58>

⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=my-CrW7rh7w>



SACD Findings and Reporting

- Undertaking facilitation of returns and shifting operational phasing to include facilitation within Phase 1, before conditions have been met, could be perceived to be encouraging returns prematurely.
- Considering a highly dangerous practice of offering the displaced Syrians cash incentives to return in unsafe circumstances, despite overwhelming evidence that conditions for such return don't exist and contrary to its own strategic documents

UNHCR's CPSS states that "present conditions in Syria are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity. Significant risks remain for civilians across the country." According to this document, UNHCR is neither promoting nor facilitating refugee returns at this stage and its planning for return in Syria is in Phase 1, which is defined as "the current phase, where the necessary conditions are not in place for safe and dignified return, but there are some self-organized returns occurring. During this phase, return should not be encouraged." Despite this, their 2019 Operational Framework removes this language and adds significant circumstances in which facilitation of returns can occur during Phase 1.

Alongside this, UNHCR are working with donors and other aid actors in an attempt to implement cash programming for returnees, which is likely to encourage and incentivize returns at a time when protection thresholds have not been met. The plan to offer the returnees a cash incentive could prove to be a tipping point for many displaced Syrians in difficult living conditions in displacement, who could see it as an incentive to return despite the absence of basic conditions for a safe and dignified return. Such plan is being considered despite clear evidence that it is not safe for a vast majority of the displaced to return without a robust international monitoring mechanism to ensure minimum conditions of safety and dignity; despite UNHCR's own admission that it has no access to a vast majority or returnees to monitor their condition once they return; and in direct contravention of its own strategy documents. There are real fears from Syrians, as well as in donor and humanitarian circles that the cash payments could coerce people back prematurely into an unsafe situation.

SACD Findings and Reporting:

UNHCR's lack of reporting on the reality facing returnees prompted the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity to conduct its own research into the fate of returnees and people from the so-called "reconciliation agreement areas." Two reports – "Fear, Repression and Vengeance: Reality Behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians" and "Between Hammer and Anvil: Motives and Experiences of Syrians Forced to Return to Assad-held Areas" – for which we interviewed some 290 returnees and people from "reconciliation areas" have documented a stark reality

SACD Findings and Reporting



awaiting returnees, which UNHCR is completely failing to report on. These are some of the key findings:

More than a quarter of those interviewed had been detained themselves or had a family member arbitrarily arrested by the security services. Of those respondents, 75 per cent had been arrested within the last 18 months. More than 70 per cent of those arrested had to pay a bribe to be released. Beatings and torture are common practices in detention. Several interviewees' relatives were taken to unknown locations, after which they were never heard from again.

- Some 68 per cent of those interviewed are themselves or have a relative who is wanted for arrest by either the security services or Assad's military. Forced conscription⁶ into Assad's forces is rampant, especially in areas integrated under "reconciliation agreements", where up to 75 per cent of those interviewed or their family members were wanted for recruitment. Conscripted fighters are almost inevitably sent to the most dangerous frontlines; many, especially young men, have been killed either in battle or in murky circumstances. Many of those wanted by the security branches for being perceived as "anti-Assad" are forced into the military and sent to the frontlines straight from detention and are never seen again.
- Two-thirds of the interviewees stated that they live in constant fear of arrest or harassment from the security services and various militias that run a maze of checkpoints—particularly those in or from areas under "reconciliation agreements". People are arbitrarily stopped, harassed, threatened and arrested by these groups to extort money on the spot or from their families. Militias rely on a network of informants to identify returnees and those who accepted "reconciliation agreements" for targeting.
- Corruption and extortion by the regime and militias permeate every aspect of life for returnees. Interviewees reported having to pay bribes to carry out the most menial of activities, such as obtaining documents or transporting produce to the market. Almost all industrial and other economic activity in these areas has ceased, so farming is often the sole source of income. The regime is exploiting this situation by enforcing a ban on the transfer of goods and products beyond local areas under "reconciliation agreements", which forces returnees to sell their produce to the pro-regime monopolists. Two-thirds of the returnees have lost their former source of income

⁶ <https://medium.com/@SACD/reconciling-with-death-disappearance-and-fear-6e17fe2456aa>



and are now unemployed or engaged in manual, temporary work that cannot provide a basic standard of living for their families.

- Most interviewees from areas covered by the regime's "urban development laws" consider themselves to be affected by the discriminatory laws and decrees governing the destroyed areas. They are systematically denied the right to their property in an openly retaliatory manner, especially in areas where the regime has seized control by force. Returnees to these areas are particularly affected, as regime officials know that one of the key reasons they returned was to officially document their property to ensure it is not lost.
- A 'clean' security record check did not translate to security on return. Our studies show cases of returnees who had a security check of their situation through special channels or those who thought that they were not to be subjected to any security proceedings because they were not part of any practices that opposed the Syrian regime. Those returnees were still subjected to arrests, security abuses, and financial extortion.
- 40 percent of returnees could not recover their original homes for reasons of partial or total destruction or because of the security measures that have impeded the return.
- 33 percent of returnees were unable to achieve their goal of family reunion although this is one of the key factors driving them to decide to return.
- Two thirds of returnees say they did not fulfill their expectations by returning to Syria. 65 percent of returnees stated that they achieved nothing by returning because either they were stuck in the poor living and economic conditions prevailing in the regime areas, or were subjected to harassment, arbitrary arrest or feared forced recruitment to Assad's military of themselves or a close family member. The combination of the listed factors made 68 percent of returnees advise other IDPs and refugees not to return.

Protection Thresholds

Protection Thresholds

- Failure to consult displaced Syrians about the protection thresholds and the significant changes made to these thresholds between February 2018 and March 2019, as well as a failure to promote the thresholds or the fact they are not being met.

In February 2018, UNHCR developed the Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy (CPSS) for Syria based on a set of protection thresholds which it said must be met before a safe and dignified return of refugees



and IDPs is possible.⁷ Its own position stated in the strategy document is that “present conditions in Syria are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity.” In March 2019, UNHCR drafted a 'Regional Operational Framework'⁸ document that included indicators for the thresholds but significantly altered the thresholds themselves; including deleting some altogether, altering wording or expanding others, and folding some into other thresholds. The document was only released publicly six months later. The changes create confusion about what exactly the protection thresholds are.

Deleted thresholds cover a reduction in active conflict, the need for an agreement between governments and the agency, returnees access to justice and law enforcement, and mine and UXO removal. There has not been any corresponding change in facts on the ground that would suggest such as change was appropriate. SACD's research shows that the deleted thresholds and wording relates to thresholds that are not being met and where violations and protection concerns exist for surveyed returnees.

SACD believes the changes are unjustified and reduce the levels of basic security and protection that must be in place before returns are promoted. UNHCR state that the thresholds and strategy will continue to be revised and fear that further degradation of the thresholds could occur and will lead to premature and unsafe returns.

When the findings of SACD research are placed in the context of the UNHCR's own criteria – protection thresholds – we see that the vast majority⁹ are far from being met, painting a dire picture for any refugees or IDPs forced to return before the minimum conditions are in place. In particular, the thresholds “the physical, legal and material safety of refugees and returnees is ensured” and “every individual's decision to return is informed and genuinely voluntary, without any coercion” were far from being met, as the SACD's own research clearly demonstrates. UNHCR must be reporting publicly on this reality, both to the displaced Syrians so they can make informed decisions about return, but also to international policymakers and donors.

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⁷ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63223>

⁸ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/71524_0.pdf

⁹ For a comprehensive breakdown of SACD research which documents failure to meet 11 key protection thresholds see the attached Annex. We only included 11 thresholds in direct correlation with our research, which does not imply that other thresholds have been met, but only that our reports have no directly relevant data on them.



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Misleading numbers have dire consequences

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This is a direct quote from the UNHCR's October Operational Update:

“Self-organized returns of IDPs and refugees from neighboring countries continue to several areas where stability has been restored, hostilities

¹⁰ <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63223>

¹¹ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/71524_0.pdf

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declined or ceased, and which have become newly accessible. It should be underlined that the Government of Syria has taken a number of decisions that helps and facilitates the return of Syrian returnees. Regional UNHCR figures report the 75,501 verified refugee returnees to Syria at the end of September, of which 7,803 Syrian refugees were reported as having returned through the organized group returns facilitated by the General Security Office of Lebanon and spontaneous returns from Jordan, as well as 97 self-organized returns took place from Jordan during September. It should be underlined that these are the numbers that are registered refugees with UNHCR. It is perceived that the number of returnees is higher than those registered with UNHCR. The movements of IDP returnees is estimated at 309,894. UNHCR field teams conducted over 87 missions to assess conditions and needs of returnees and IDPs. Through these missions as well as follow up over the phone with families who have recently returned to Syria from Lebanon and Jordan, the top three key concerns identified by returnees included destroyed homes, lack of livelihood opportunities and lack of civil status documentation.”

If a displaced Syrian, currently facing difficult living conditions in displacement or pressure from the rising anti-refugees sentiment in countries like Lebanon or Turkey, reads this from an agency that is supposed to be the provider of the most accurate and salient information on the conditions for return it is reasonable to expect they will conclude that it must be safe to return. Perhaps difficult, but safe.

The numbers given do not indicate in any way that the UNHCR has no way of checking what happened to the vast majority of the returnees it has recorded. The number of missions it cites must be put in the context of the fact that, according to its own planning document from March 2019, they are possible only in a very limited number of sub-districts under Assad’s control: “Access of humanitarian actors, including to areas of return, remains selective and restricted in certain parts of the country, and generally highly regulated, thereby limiting inter alia, the ability to assess conditions and safety in these areas¹³.”

The “follow up over the phone” supposedly reveals that families who have recently returned from Lebanon and Jordan have concerns that do not mention their safety and security at all. This is in direct contradiction with the findings of our research where the majority of those interviewed, over 70% have indicated that they do not feel safe¹⁴ due to arbitrary arrests, forced recruitment and harassment. Nothing best illustrates this from the fact that in the Dara’a governorate, where, according to the UN’s Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme (HNAP) the largest number of returnees is recorded, there are literally demonstrations and clashes with the regime security forces over a campaign of arbitrary arrests and forced recruitment of returnees. This has been well documented by the

¹³ https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/71524_0.pdf

¹⁴ “Fear, Repression and Vengeance: Reality Behind Assad’s Promises to Displaced Syrians,”

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UN Commission of Inquiry¹⁵ and reported on publicly on almost daily basis¹⁶.

But, this information does not seem to be of relevance for the UNHCR to report. Instead, it keeps ignoring the overwhelming data on the harsh reality facing returnees and informs its potential donors that its strategy will be shifting from “emergency humanitarian response towards return and reintegration and expanded its services to the Syrian returnees.” The impact of this is real and deeply worrying as refugees interviewed by the UNHCR itself increasingly cite “improvements in the security situation, family reunification, and having livelihood opportunities in Syria as the top reasons influencing their decision to return.” As our reports document, nothing could be further from the truth and UNHCR is failing to inform the people it is supposed to protect in order for them to make an informed decision on return. Once they do and face the reality of harassment, persecution, difficult living conditions, absence of basic services and economic opportunity, more than 68% regret the decision to return regardless of the difficult situation in displacement and advise other IDPs and refugees not to return¹⁷.

In the creation of this dangerous mirage, numbers play a crucial role. The UNHCR has claimed that at least 1.4M of displaced Syrians have returned last year, implicitly supporting the regime-promoted narrative that Syria is safe, and that the conditions inside the country are now fit for the voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to their areas of origin. Social media posts showing senior UNHCR officials [walking through the rubble of Homs](#) and other Syrian cities, supposedly to illustrate how conditions are harsh but improving, were deeply misleading and indeed dangerous for the Syrian displaced who returned only to face forcible recruitment into Assad’s army, detention, and in some cases enforced disappearance¹⁸. Even after the outcry of other [humanitarian groups](#) and UNHCR’s head Filippo Grandi [openly admitting](#) that UNHCR has no access to all areas of the country to ensure that returnees are safe, the agency narrative curated through its social media and public documents available to the displaced Syrians has not changed.

Let’s return to the figure of 1.4 million people who have supposedly returned home within the country in 2018. This number does not provide a clear picture of the actual situation, which is much more complex than this

15 UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria: Continued hostilities and lawlessness countrywide render safe and sustainable returns impossible
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=24229&LangID=E>

16 [Daily protests in Daraa fueled by anger at regime](https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi/di/features/2019/10/16/feature-03?di_exp_001=true)
https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi/di/features/2019/10/16/feature-03?di_exp_001=true

17 “Between Hammer and Anvil: Motives and Experiences of Syrians Forced to Return to Assad-held Areas”, SACD report

18 “Fear, Repression and Vengeance: Reality Behind Assad’s Promises to Displaced Syrians,”
www.syacd.org



Misleading numbers have dire consequences

figure suggests. UNHCR's number fails to take into consideration the ongoing levels of displacement in Syria, issues arising from the regime's continuing campaign of targeting of Syria's civilian population, and the troubling security conditions inside the country.

During 2018 — the same period during which the UNHCR claims at least 1.4 million people have returned — new, or secondary, displacement inside the country remained constant. People across the country were forced to leave their homes because of lack of safety, ongoing persecution by the Assad's regime, as well as the collapse of economy and the resulting lack of employment. As of August 2018, there were still 6.1M IDPs in Syria with an average of 6,550 people being [displaced every day](#). For example, while 119,698 IDPs returned to their areas of origin in December 2018, there were also 58,549 new [IDP displacements](#) during that same month.

Displacement inside Syria in 2018 has remained constant throughout the year but, additionally, for the majority of areas, it has not been reversed. For example, between April and June 2018, at least 61,800 people left rural Damascus and moved to Hama, Idlib and Aleppo governorates. According to UNOCHA data, only 6,700K came back to their areas of origin in the areas that drove this displacement during the same period. This suggests that conditions in rural Damascus, despite the end of military operations, are not safe enough for Syrian to return to. Again, numerous reports of arrests and detentions against those that have spontaneously returned to rural Damascus after the evacuation and "reconciliation" deals under Russian "guarantees" have been [reported](#).

This was in 2018. Since the start of the assault of Russian and Assad's forces on Idlib in February 2019 more than 400 000 people have been displaced, some of them for the ninth or tenth times since the start of the conflict. Add to this more than 120 000 people displaced from NE Syria after the start of Turkish operations in October, we easily get to half the number of 1.4 million advertised by the UNHCR.

Again, it is important to note that while UNHCR can track the number of people returning to the country, it cannot monitor what happens to them once they arrive. This raises a question of what these "returns" numbers are actually telling us. While it is easy to get data about the people returning to the country, it is near impossible to track the number of people still being smuggled out of the country across Lebanese and Turkish borders, since borders are officially closed and no information can be tracked about movement of people across them. If Syrian social media which focuses on migration is taken as illustrative, the vast majority of reports are still focusing on information regarding how to get out of the country rather than on how to get back in, confirming that, for the majority of Syrians, Syria is not yet a place in which they can safely live but are searching for ways to escape it. Our research has firmly documented that nearly 60 per cent of the returnees (and 73 per cent of those living in areas the regime seized by force) reported that they would seriously consider leaving if an opportunity presented itself.

This is a direct quote from the UNHCR's October Operational Update:



“Self-organized returns of IDPs and refugees from neighboring countries continue to several areas where stability has been restored, hostilities declined or ceased, and which have become newly accessible. It should be underlined that the Government of Syria has taken a number of decisions that helps and facilitates the return of Syrian returnees. Regional UNHCR figures report the 75,501 verified refugee returnees to Syria at the end of September, of which 7,803 Syrian refugees were reported as having returned through the organized group returns facilitated by the General Security Office of Lebanon and spontaneous returns from Jordan, as well as 97 self-organized returns took place from Jordan during September. It should be underlined that these are the numbers that are registered refugees with UNHCR. It is perceived that the number of returnees is higher than those registered with UNHCR. The movements of IDP returnees is estimated at 309,894. UNHCR field teams conducted over 87 missions to assess conditions and needs of returnees and IDPs. Through these missions as well as follow up over the phone with families who have recently returned to Syria from Lebanon and Jordan, the top three key concerns identified by returnees included destroyed homes, lack of livelihood opportunities and lack of civil status documentation.”

Recommendations

Immediate action required by the UNHCR

Recommendations:

SACD maintains that states have two key roles in addressing UNHCR’s failures of responsibility to the displaced Syrians:

- As political actors, ensuring that IDP and refugee return is addressed as part of any peace process of political agreement; including the need to address political and structural barriers to return at the political level.
- As major donors of UNHCR and the UN response in Syria, holding UNHCR to account for humanitarian-level aspects of the refugee and IDP returns response.

Immediate action required by the UNHCR

- SACD calls for the immediate reinstatement of the February 2018 thresholds, clarity around the drafting of thresholds, and significant and meaningful consultation with displaced Syrians in any future changes to the thresholds through a transparent process.



Immediate action required by the UNHCR

- UNHCR must be clear about the limits of their access and monitoring capabilities and highlight the gaps in knowledge and risks inherent in this lack of access and monitoring. UNHCR must call for access and make it a pre-condition of any future returns discussion or work. UNHCR must only use contextually relevant information to monitor conditions and should monitor implementation of legislation and announcements in addition to the announcements themselves. UNHCR must work with organizations like SACD to produce and distribute research and monitoring information about security concerns and conditions until such time as they are able to do so themselves.
- Timely and granular information on the protection thresholds, conditions in areas of return, and the experience of returning refugees and IDPs must be made available to CSOs and refugees through publicly-facing platforms that they can access in their own time when considering returns decisions. Until such time as this can be provided returns cannot be considered to be informed or voluntary.
- Immediately revert to the 2018 language under Phase 1 of the strategy, highlighting that returns should not be encouraged and that facilitation should not occur until the conditions exist under which safe, dignified and voluntary returns can take place and cease programming that could encourage or facilitate premature and unsafe returns.
- UNHCR must recognize the impact its social media have on the decision-making by the displaced Syrians and curate the conditions in Assad-held areas accurately and responsibly. It must account for misleading narrative curated through its social media which omits any information on security threats facing returnees in Assad-held areas and complete omission to report through its social media on the suffering of more than 400 000 Syrians displaced from Idlib since the start of the assault by Russian and regime forces in February.