

THEMATIC SERIES
THE INVISIBLE MAJORITY

This thematic series addresses the gap in awareness, data and knowledge about the relationship between internal displacement, cross-border and return movements.



RETURNEES IN SYRIA

Sustainable reintegration and durable solutions,
or a return to displacement?

NOVEMBER 2017

I. Introduction

In May 2017, an agreement signed by Iran, Russia and Turkey in Astana (Kazakhstan) led to the implementation of a ceasefire and the delineation of de-escalation zones in Syria. The four zones in the agreement are opposition-controlled parts of the southern provinces of Deraa and Quneitra, pockets around Damascus and Homs, all of Idlib province and western portions of Aleppo province.¹ Over two and a half million people currently live in these areas (see figure 1). The agreement specifies that unhindered humanitarian access should be granted to these areas, basic services should be restored there, and air raids by Russia or the Syrian regime in these zones should cease.² Needless to say, if this truce were to hold it would greatly improve the lives of a large number of people and could prompt a wave of returnees to these areas. Against this backdrop, various entities working in Syria have already started to observe an unprecedented flow of returns from Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey as well as from IDP camps inside Syria.³

Over the past five years, Syria's displacement figures have been the highest in the region – roughly double Iraq's for example. Moreover, since the beginning of the armed conflict Syria has been one of the three countries with the highest level of internal displacement, in terms of both new displacements and stock numbers (total IDPs at end of year). Syria's stock figures are especially relevant: they were the highest worldwide for three consecutive years (2013, 2014 and 2015), While new displacements in the country have decreased since 2013, Syria nonetheless remains one of the three countries with the most displacement.⁴

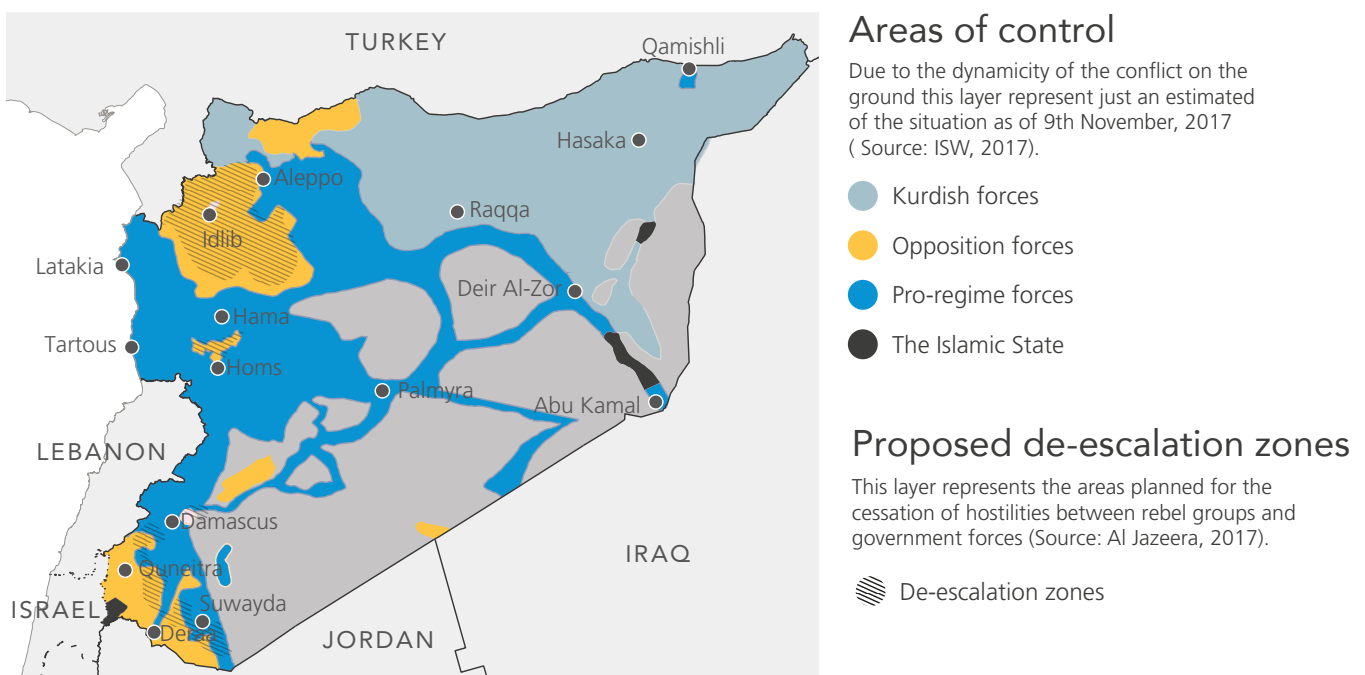
The slight, yet steady decrease in the stock figure may suggest that IDPs are trickling back home, or crossing borders, due to

developments on the ground or changes in personal situations. However, a clear picture of their number, fate upon return, conditions in places of return, and progress towards achieving durable solutions – or alternatively renewed displacement – is not being systematically captured. Some preliminary data does exist however, specifically data collected by the Needs and Population Monitoring (NPM) project of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR, along with data obtained by local NGOs.

From January to October 2017, the NPM project monitored 766,852 returnees countrywide, about 40,000 from Turkey, 4,300 from Jordan and 4,500 from Lebanon, while over 700,000 were IDP returns.⁵ According to NPM data, about five per cent (37,600) of those returnees have already been displaced again. Ninety-six per cent of returnees were reported to have gone back to their own homes.

The Population Monitoring Initiative (PMI), led by UNHCR and the protection cluster in Jordan, has also been monitoring returns to the southern governorates of Syria. PMI data indicates that about 2,520 families returned during the month of September alone (84 per cent to Deraa city and Neimeh town). A local NGO in the south has also collected some initial data on returnees to southern governorates this year. It obtained the data from local town councils, where returnees register to receive aid. As of October 2017, over 4,000 returns in Deraa province had been reported, more than half from displacement inside the province and another 800 from Jordan.⁶ Similarly to the data collected by PMI, half of the returns recorded were specifically to Deraa city while another 1,000 were to Neimeh, two previously very active frontlines.⁷

FIGURE 1: MAP OF SYRIA TERRITORIES UNDER CONTROL

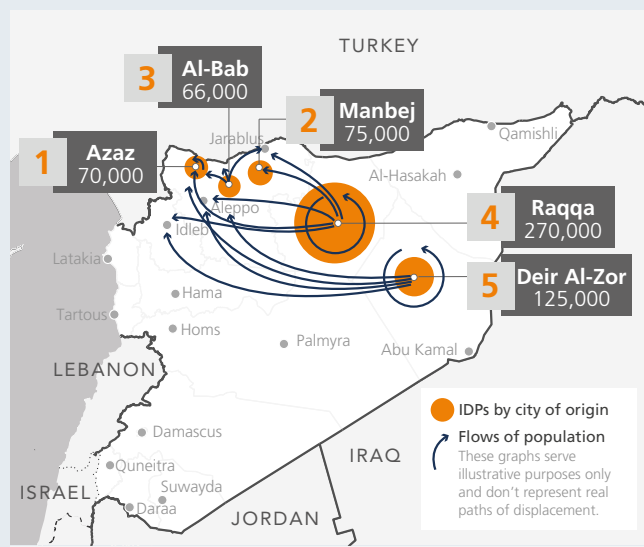


The boundaries, names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IDMC.

FIGURE 2: RECENT DISPLACEMENT PATTERNS

Displacements from the various offensives that have taken place over the past year. Below the description of the key events that caused major displacements.

- 1. Azaz, Feb 2016:** Syrian army offensive on Aleppo city led to large displacement towards border.
- 2. Manbij, May - Aug 2016:** SDF leads Manbij offensive to recover the city.
- 3. Al-Bab, Nov 2016 - Feb 2017:** Turkish-backed opposition armed groups offensive to retake the city of Al-Bab, triggered displacements to northern cities such as Jarablus, Al-Rai and Azaz (Source: OCHA, 5 March 2017).
- 4. Raqqa, Jun - Oct 2017:** SDF leads Raqqa offensive to recover the city.
- 5. Deir Al-Zor, Sep - Nov 2017:** Syrian regime offensive to take Deir Al-Zor city.



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Given the context of the ongoing war in Syria and the policies of the Turkish and Jordanian governments, which do not allow returnees to seek refuge in their countries again in the near future, it is difficult to imagine what factors are driving the decisions of refugees and IDPs to return. In the absence of interoperable datasets along the displacement continuum⁸ – internal displacement to refugees to returnees/internal displacement – this paper aims to shed some light on the push and pull factors throughout the displacement journey and on the wide spectrum of returning refugee and IDP experiences.

II. Methodology

At the end of October 2017, 11 key informant interviews were conducted with individuals residing in Turkey, Jordan or inside Syria. Some of them were not returnees, but they provided additional context on the current situation of Syrians in neighbouring countries and on conflict developments inside Syria. Six individuals' stories are profiled below. Recognizing that the size of the sample does not allow for broad conclusions to be reached, this paper aims to provide only anecdotal evidence to begin discussing the phenomenon of returns to Syria. To complement information gathered from these interviews, IDMC data, UN agency reports and media sources were also used for this report.

III. Northern Syria and Turkey

Over two million individuals are thought to be living in internal displacement in northern Syria, with about 380,000 living in IDP camps or informal settlements⁹ and the rest living in host communities.¹⁰ Major offensives against ISIL in 2016 and 2017 led by the Syrian regime, American-backed rebels (SDF) or Turkish-backed rebels have led to large waves of displacement, as shown in map 2. This is in addition to the continuing displacement throughout the north driven by ongoing aerial

bombardment and localised violence. The examples in map 2 below reflect the scope and scale of displacement patterns in northern Syria.

In addition to the two million IDPs in northern Syria, 3,252,000 Syrian refugees were registered in Turkey as of October 2017, according to the Government of Turkey.¹¹ They primarily live in the border towns of Antakya and Gaziantep, but also in Istanbul and other Turkish towns. Syrians arriving in Turkey register to receive a 'kimlik' which is an ID card that grants them temporary protection status, access to health services, and some other benefits. Others can choose to live in refugee camps, but over 90 per cent of refugees do not favour this option.¹²

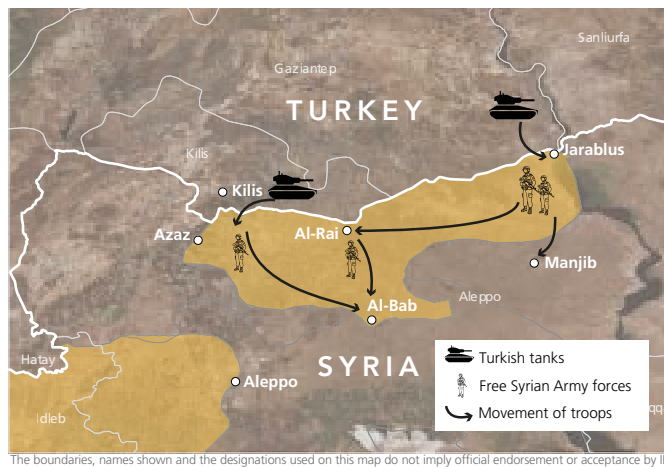
Since the Turkish border closed in early 2015,¹³ the movement of Syrians across the border has become extremely difficult though special cases are able to do so. These include INGO staff who can request special permission to enter and leave Turkey at will, as can those working for key local councils or the Syrian interim government. Movement across the border for medical reasons is also still allowed.¹⁴ However, the borders have been firmly closed to large waves of displacement. For example, between 50,000 and 100,000 people seeking refuge from regime advances were reported to have made their way to the border from Aleppo city in early 2016.¹⁵ Turkey's border remained shut to them and temporary shelters were set up to accommodate this large influx of IDPs to the area.

a) Turkish intervention in Northern Syria

In August 2016, Turkey began a military operation dubbed 'Operation Euphrates Shield' to clear its border areas from ISIL and prevent further expansion of the US-backed Kurdish forces. It backed Syrian rebels both by air and land to advance from Azaz east towards the Euphrates River and south towards Al-Bab. By the end of the operation, officially declared in March

2017, Turkish-backed rebels had captured a 100-km strip of the border, including the towns of Jarablus and Al-Rai, and south to Al-Bab.

FIGURE 3: MAP OF TURKISH EUHRATES SHIELD OPERATION IN NORTHERN SYRIA



In addition to its presence in northern Aleppo, Turkey now also has a military presence in Idlib province. On October 12 of this year, as part of the agreement to establish de-escalation zones, Turkey sent a military convey into Idlib province through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing.¹⁷ However, since it entered the province, the Turkish army has made its way to key strategic points in the western Aleppo countryside overlooking Afrin, the last remaining Kurdish-controlled area west of the Euphrates. This clearly demonstrates that Turkey's primary aim in entering Idlib was to prevent any Kurdish expansion in the region, rather than to enforce the de-escalation zone.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Turkish presence in the province has had the intended effect of preventing Russian and Syrian regime bombing of the region, leading to general support of Turkey's mission in Idlib.¹⁹

b) Security and Basic Services

In Northern Aleppo governorate, Turkey has taken on sole responsibility for the stabilisation and reconstruction of the area, barring international NGOs from having a presence there. The Turkish military is still present in the area, which has effectively protected northern Aleppo against Syrian regime attacks. Furthermore, a Turkish-backed police force has been established there to maintain law and order. Additionally, local councils backed by the Turkish authorities have been set up to deal with the delivery of basic services.²⁰ Based on interviews with people currently living in these areas, basic services such as electricity and water have not been restored.²¹ People still have to buy electricity in 'amp unit' blocks from people who own generators, and water needs to be purchased. These are extremely costly purchases that most people can seldom afford, leaving them without daily access to these basic necessities. The education sector, on the other hand, has been fully revived as school buildings have been renovated and teachers

and salaries reinstated. Children were back in schools as of October.²² Despite the absence of shelling and bombing and the presence of a fully-equipped Turkish-backed police force, people still reported relatively unstable security conditions, with armed group in-fighting, widespread petty crime, kidnappings and murder.²³

In Idlib, contrary to northern Aleppo, a plethora of international organisations are working with the various local councils and civil society groups to provide services, rehabilitate water, electricity and sanitation systems and provide support to the health and education sectors. As a result, the status of basic services in Idlib province is considered decent. The presence of Heyat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), an al-Qaeda affiliate spearheading a coalition of armed groups, is however fuelling ongoing instability in the province. In July 2017, HTS and Ahrar al-Sham, the other major armed group in Idlib province, were embroiled in heavy fighting, in which HTS made important gains. It took over the provincial capital, Idlib city, and forced Ahrar al-Sham away from managing the Syrian side of the Bab al-Hawa crossing with Turkey.²⁴ This is of particular concern to civilians who fear that HTS control of the province could compromise the fragile truce and prompt further Syrian and Russian air strikes. HTS control of the province also means increasing hardship and restrictions for residents, including decreases in relief delivery to the province and reduced economic activity due to Turkey's closure of the border to commerce.²⁵

Despite the seemingly unstable security and services situation in Idlib and northern Aleppo, there has been a steady stream of returns to these areas over the past six months, and more are expected to return to their towns in the coming months. Although many believe these returns are driven by implementation of the de-escalation zones and the consequent revival of market activity and rehabilitation of some basic service infrastructure, interviews with returnees about their individual experiences paint a more complex picture.

c) Refugees, IDPs and Returnees

Turkey relaxes the border closure on specific days to allow families to reunite during the two major Muslim holidays of Eid a- Fitr (June 24-25 2017) and Eid al-Adha (31 August-4 September 2017). Persons exiting Turkey to spend Eid holiday periods with family members in Syria also take these opportunities to check on their homes and towns. At the border crossing, Turkish authorities take their fingerprints and register their names to ensure that only those same persons are allowed to re-enter the country.²⁶ Of course, there are exceptions and some people re-entering Turkey are not from the original group of people who exited the country at the beginning of the Eid period; however, this data gives us an approximate sense of the number of people who decide to stay in Syria, effectively forfeiting their right to re-enter Turkey (see figure 4²⁷).



Recently displaced Syrian families walk towards the Bab Al-Salame border gates with all they can carry. Thousands of people have gathered at the border hoping and praying they could be let through. Many would not have shelter for the night. Photo: NRC, 2016

FIGURE 4: BAB AL-SALAME BORDER CROSSING (WITH ALEPPO PROVINCE)

	Left Turkey	Came back to Turkey	Stayed in Syria
Eid al-Fitr	68,154	58,992	9,162
Eid al-Adha	53,834	47,083	6,751

BAB AL-HAWA BORDER CROSSING (WITH IDLIB PROVINCE)

	Left Turkey	Came back to Turkey	Stayed in Syria
Eid Al-Fitr	120,000	97,000	23,000
Eid Al-Adha	Numbers unavailable	Numbers unavailable	

Of particular note are the 23,000 persons who remained in Syria after crossing into Idlib from Bab al-Hawa in June. Interviewees from Idlib all mentioned the excitement in the province in June and July when the shelling there had stopped, markets were revived and people felt they may soon return to their homes. At that time, the real estate market was booming, people were buying and selling land and property and thinking of rebuilding and resettling in their places of origins.²⁸ It was reported that during that Eid period, large numbers of IDPs from camps also came back to their towns to check on the situation there. The atmosphere was described as full of excitement and hope.²⁹ However, clashes between HTS and Ahrar al-Sham reversed some of the initial excitement people felt for the sustainability of the improved situation in the province.

People returning to Idlib and Aleppo provinces face very difficult conditions. Though both provinces are now relatively safe from aerial bombardment, returnees struggle to secure jobs, basic services are lacking and their physical security is still very much at risk. The ceasefire may therefore not be the overriding or sole reason for their decisions on whether or not to return. The four examples below illustrate the complexity of the displacement trajectories of IDPs and refugees in Turkey and northern Syria, and provide insight into what prompts their decisions to return and stay in their places of origin, or move elsewhere again:

1. A family leaves Antalya in Turkey to return to Idlib city, their place of origin. After three months, they decide to go back to Turkey due to the hardship and challenges they faced in Syria (refugee returnees unable to achieve durable solutions and become refugees again);
2. A young boy returns to his home in the Aleppo countryside after three years in Turkey. For now, he will stay (refugee returnee achieving a temporary solution in place of origin);
3. An IDP family from Aleppo city attempts to find somewhere to settle and achieve a durable solution. The family chooses Al-Bab, but has already been displaced inside the city and is living in collective housing (IDP returnee family failing to achieve durable solution in new place of settlement);
4. An activist individual and his family experience multiple displacements inside and outside Syria (IPD/refugee activists, cyclical and ongoing displacement).

RETURNING REFUGEES BECOME REFUGEES AGAIN (IDLIB CITY)³⁰

Om Shadi is from Idlib city and began her displacement trajectory at the end of 2013, prompted by the harassment she and her family were being subjected to by regime forces. Her two older sons were active in the revolution and were wanted by the regime. Every morning, regime soldiers would break down her door and enter the house looking for the two boys. They would also bully the younger son to divulge where his brothers were hiding. No longer able to stand the daily harassment, Om Shadi decided to move further north to Binnish town in opposition-controlled Idlib. The family remained there for two months, but the intense daily shelling prompted her to move to Antakya in Turkey with her youngest boy, leaving the other two sons behind.

Om Shadi has lived with her high school-aged boy in Antakya ever since. She was able to pay rent in Turkey using money earned by renting out the property she owned in Idlib and covered other expenses with the help of her older sons. But she never felt their living situation in Turkey was sustainable. Nor did she believe they would be there long term. Her younger son was attending school in Antakya, but Turkey has changed its policy on schooling for Syrian refugees a number of times, with the last change ruling that all school courses must be in Turkish. This, of course, proves difficult for older children, including for Om Shadi's son. They also felt unwelcome in Turkey. In Antakya and neighbouring Reyhanli, there have been instances of violence against Syrians and their shops and property.³¹ Early last summer, they began to hear that the situation in Idlib city had improved, with no more shelling and improved services provided by the newly-elected civilian local council. Om Shadi's older son had left for Sweden with his wife and the younger son just wanted to go back to Syria. Living costs in Turkey were high and they were struggling to stay on top of expenses. So last June, when the family decided to go home to visit family for Eid al-Fitr, they returned to Idlib city with the intention of staying.

Living costs in Idlib city were much higher than they had expected. Water and electricity still needed to be bought at high prices, and was not available on a daily basis. Electricity currents were not strong enough to power major household electrical appliances such as refrigerators, and the water quality was questionable. Whatever they were able to save on rent, by living in their own home, they had to spend in time and money securing daily basic services. Moreover, Om Shadi's son got very sick for unknown reasons and was hospitalised on a number of occasions. They suspected the water was to blame, but doctors were not able to diagnose his illness and just gave him pain killers to deal with pain and other symptoms. Om Shadi was also worried about the presence of HTS in the community and the group's ability to radicalise youth, especially in the absence of educational and livelihood opportunities. When the borders opened two months later, Om Shadi took her son back to Antakya.

Despite the illness, Om Shadi's son still wanted to return and stay in Idlib city, live in his home and be near his friends. Om Shadi, on the other hand, did not feel Idlib city's current environment was suitable for her boy, and decided to keep her family in Turkey, for now. For her, the well-being of her son trumped economic considerations and feelings of alienation they experience in Turkey. All her son wanted was to be with friends and in a familiar environment. They were lucky that the Eid holidays coincided with their decision to return to Syria (and then back to Turkey), as it would have been impossible to go back to Turkey had they returned at another time during the year. However, they are currently both left in displacement, with no path to achieving a durable solution, neither in their place of origin nor in their place of refuge, with no livelihood prospects in Turkey and no further improvement of the situation in Idlib in sight.

RETURNING REFUGEE ACHIEVES TEMPORARY DURABLE SOLUTION IN PLACE OF ORIGIN (NORTHERN ALEPPO COUNTRYSIDE)³²

Yusef comes from a large, rural family. He is from Kafra, a town in the northern Aleppo countryside, and is one of 17 children. He was only 15 when the crisis in Syria broke out and had just graduated through 9th grade. He left Kafra to join peaceful protests with fellow high school students in Aleppo city. However, armed fighting soon began, leaving little space for civilian revolutionary activity outside of joining the armed struggle.

In early 2014, opposition groups began fighting ISIS, which had a presence in Aleppo province at the time.³³This led to much displacement in the area. Yusef was displaced several times within his own town, first to the western side, when ISIS occupied the east, and then back east when opposition fighters made advances. This went on for several months, until Yusef moved further west to the town of Azaz with one of his sisters.

Members of his family were all displaced to different locations. While the smaller children remained with the parents, the rest fended for themselves. Yusef remained in Azaz in a rented home for six months, until the owner wanted the house back and the security situation had become severe enough to cause concern. After a bomb fell near the house in 2015, he decided to join one of his brothers living and working in Istanbul. His brother worked in a factory and told Yusef he could secure him a job there, so Yusef went to Turkey.

Once across the border, Yusef made his way first to Kilis, where he prepared for his trip to Istanbul. Upon arrival in Istanbul he began working in the factory. Initially, conditions were good, but with time the factory owners became greedy. Knowing there was no shortage of cheap labour they paid their employees very little and worked them up to 18 hours a day, six days a week. Yusef was physically exhausted and was fired when he requested their two-day weekends off work, as is the norm. Working long hours in a factory for menial pay was not the future he wanted, so he decided to go back to school to get his high school diploma. He moved to Kilis where one of his brothers was attending school. There he was told he would need to wait until the next school year to begin his studies, but could not be guaranteed acceptance. Not wanting to put off his education any longer, Yusef returned to Kafra during Eid al-Adha at the end of August.

Back in Kafra, in his family home, Yusef looked for opportunities to study for his high school graduating exam in Syria. Opposition-controlled areas of Syria do not have many options for adolescents wanting to go to high school. Some centres offer classes to prepare for high school graduation exams, but these are not the official Syrian regime exams and are adapted Syrian opposition exams, which are not widely recognised for admission into university.³⁴In the northern Aleppo countryside, only two such centres exist: one well-established centre with a good teaching staff 16 kilometers away from Yusef's home, and a newer one in Soran only five kilometers away, where teaching takes place in tents. He chose the Soran centre as it was more accessible. Yusef is now studying in the poorly equipped Soran centre, but he is hopeful. "If I pass with high marks maybe I can sign up for medical school, there is one in Azaz," he said.

According to Yusef, the status of basic services in the area is left wanting. Although Turkey's presence ensures that no bombs will fall from the skies, the Turks have not restored basic services. Water and electricity networks are non-functional and access to them is expensive. Health services are ok, with a decent hospital in Azaz. The lack of basic services does not seem to bother Aleppo city much and has not figured importantly in his decision making.

War and displacement have severely disrupted the future plans of many youths who are being forced to put a premature end to their education in order to support themselves and/or their families. High school and university education opportunities inside opposition-controlled Syrian areas are minimal. With the conflict in its sixth year, youths are seriously considering solutions to this problem, many choosing to leave Syria. Yusef found a way to complete his high school education by returning to Syria, as Turkey did not provide him with a clear opportunity. The lack of livelihood opportunities in a context of ongoing war is likely to keep youth like Yusef on the move in coming years.

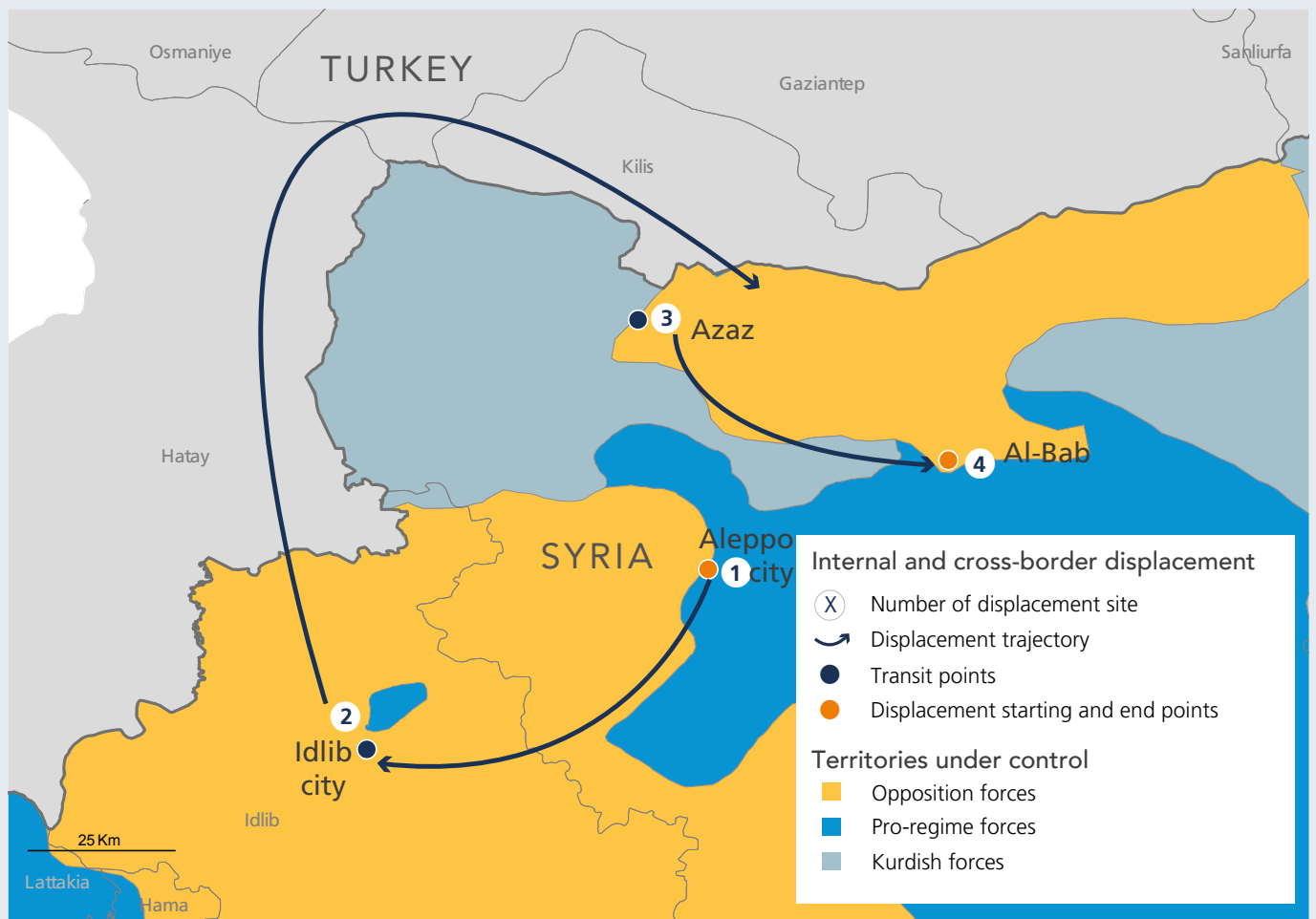
IDP FAMILY SETTLING ELSEWHERE FAILS TO ACHIEVE DURABLE SOLUTION (AL-BAB, ALEPPO NORTHERN COUNTRYSIDE)³⁵

Om Mohamed is originally from Deir Al-Zor but was living with her husband and five kids in Aleppo city, the husband's home town, when the revolution broke out. By the end of 2012, the armed opposition had captured the eastern and southeastern portions of the city, a division that was to remain until the end of 2016.³⁶ Om Mohamed was living on the regime controlled side of the city, but moved with her family to the opposition side as soon as the dividing line was established. They remained there until the regime recaptured the entire city and the family was evacuated on the green buses in December 2016.³⁷

Her husband is a fighter and she is a very active member of the civilian opposition. Throughout the four-year stalemate, the regime relentlessly bombed the eastern side of Aleppo city, where about half a million people resided, causing much displacement. Om Mohamed and her family were displaced continuously throughout this period, so frequently that she was not even able to recall how many times bombs forced them to leave their homes and move a few kilometers away. But they

stood their ground and refused to leave the city; it was their home and they were determined to defend it.

2016 sealed the fate of Aleppo city. The Syrian regime began an offensive to cut the city off from the rest of opposition-controlled Aleppo, effectively besieging the population. The opposition was able to break the siege a number of times in July, but in October the siege was final. The next two months was grim for the remaining residents, with the bombing of hospitals and swift regime advances. On 13 December, a ceasefire was agreed and the evacuation to Idlib of the remaining opposition fighters and families was organised. Om Mohamed and her family were taken to Idlib city on the evacuation buses on 22 December 2016. They remained in Idlib city for a few weeks until they were able to make their way over to northern Aleppo. Her husband, being an active combatant with Aleppo-based opposition fighting groups, wanted to remain in Aleppo province. The safest place was thought to be Al-Bab city, newly liberated from ISIS and effectively controlled by the Turks.



The trip from Idlib province to northern Aleppo, however, is not an easy one. Opposition controlled Idlib and northern Aleppo are separated by Afrin, a Kurdish-controlled area through which passage is not guaranteed. The opposition was able to strike a deal with Kurdish fighters to allow for the transport of civilians between Idlib and Aleppo via their territory. A few buses were allowed through, but some were attacked. Generally, women and children were permitted to cross, while men, especially fighters, were not. The husband therefore had to exit Bab al-Hawa border with Turkey, travel to Kilis and re-enter Syria through the Bab al-Salame crossing, into Azaz. This trip for fighters was facilitated by the Turkish authorities. Om Mohamed, being a well-known opposition figure, had to get a fake ID card to be allowed to cross through Kurdish territory with her children.

Arriving in Al-Bab, with no relatives or ties to the place and minimal resources, Om Mohamed and her family moved into empty government buildings. Al-Bab has six buildings, previously interior ministry offices that de facto became IDP shelters. The buildings were turned into 86 units housing IDPs from Raqqa, Deir Al-Zor, Homs, Aleppo and Palmyra. Shortly thereafter, the Al-Bab local council, with orders from the Turks, told the IDPs they must leave the buildings. The reasons were unclear and a number of excuses were given. Finally, the police were brought in to evict the residents and 150 families were thrown into the street and told they could register with the local council for a place in an IDP camp or to get emergency housing "later". About half the families went to live in informal settlements in various parts of the city.

There are no official camps in Al-Bab, only informal groupings of 20 to 30 tents here and there. Some people are also living in destroyed houses. Renting homes is beyond the reach of most IDPs, as monthly rents range between 150 and 300 dollars, an exorbitant sum for many Syrians. The Al-Bab council began settling IDP families in small apartments – placing three families who do not know one another in one-bedroom apartments. Om Mohamed and her family are currently living in one of these temporary apartments with two other families in Qabasin, a town seven kilometers northeast of Al-Bab. Until they are able to afford to rent, this will have to do.

Life is expensive in Al-Bab. As with other places in northern Aleppo, water and electricity services have not been restored, and only the educational sector is functional. There has been some market activity, mostly in the real estate business of building and selling apartments and homes. The security situation is stable and there is a large police presence. Om Mohamed and her family moved there for lack of a better option, but now she says she regrets it. They did not want to stay in Idlib due to the presence of HTS, and their lack of ties to the province. Despite having no ties to Al-Bab either, they thought they would have an easier time integrating within Aleppo province. However, Om Mohamed said IDPs in Al-Bab are not welcome. Rents are extremely high and some families are living in destroyed shops and homes, unable to afford rent. Moreover, Om Mohamed reported general discrimination from local residents vis-à-vis the IDPs. Her family is in Deir Al-Zor city, which is currently under regime control, as is Aleppo city, her home city. Going to live in regime-controlled Syria is out of the question for her and leaving Syria altogether has never crossed her mind. Although her experience in Al-Bab so far has been awful, she is not planning on leaving. Until one of her homes is liberated or a third, better option exists, Om Mohamed and her family will remain in Al-Bab.

IDP/REFUGEE ACTIVIST, CYCLICAL AND ONGOING DISPLACEMENT (ALEPPO CITY)³⁸

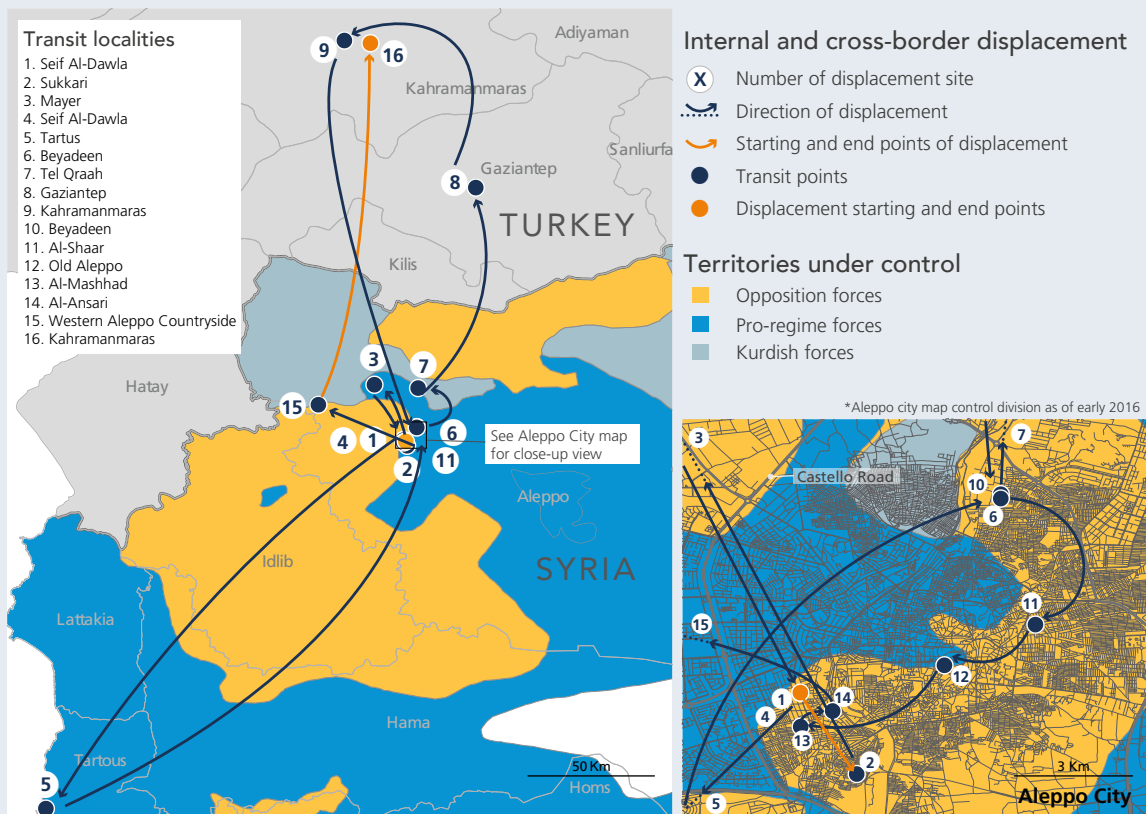
Prior to the revolution, Abu Ahmad was an electrician and worked in Saudi Arabia for about a year. However, in 2010, he decided to move back to Aleppo city with his wife and six children as he preferred his offspring to receive an education in Syria. He opened a shop in Aleppo city, and his financial situation was decent. He was living in the neighborhood of Seif al-Dowle, where the protest movement and the armed fighting in Aleppo city would originate in mid-2012.

In March 2011, when children in Deraa city were imprisoned and tortured for writing anti-regime slogans on walls,³⁹ Abu Ahmad was unable to keep quiet. The brutality of the regime was plain for all to see and Abu Ahmad was enraged. He spoke about it to many people. At some point he must have been overheard by the wrong person and his outspokenness landed him in jail where he remained for two months until his release in November 2011. He arrived back home to see that much of the country, including Aleppo city, had erupted in protests. Shortly after his release, a protest was taking place in Saladin, a locality directly adjacent to his neighbourhood. His wife and children begged him not to take part, as it was known that those who did so did not always return home. Over the next eight months, Abu Ahmad was imprisoned three more times, twice when he was picked up during protests, which he was accused of organizing, and once after being taken into custody

from his shop. These incidents did not deter him, however, and he continued to be involved in protests and join groups that organised them in Aleppo city.

His fifth and final arrest was in June 2012, when he was out late at night getting a bite to eat with an activist colleague. This arrest was by far the most difficult one. Shortly after entering prison, he saw TV footage of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a group of opposition fighters primarily from rural Aleppo, taking over parts of Aleppo city, including his Seif al-Dawla neighbourhood. Street fighting between the FSA and regime fighters, coupled with bombing of densely-populated neighborhoods, caused large-scale displacement. Abu Ahmad had no way of reaching his family to check on their well-being, and remained in a state of helpless worry for his family for the next five months. In December, when he finally was able to make contact, his family recounted their experiences of the previous five months.

When the FSA first entered the city, the Seif al-Dawla neighbourhood was hit especially hard, causing Abu Ahmad's wife and seven children to be displaced to his mother's home in the Sukari neighborhood. Shortly thereafter, a bomb fell next to the residence and they all fled to Mayer, a town in rural northern Aleppo. Abu Ahmad is originally from Mayer where he has many relatives, which influenced the decision to go



Sources: Territories under control (ISW and Reuters, 2017), roads (OSM, 2017). The boundaries, names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IDMC.

there. However, the homes of Abu Ahmad's relatives were already overcrowded and so his family decided to return to Seif al-Dawla. But the ongoing fighting and shelling of the Seif al-Dawla neighbourhood made living conditions there totally unsustainable. Abu Ahmad's sister had moved to Tartus, a regime stronghold on the coast, which remains a safe haven to this day. She was able to rent a house for Abu Ahmad's wife and children and so they moved there. They remained in Tartus for the following two months, until they decided to go back to Aleppo city, as they knew they would not be able to contact or see Abu Ahmad should he be released from prison if they stayed in Tartus. His wife moved the family back to Aleppo city's Beyadeen district, which was relatively safer than the more southern localities of the city, where active fighting was ongoing. She hired a lawyer and worked to get Abu Ahmad out of jail. In December 2012, Abu Ahmad was released and he joined his family in Beyadeen.

In Beyadeen, Abu Ahmad worked with local humanitarian organisations to distribute aid, first at neighbourhood level, then at city level. He was part of the first local and neighbourhood council to appear in Aleppo city. Local councils were being formed in most opposition-controlled areas of the country, to take the place of the no longer functioning municipalities and to provide their communities with basic services. At that time, electricity and water services were abysmal, as was health care, with only a few 'medical points' operating to treat conflict-induced injuries. The city continued to come under heavy bombardment and some frontline neighbourhoods still had active street fighting. Abu Ahmad's family, especially one of his daughters, repeatedly begged him to leave the city and move to Turkey. He could not accept the prospect of leaving his countrymen behind, and was so involved in the relief efforts that he admitted having repeatedly ignored his children's pleas to leave.

One day, he was very late coming back from work and found his home destroyed, with the windows and doors blown out, and his family was nowhere to be seen. A barrel bomb had exploded a few feet away from his house. Thankfully his family was safe. They had left him a note saying they had gone to Tel Qrah, a town in eastern Aleppo, to stay with relatives. He made his way there and found his family very shaken by the incident and learned that staying in Tel Qrah could only be short term. When he asked his family where they wanted to go, the vote was unanimous: Turkey.

In April 2014, he took his family to the Bab al-Salame border and let them cross into Turkey. They were going to join Abu Ahmad's wife's family in Gaziantep, and he would remain in Aleppo city for now. The family looked for housing in Gaziantep for a while, but rents were very high, partly due to the large influx of Syrian refugees there over the past year. They moved on to Kahramanmaraş, a town further north, and found accommodation there where they are still living to this day. Abu Ahmad had no job at time since he had been fully involved in revolutionary activism for a year or so. Consequently, this initially was a very difficult period for the whole family. Abu Ahmad eventually received payment

for his work and was able to furnish the house, cover rent and living expenses, and visit his family in Turkey once a month.

Abu Ahmad continued to live in Beyadeen, working with various local councils and other local organisations. When the border to Turkey closed in early 2015, he was granted special permission by the Turkish authorities to continue entering the country, thanks to his status as a member of a local council. This enabled him to continue visiting his family.

He lived in Beyadeen district with a group of fellow activists, and stayed through the sieges of Aleppo city that began in the summer of 2016. Over the following six months, as regime forces advanced, he moved further and further south through the city neighbourhoods. This took him from Beyadeen to Shaar to Old Aleppo, then to Mashhad and finally to Ansari Sharqi, losing more and more belongings with each displacement. On 17 December 2016 he left Aleppo city on a green evacuation bus, and went to Idlib province where he stayed a few days, until he managed to cross into Turkey and rejoin his family.

Abu Ahmad's strong sense of duty towards the revolution encouraged him to keep going back, despite the constant bombardment of Aleppo city throughout the four and a half years it remained under opposition control. Whenever he can, he continues to cross into Aleppo province, to the Turkish-backed rebel-controlled areas of the northern Aleppo countryside to assist local councils. He still considers Syria his primary place of residence and is not considering ever being too far away from the country. But for now resettling his family in Syria is not in his plans. Some of his children were cut off from their studies for a couple of years, while the others were being terrorised by the bombing. Now that they are all safe, have access to basic services and are all back in school he is not even considering returning them to the chaos of Syria. He spends enough time in Aleppo province to know that basic services are sorely lacking and that the security situation is by no means stable enough to warrant their return. Of course, the day basic services are restored and a lasting truce is secured he would consider moving them back to Syria, even if Aleppo city remains inaccessible. Any of the neighbouring towns or villages would be just fine in his view.

Family separation in the Syria context is a widespread phenomenon. Family members are separated across borders and frontlines and sometimes do not see or speak to one another for years. This is particularly common among young 'revolutionaries' who usually decide to stay in dangerous areas to distribute relief, but whose families almost always live elsewhere, at times out of reach. It was not uncommon for activists to be living in opposition-controlled eastern Aleppo while their families were living in regime-controlled western Aleppo. Families with the necessary means would reunite in Turkey every year or so. Others have remained separated for years. As each year passes, the closed borders and the increasingly polarised and militarised zones within the country make families drift further and further apart.



*Syrian refugees in a house provided by NRC's urban shelter programme get rent-free accommodation from 12 to 24 months in Irbid, Jordan.
Photo: Alisa Reznick, March 2015*

IV. Southern Syria and Jordan

Jordan's role in the Syrian crisis has been significantly less overt than Turkey's. However, Jordan's behind-the-scenes involvement has not been insignificant. From the onset of the conflict, Jordan has controlled its borders with Syria much more rigidly than Turkey has controlled its borders with that country. Prior to the revolution, Syrians were able to travel to Jordan with only their ID cards. Furthermore, due to the duty free zone on the border between the two countries, cross-border movement, especially for business, was not uncommon. However, very early on in the revolution, Jordan took control of its border, only allowing cross-border movements for medical emergencies. Most recently, even that has become nearly impossible.

Jordan has also closely controlled the activities of international organisations in Deraa province, especially those engaging in non-humanitarian work. The Jordanian authorities are well informed of all aid crossing its border into Syria and work closely with the aid organisations involved, including the UN. Unlike in Turkey, UNHCR has a strong presence in refugee camps in Jordan and also provides assistance to refugees living in host communities. As of 5 November 2017, an estimated 654,877 Syrian refugees were registered in Jordan by UNHCR.⁴⁰ Of those, only about 20 per cent (139,516 individuals) live in refugee camps, while the rest live in Jordanian cities, especially Amman, Mafraq, Irbid and Zarqa.⁴¹

a) Security and Basic Services

Jordan borders Syria's Deraa and Quneitra southern provinces, which were among the areas demarcated as de-escalation zones in the Astana talks, held in May 2017.⁴² These areas had previously been subject to much shelling and bombard-

ment, causing significant displacement within the provinces. As of March 2017, about 400,000 IDPs were living in these two provinces.⁴³ Currently, one of the sub-districts of Deraa province, Ash-shajara, is controlled by ISIS, which has caused displacement to the neighbouring sub-districts. However, barring further ISIS advancements, Deraa province's security situation has been relatively stable over the past few months.

Since last summer, INGOs and the UN in Jordan, very much like their counterparts in Turkey, have observed a wave of returns to southern Syria and also within Syria back to areas of origin. Earlier, as previously mentioned, a local NGO began collecting returnee data obtained from local town councils, which register returnees for aid handouts. As of October 2017, over 4,000 returns had been recorded, more than half from inside the province and some 800 from Jordan.⁴⁴ Half of the returns were to Deraa city and about 1,000 to Naima, two previously very active frontlines.⁴⁵

The process of returning to Syria for a refugee in Jordan is multi-faceted and includes notifying both UNHCR and the Jordanian authorities, who organise three bus rides a week to transport Syrians to the border. Leaving Jordan means forfeiting your right to go back there, as the borders are tightly sealed. Therefore, the decision to leave is not taken lightly. To shed light on why these decisions are taken, two returnee stories are profiled below.

- A man who returned to Tafas in Deraa province with his family in 2015 is living in his home and feels he has achieved a durable solution to his and his family's displacement;
- In September this year, a family returned to their town of origin, Da'el in Deraa province, but not to the family home. Livelihood opportunities seem grim at this point, but the family is hopeful.

RETURNING REFUGEE HAVING ACHIEVED A DURABLE SOLUTION (DERAA PROVINCE)⁴⁶

Prior to the revolution, Ali made a decent living working in the duty free zone between Jordan and Syria. He lived in Tafas, an agricultural town only 15 kilometers from the border with Jordan. Early on in the revolution, the Syrian regime was randomly arresting people in Dara'a province and detaining them for various lengths of time. Ali was one of those people. In November 2011, he was picked up by the authorities and detained for two weeks. Despite the short detention period, the imprisonment ordeal made him determined to leave the country upon release. In December of that same year, he moved to Jordan, rented a home and prepared everything in advance of moving his family there in January.

At that time, armed activity in Dara'a province was minimal and there was no shelling or bombing. While Ali's decision to move was partly prompted by his prison experience, it was also influenced by the easy access to Jordan through the open border and his ability to continue his job, this time working in the duty free zone on the Jordanian side of the border. He settled in the Jordanian town of Ramtha, a few kilometers from the border.

Their life in Jordan was decent. Syrians do not readily have access to work permits in Jordan and so many of them struggle to make ends meet. Ali was among the lucky ones. However, in April 2015, the border was closed and the duty free zone was shut. Until that date, the Syrian regime still controlled the Syrian side of the border, and so trade between Syria and Jordan was ongoing. When the opposition armed groups seized control of the border in 2015, the Jordanians closed their border and the duty-free zone.⁴⁷ Ali lost his job.

When they first arrived in Jordan, Ali registered with UNHCR as a refugee. For refugees not living in camps, UNHCR provides monthly food baskets and used to pay a small housing allowance. This aid is by no means enough to cover the basic living expenses of a family. But for Ali, who had a salary, this aid really helped him stay on top of expenses. Once he lost his job, however, these handouts barely put a dent in the family's list of needs. Moreover, Ali and his family were rejected for resettlement to the US in 2015, without any explanation given. With no job prospects, increasing debt and no hope of resettlement in a third country, Ali and his family seriously began to reconsider moving back to Syria.



Family deliberation lasted some time. Once the decision to leave was made there would be no way to return back to Jordan. Ali saw no other option, but his wife was afraid of the bombs. Rent in Jordan is very high and is a huge burden on refugee families. At least they would have a home in Tafas and Ali would find a way to get a job. In November 2015, Ali, his wife, their two children and his father, moved back to Syria.

Initially the situation was okay. The family found their home intact and was able to settle back in. But soon after, the shelling and bombing began. Since the other parts of Dara'a province were enduring similar attacks there was no obvious town to take refuge in – and no option of returning to Jordan. Although they were terrified by the constant sound of planes overhead, the good news was that Ali found a job, basic services were decent, and schools were running so the children had access to education. Also, Tafas being an agricultural town meant that fruit and vegetables remained plentiful, as was water. Moreover, they were living among family and friends again. Ali knew they had made the right decision.

Now, with the implementation of de-escalation zones, the situation really feels sustainable. With security, a job and basic services the family feels they have achieved a durable solution back in their home. Ali did not report any discrimination against him or his family upon return. On the contrary, he feels he is living a dignified life again, unlike their experience in Jordan, where discrimination against Syrians is widely reported.

RETURNING REFUGEE – TOO EARLY TO TELL (DERAA PROVINCE)⁴⁸

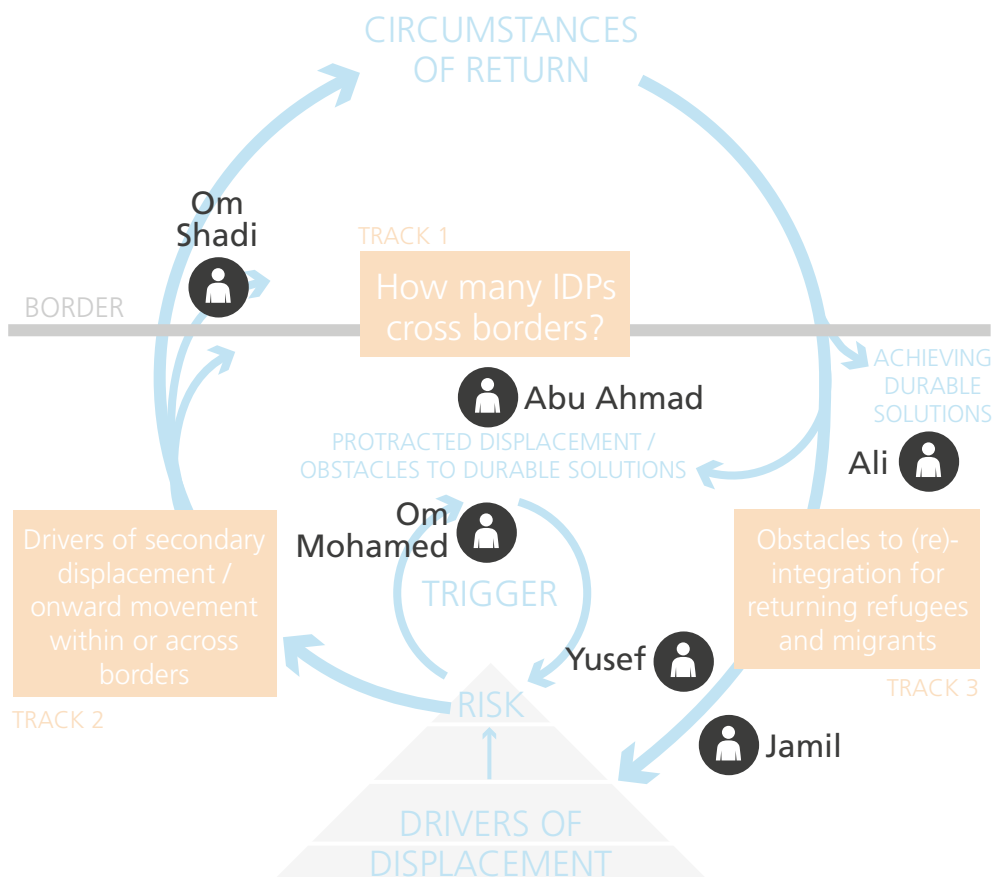
Jamil and his family moved to Jordan from his home town, Da’el in Dara’a province, in July 2012 after he had been injured by regime shelling. They had been living under constant fear of bombing for months prior to his injury and his four children were terrified. However, his injury was the final straw.

They moved to Irbid, a Jordanian town close to the Syrian border. Jamil registered his family with UNHCR and received monthly stipends and food vouchers. Initially, the UNHCR aid was just enough to get by. The children attended government schools and their basic needs were met. Over time, however, the amount allocated to families decreased and the price of goods and rent kept increasing. Jamil’s injury, along with the inability of Syrian nationals to get work permits in Jordan, meant it was impossible for him to get a job. His financial situation deteriorated and the family found itself in increasing debt, with no solution in sight. Jamil’s fear of the security situation back home, especially the prospect of exposing his children yet again to the bombing, prompted him to remain a refugee in Jordan for so long. But by 2017 Jamil had exhausted his resources and was desperate to find a solution. The only

option was to return to Syria, where much of Jamil’s family still remained. Luckily for him, this decision coincided with the ceasefire, and so he was able to return to a quieter, safer, Syria.

On 20 September 2017, Jamil and his family returned to Syria. They notified UNHCR and the Jordanian authorities, as is the procedure, and were put on a bus to the border. Jamil’s house back in Da’el was found to be uninhabitable after being damaged by bombing. His family is currently living in his brother’s house where an additional room has been rigged for their stay until they are able to rebuild their own home. Da’el is an agricultural town and so day labour jobs are available; however, Jamil’s hand injury does not allow him to engage in this kind of work. For him, finding a job and saving up enough money to fix his home is still quite a remote prospect. Despite the big hurdles ahead, he nonetheless feels a huge burden has been lifted. His children seem infinitely happier back home. “They are laughing and smiling again,” Jamil said. Living among friends and family, and not feeling like a stranger anymore, has been totally worth it.

FIGURE: SYRIAN CASE STUDIES ON THE DISPLACEMENT CONTINUUM



Push Factors to Return

Despite the differences in the situations facing refugees in Turkey and Jordan, and given the different status of security and basic services in Syria's northern and southern regions, the factors that have led to decisions to return have generally been very similar.

- **Economic pressure in places of displacement**, whether in Turkey, Jordan or Syria, was the top factor in the decision-making process. Rent prices were cited as the largest financial burden on individuals and families. The appeal of going home and not needing to pay rent was therefore a strong pull factor. In Jordan in particular, with Syrians unable to get work permits, continuing to pay high rent was just no longer an option.
- **Feelings of alienation and discrimination in places of displacement** also figured heavily in decisions to return. In Jordan, refugees reported a lot of racism from Jordanians, who blame Syrians for their social and economic ills such as rising rent prices and the lack of jobs. In Turkey, the language and cultural barriers have led to miscommunication and difficulties for Syrians to integrate into the context. Similar accusations of Syrians taking jobs and creating social problems have also caused tensions. An interviewee in Dara'a said even those internally displaced within the province face similar types of discrimination from the host communities.
- **The improvement in the security situation** has definitely been a factor in making people feel they are able to take their families back home. While at times this has been the trigger for that decision, it has not been the underlying reason for return. As interviews demonstrated, people stayed home for as long as they could and did not make the decision to move until a shell fell right next to or on their home. Some interviewees returned home before the ceasefire began or were already thinking about doing so before it was in place. One interviewee said: "This trend began about a year ago, but the international organisations have just begun paying attention this summer, when the ceasefire began."⁴⁹ This suggests that there may be a 'tipping point' at which refugees feel they no longer can endure the financial burden in their new home and begin to devise a return plan, regardless of the situation back home.
- **The presence or lack of basic services** have not played a big role in the decision of returnees. The status of basic services in most areas of return is still very poor but this has not deterred returnees.
- **Family ties almost always play a role in deciding a family's next move.** When family ties do not exist in other villages or abroad, the decision to move is ever more difficult. The case of those evacuated from Aleppo city is an interesting one. In the final evacuation from Aleppo city, many people were put on buses and shuttled to Idlib province. There, people with ties or family in rural villages of Aleppo or Idlib made their way to those villages. Those with no ties sought somewhere relatively safe and where some livelihood opportunities exist. Om Mohamed, who

believed Al-Bab could be a good option, was such a case. Others preferred not to leave Aleppo city at all. One Aleppo city inhabitant spoke of his friend who decided not to leave the city as he had no ties to any other part of the country and could not imagine moving elsewhere. He remains in regime-controlled Aleppo city and is routinely subjected to bullying by the regime's 'shabiha' (thugs) and has even been imprisoned and tortured. Yet, he has still not left, as he has nowhere to go.

Conclusion

Given the volatile situation in Syria, the fragile truce and the lack of basic services, it is clear that Idlib, Dara'a and northern Aleppo cannot be considered safe areas to return to. Despite this, people are still deciding to do so. The lack of livelihood opportunities in places of displacement and people's inability to sustainably integrate into host communities, both within their own countries and abroad, are factors that have caused people to remain on the move. Interviewees expressed the need to find a long term solution to their displacement, as the conflict, now in its sixth year, is far from being resolved. This raises the question of how and why the international community has failed to assist people in displacement, whether they be refugees or IDPs, especially those fleeing from protracted conflict situations. The need to protect refugees abroad to avoid early and potentially unsustainable returns is unquestionable. Funding restrictions and host country politics have, in many instances, hindered an effective humanitarian response.

In the case of Syria, the role of Turkey and Jordan in providing refuge to Syrians fleeing the conflict is far from negligible. However, certain policies, such as Jordan's refusal to allow Syrians to acquire work permits and Turkey's recent monopoly of cross-border aid into Syria, have accelerated returns. Jordan's policy prevents Syrian refugees from earning a livelihood, leaving them with return as their only option. At the same time, Turkey's policy prevents the establishment of a more stable environment inside Syria by not allowing for the creation of conditions conducive to the restoration of basic services in northern parts of the country, thus increasing the risk of further displacement upon return there.

Meanwhile, the role major world powers could play in undermining or upholding the ceasefire or brokering a peace deal is also not insignificant. But without a real political solution and an end to the violence, new displacements will continue to occur and returnees will likely be displaced again, without being able to achieve durable solutions in their place of origin or elsewhere in the country.

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Cover photo: A Syrian activist captures a selfie a day before the evacuation of Aleppo city, December 2016.

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