

URF  
Thematic  
Paper

# Responding to Displacement in Urban Recovery Approaches

URBAN RECOVERY FRAMEWORK

| September 2022

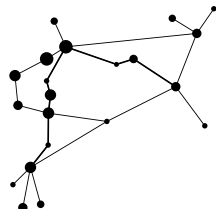
URBAN  
RECOVERY  
FRAMEWORK



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# Responding to Displacement in Urban Recovery Approaches

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FRAMEWORK



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## Abbreviations

<b>ABRS</b>	Area-Based Return Support
<b>CBS</b>	Central Bureau of Statistics
<b>CCCM</b>	Camp Coordination and Camp Management
<b>CSO</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>ERW</b>	Explosive remnants of war
<b>HLP</b>	Housing, Land and Property
<b>IDP</b>	Internally Displaced Person
<b>INGOs</b>	International Non-Governmental Organizations
<b>IHL</b>	International Humanitarian Law
<b>GoS</b>	Government of Syria
<b>JP</b>	Joint Programme
<b>MoFA</b>	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
<b>Mol</b>	Ministry of Interior
<b>MoLAE</b>	Ministry of Local Administration and Environment
<b>MoPWH</b>	Ministry of Public Works and Housing
<b>MoSAL</b>	Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour
<b>MSNA</b>	Multi-Sector Needs Assessment
<b>PPP</b>	Public-Private Partnership
<b>RRWG</b>	Syria Return and Reintegration Working Group
<b>RRWG TWG</b>	Technical Working Group of the RRWG
<b>SYP</b>	Syrian pounds
<b>TWG</b>	Technical Working Group
<b>UN-Habitat</b>	United Nations Human Settlements Programme
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>Urban-S</b>	Urban Analysis Network for Syria
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence against women and girls
<b>WASH</b>	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
<b>WHO</b>	World Health Organization

## Terminology

**Area-based approaches:** multisectoral, multi-stakeholder, geographically targeted and consider the whole population within a selected location.

**Building-back-better:** an approach to post-disaster recovery that reduces vulnerability to future disasters and builds community resilience to address physical, social, environmental, and economic vulnerabilities and shocks.

**Enabling components of cities:** systems in urban areas that are needed to support, manage and successfully implement a response for displaced people in cities, including 1) Policy, Legislation and Governance, 2) Urban Economy and Finance, and 3) Data. Built components of the city refers to systems that are physical manifestations or structural elements of the city which are essential to formulating a response to displacement, including 4) Housing, 5) Urban Basic Services, and 6) Social and Recreational Facilities.<sup>1</sup>

**Informal areas:** Areas located in administrative governorate boundaries on the public or private properties without previous land division plans that led to unplanned random urban and rural expansion in various sizes and space spontaneously and without planning rules.<sup>2</sup>

**Durable solutions:** Solutions that enable refugees or IDPs to secure the political, legal and social conditions to maintain life, livelihood and dignity. Three durable solutions are internationally acknowledged: voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement.<sup>3</sup>

**Multi-Sectoral Approach:** The collaboration between various sectors (e.g., health, environment and economy) to jointly achieve a policy outcome with all major stakeholder groups (e.g., United Nations, government, civil society, business and academia) sharing a common vision and perspective.

**Recovery ladder:** the identification and prioritisation of actions along a continuum from stabilization to transformation and across scales from local to national levels.

**Spontaneous return:** return by refugees' own means, often unexpectedly, and sometimes in conflict situations.

Spontaneous IDP returnees: IDPs who return to place of origin within six months after being displaced.<sup>4</sup>

**Urban Recovery Framework:** the Urban Recovery Framework (URF) is a methodology developed to guide urban-specific dimensions of post-disaster and post-conflict recovery. It is intended to fill a significant gap in the international system's ability to support countries and cities affected by urban crises.

**Urban Recovery Ladder:** A concept describing the stages of urban crises response towards recovery, from absorptive (responding to immediate needs), adaptive (medium-term response and recovery) to transformative phases (longer-term response). While sequential, actions that will contribute towards a transformative path – or bounce-forward measures, can be identified in the absorptive and adaptive phases and thus inform a strategic direction of the response.

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<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, "Handbook Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection," 1996.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR and UN-Habitat, "Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas," 2022.

<sup>2</sup> MPWH, "Policies and strategies for the development of informal areas," 2013.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR, Handout on refugee protection, 2005; IASC, IASC Framework on Durable Solutions for Internally Displaced Persons, 2010.

## Executive Summary

This *Responding to Displacement in Urban Recovery Approaches* report is part of a series of policy papers developed under the Urban Recovery Framework (URF) project, led by a multi-stakeholder consortium, that explore conditions and recovery options under a set of thematic areas. Situating the URF in the Syrian displacement context, this paper aims to support evidence-led area-based approaches in high displacement or future potential return areas, drawing on experiences in Syria to date; and to embed further displacement sensitivity and considerations for reintegration in urban recovery programming.

In Syria, fighting has often been concentrated in urban areas, particularly in informal or impoverished city neighbourhoods, rendering cities and regions highly damaged, fragmented, and with low- or non-functional social and infrastructure systems, and markets. The large-scale displacement has contributed to the urbanisation trend seen in Syria over the last decade. With a likely continued high urbanisation, cities will have to prepare to house an even greater share of the population, while at the same finding ways to recover from the large-scale damage and destruction from the conflict.

### Policy analysis for displacement sensitivity in urban recovery approaches

**Compounded shocks have contributed to a worsening situation for Syrians over the last years**, where a deepening economic and financial crisis, spread of Covid-19, and conflict-related human rights violations are exacerbating already dire consequences for affected populations, including the more than 12 million people who have been forced to leave home.

**The distinct urban dimension of the Syrian conflict has amplified an urbanisation trend seen over the last decades, and it is expected that many Syrian**

**cities will continue to expand due to new arrivals.** This means that cities, and particularly informal areas, will have to prepare to house an even greater share of the population while also responding to the massive building and infrastructure damage and destruction, and low service functionality.

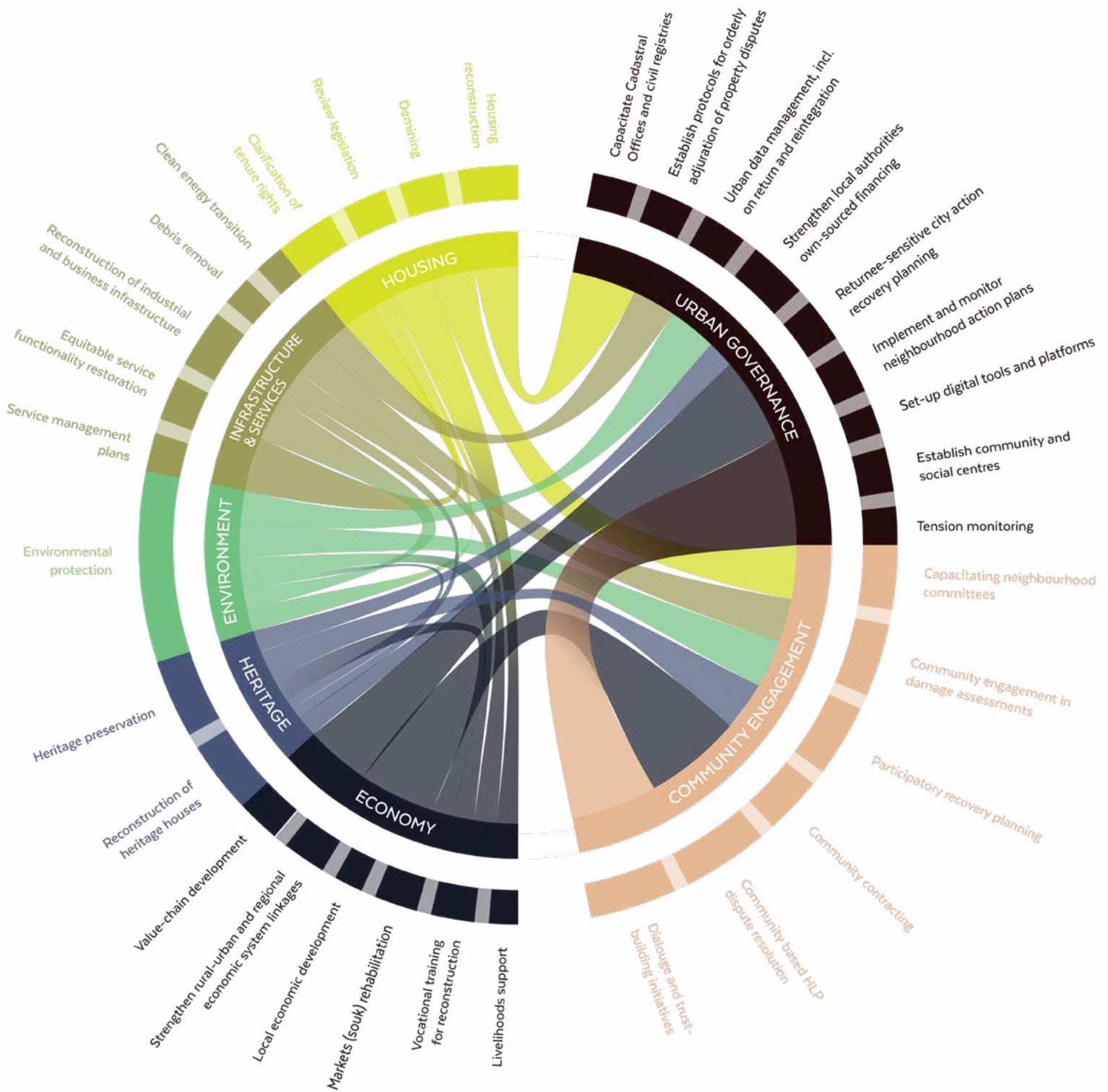
**The conflict impact differs within and between cities, is more concentrated in informal and impoverished areas, and has led to increased fragmentation.** The conflict has brought drastic changes in the demographic composition within cities. While some neighbourhoods have become increasingly heterogenous as IDPs have arrived in large numbers, others have become increasingly homogenous as people flee. This has further intensified economic, social, ethnic, and political fragmentations in cities.

**The acute and rising needs across affected populations in Syria underscores the relevance of applying holistic and contextualised response approaches rather than singling out displaced and returnee beneficiaries from a larger population.** Area-based approaches, being holistic, multi-stakeholder, multi-sector, and multi-scalar are suited for response to a situation where needs and vulnerabilities cut across the population, but with significant inter- and intra-city variations.

**A significant number of Syrians live in uncertain and protracted displacement situations in urban areas.** The reality for many is one of dwindling resources, limited economic prospects, weak social networks, and acute and increasing needs. Key challenges to be addressed include unemployment, particularly among youth, informal employment, especially among women, rising debts, domestic violence, lack of civil documentation, and limited access to basic and social services.

**Urban populations are exposed to specific safety and security risks** linked to, among others, the





**Figure 1** Sectoral inter-dependencies within a displacement sensitive area-based approach. Source: UN-Habitat

presence of armed actors, check points and different enclaves within the city, destroyed infrastructure and buildings, inadequate housing, and the presence of explosive remnants of war (ERW). While there is great variance between areas, it is estimated that one in three neighbourhoods is potentially contaminated with ERWs. Many displaced women and girls living in urban areas further face increased risks of violence against women and girls (VAWG) due to factors such as overcrowded buildings, a lack of privacy, and limited movement.

**Access to livelihoods is a primary consideration for where displaced persons move to, and for return.**

The conflict has added to pre-conflict economic challenges, where economic growth did not keep up with rapid urbanisation and a young population, and livelihood opportunities are few. While increased economic activities have been observed, economic recovery requires addressing a range of interlinked issues, including damage and destruction to infrastructure and buildings, energy, transport, and water access, lack of (skilled) labour and affordable housing in proximity to jobs, cost of fuel, weak supply chains and linkages between industrial centres in cities and rural areas with (in many places) limited production of raw material and labour.

**Housing, land, and property issues continue to affect displaced, returnees, and remaining residents.**

During the conflict, expropriation of property and redevelopment has taken place without proper planning for return of displaced populations. In the current legal and policy environment, informality and housing projects by private developers are expected to continue to play important roles as more people are looking for a place to live and invest.

Policy implications from the analysis include:

- **Resolving HLP grievances and addressing HLP risks** will be decisive for return and reintegration prospects.
- **Carrying out careful conflict sensitivity and risk analysis, embedding safeguarding measures, and grounding in the principle of do-no-harm** will be critical to address critical needs and mitigate social tension from competition over scarce resources.
- **Protecting the environment and mitigating and adapting to climate change** is integral to durable solutions, and to reduce risks of displacement in the future.
- **Restoration of service functionality in cities in**

**an equitable manner** is critical for return and reintegration.

- **Preservation and restoration of urban heritage**, with local identities, craftsmanship and heritage buildings and sites, are important for reconciliation, and may be used as a vehicle to strengthen HLP rights for displaced and returnees in historic neighbourhoods.
- **Economic recovery** relies on improved rural-urban linkages, strengthened supply-chains, better access to raw materials, energy (including clean energy) and water for production, as well as access to labour.

This paper presents several area-based policy recommendations covering neighbourhood, city, and national levels, aligned with the URF approach. These look at both the immediate needs of people, and how systems and markets can be support for resilience-building and recovery over time. Figure 1 shows the interrelated factors discussed in this paper and key recommendations to address issues identified under each. The analysis affirms the relevance of area-based approaches to support affected populations and build resilience in Syrian cities, where the aim of the recommendations is to contribute to thinking on what this may entail using an evolving, flexible, and iterative response framework, such as the URF.

For instance, the recommendations suggests that housing, land and property (HLP) rights can be strengthened working with communities in neighbourhood action planning processes, rehabilitation and reconstruction of housing; working with cadastral offices to clarify land rights and improve formal land registration; and working with central and local authorities to improve a dialogue for streamlining municipal approval processes of urban redevelopment. Strengthened HLP rights will also have a positive effect on areas such as local economic activity, cultural heritage and safety.

This policy paper suggests that the URF provides a tested approach for local, national and international partners to work collectively in an area-based manner in areas of high displacement and/or potential high return. Applying area-based approaches such as the URF in a displacement sensitive manner entails a focus on strengthening HLP rights, supporting economic opportunities, promoting equitable service delivery, rebuilding housing and infrastructure, and enabling participation in planning and decision-making by current residents and displaced persons alike.

## Introduction

The Syrian conflict has amplified inequalities linked to services, housing, and infrastructure within and between cities. Damage and displacement have been particularly high in certain areas, and neighbourhoods are growing more fragmented. Some neighbourhoods have increasingly homogeneous populations, others increasingly heterogeneous. At the same time, needs are acute across population groups and keep rising for host community members, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees alike. In 2021, 63 per cent of people in need were vulnerable residents, and while returnee and IPD households are still comparably worse off, over three quarters of households in Syria are struggling to meet the basic needs of their families.<sup>5</sup> The conflict impact has further been aggravated by compounded shocks, including a severe contraction of the economy, devaluation of the Syrian pound (SYP), an energy and fuel crisis, and Covid-19. Displacement remains high, and limited return is taking place. To respond to this situation, careful consideration of how people's realities manifest geographically, is needed.

This paper situates urban recovery approaches in the Syrian displacement context. The paper has been developed as part of a policy paper series aiming to shed light on key challenges to be addressed in urban recovery planning in Syria. The policy papers explore conditions and recovery options under a set of thematic areas, seen as interlinked pillars to any urban recovery.<sup>6</sup> The objective of this paper is two-fold; first, to promote evidence-led area-based approaches, drawing on experiences from urban areas in Syria with high displacement and/or relatively higher numbers of returns. Second, to embed further displacement sensitivity and considerations for reintegration in urban recovery programming.

<sup>5</sup> Defined in the HNO as “those that have not been recently displaced”, p.8 in OCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic,” 2022.

<sup>6</sup> In addition to this paper, the thematic papers look at urban heritage, environment, governance, infrastructure, housing and monitoring.

## Displacement sensitive recovery using an area-based approach

Area-based recovery approaches are holistic, multi-stakeholder, multi-sector, and multi-scalar. These approaches integrate spatial parameters (e.g., areas with high displacement) to situate other criteria for support (e.g., population profiles) within urban settings. Being people-centred, area-based recovery emphasise interlinkages between people, systems, and resources to respond to vulnerabilities and needs, address structural issues, and magnify positive impacts of recovery efforts in the short-, medium- and longer-term. In a constantly changing displacement context, area-based approaches allow for flexibility to quickly shift, expand, or replicate efforts.

To move towards urban recovery at scale in a manner that is displacement sensitive and supports reintegration, addressing both household grievances and system-gaps is required. Multi-dimensional, evidence-based and coordinated recovery plans and interventions that draw on both local and international capacities can help support such efforts. To avoid unintended negative effects, mitigate social tensions, and neutralise politics of exclusion, displacement sensitive recovery plans must integrate careful risk analysis and sound safeguarding measures, considering all affected populations.

## The Urban Recovery Framework (URF): an area-based framework

The URF for conflict and crises-affected countries is an enabling institutional and policy framework and related programming that aims at supporting resilient urban recovery at scale, and the renewal of

the social contract.<sup>7</sup> It functions as a vehicle to clarify institutional roles and responsibilities, outlining local leadership, coordination, and accountability to respond to urban challenges.

Since 2014, the URF concept has been piloted through an iterative process by UN-Habitat in collaboration with a wide range of partners in Syria. Its application has progressed from initial urban analysis to comprehensive multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder approach that can be addressed both within the humanitarian (early recovery) architecture, as well as longer-term resilience interventions. As such, it has evolved from an initial focus on humanitarian needs, to increasingly incorporating pre-crisis conditions and historical grievances, complementing national frameworks to support sustainable recovery and resilience in cities.

As an area-based approach, the URF focuses on the needs of affected populations and systems to support cost-effective urban recovery at scale. The goal of the URF is to improve urban recovery responses in cities affected by crisis, based on three broad strategic objectives:

1. To strengthen institutional arrangements and guide investment to optimise recovery impact and to deliver cost-efficient urban recovery.
2. To contribute to an integrated response within the humanitarian-development-peace nexus, in stabilisation, early recovery, resilience, and reconstruction programming, addressing root causes and crises impacts.
3. To improve urban governance, including strengthening local capacities and participation mechanisms, promoting local ownership, accountability and to restore the social contract.

The URF is an important contribution to tested area-based approaches aligned with the strategic focus on integrated and area-based programming of the UN Strategic Framework 2022-2024 in Syria.<sup>8</sup> Critically, the URF works across multiple scales, based on the acknowledgment that the household and neighbourhood level cannot be considered in isolation. As a multi-scalar approach, the URF helps identify opportunities to link short-term humanitarian activities with more medium-term resilience-based programming, with potentially transformative bounce-forward measures.

7 UN-Habitat, "Urban Recovery Framework Policy Brief," 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003091707>.

8 United Nations and Government of Syria, "UN Strategic Framework 2022 – 2024," 2022.

## Policy analysis: Responding to Displacement in Urban Recovery Approaches

This paper is structured in two parts. The first part provides a brief overview of the displacement situation in Syrian cities and outlines some of the main challenges for recovery and reintegration in urban areas. The analysis looks at several issues that hold significance for displaced persons and returnees, and how policies and the regulatory environment, systems and governance structures, and needs and vulnerabilities are impacted by, or contributing to, these. Drawing on contextual analysis and policy implications from this analysis, the second part explores how the URF as an area-based approach can support local responses in areas of high displacement. Key policy principles and a flexible policy design to support affected populations are outlined, followed by policy recommendations for interventions that target root causes as well as alleviate immediate and medium-term needs.

The recommendations build on an analysis of *Enabling*<sup>9</sup> and *Built* components in Syrian cities, as defined in the UNHCR and UN-Habitat *Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas*,<sup>10</sup> taking account of both the emergency perspective typical of humanitarian response, as well as development-oriented perspectives enshrined in urban recovery programming. Placing people at the centre, inclusive and pro-poor economic recovery and income opportunities are seen as integral components for dignity and a sense of future among all population groups. It should be noted that, although this paper draws on displacement data for the whole country, the discussion and recommendations are focused on Government of Syria (GoS)-controlled areas, which encompasses almost 70 per cent of the Syrian territory.

9 Enabling components of the city refers to systems in urban areas that are needed to support, manage and successfully implement a response for displaced people in cities, including 1) Policy, Legislation and Governance, 2) Urban Economy and Finance, and 3) Data. Built components of the city refers to systems that are physical manifestations or structural elements of the city which are essential to formulating a response to displacement, including 4) Housing, 5) Urban Basic Services, and 6) Social and Recreational Facilities.

10 UNHCR and UN-Habitat, "Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas."

## Cities as Centres of Migration and Displacement

The conflict in Syria has taken on a distinct urban dimension, with intense fighting, destruction, and displacement in cities. This builds on a legacy of high urbanisation rates in Syria starting in the second half of the 20th century with rural-urban and urban-urban migration, that led to rapid expansion of cities and towns (see the Housing, Land and Property section). In the years prior to the conflict, especially in the 2000s, major cities, and particularly informal areas, grew rapidly. For example, from 2004 to 2011, Aleppo's population expanded from 2.1 million to close to 3 million, where most of the expansion took place in informal areas in the eastern parts of the city.<sup>11</sup> The rural-urban migration has been driven by young people who arrive in cities in search of livelihood opportunities. This has in part been a consequence of environmental and climate change. A three-year drought from 2006 to 2010, which depleted water resources and had an adverse effect on agricultural productivity and livelihoods, was a significant contributor to economic migration in the pre-conflict period.<sup>12</sup> Conflict has also been a significant contributor, including the Iraq war that broke out in 2003 and led to the influx of between 1.2 and 1.5 million Iraqi refugees to Syria predominantly to urban areas, the vast majority of whom have since returned from Syria or moved elsewhere. By 2011, it is estimated that at least one in every four persons living in a city in Syria were first generation domestic migrants and their children (arriving within the last 20 years). In major cities, estimates suggest one in every two persons were first generation migrants and their children. As more people came to the cities, informal settlements continued to grow. By the time the conflict started, one-third of those living in cities lived in informal settlements.<sup>13</sup> The rapid expansion of these informal areas led to additional pressure on

basic services and increased competition for housing and jobs. Furthermore, a segmentation of regions and areas between and within cities emerged with distinct social, ethnic, and economic characteristics. Displacement over the conflict-period has vastly altered the demographic composition in Syrian cities.<sup>14</sup> The security situation and the immense damage and destruction of buildings and infrastructure has forced civilians to leave ruined homes and neighbourhoods behind. As residents flee and others arrive, this has led to a drastic change in population. Some cities and neighbourhoods have expanded rapidly, while others have largely been deserted. Currently, an estimated 84 per cent of IDPs live in urban areas,<sup>15</sup> with 71 per cent living in residential areas.<sup>16</sup> The share is particularly high in Central and South Syria where 99 per cent of IDPs live in cities and towns.<sup>17</sup> Reflecting the very high share of urban populations in host countries as well as pull factors to cities (e.g., perceived livelihood opportunities, access to services, dense populations and the possibility to remain unanimous etc.), 95 per cent of registered refugees also live in urban and peri-urban non-camp settings.<sup>18</sup> Similar to those who were forced to flee, urban residents who still live in their homes are subject to increasingly difficult living conditions as livelihoods have been lost, infrastructure and buildings destroyed, damaged and looted, and local power structures shifted.

Over the period from 2011 to 2017, all governorates experienced a large increase in IDPs relative to the population, with the greatest increase taking place in

11 Urban-S, *Urban Baseline Aleppo*, 2019.

12 Urban Recovery Programme, "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Pursuing Environmental Sustainability through Urban Recovery in Syria," n.d.

13 The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), "Return Is a Dream: Options for Post-Conflict Property Restitution in Syria," 2018.

14 Estimates of the urbanisation rate over the conflict period varies greatly. While UNDESA estimated that the urban population decreased from 56 per cent to 51 per cent between 2010 and 2014 before again reaching its 2010-level in 2018, the World Bank estimated that the urban population had reached 78 per cent by 2018, and UN-Habitat that it increased from 51 per cent to 76 per cent between 2010 and 2014.

15 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

16 OCHA.

17 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "IDP Report Series 2020: Shelter Conditions," 2020.

18 3RP, "Regional Needs Overview 2021," 2021.

Population growth 2011-2017				
Population growth 2011-2017 and share of IDPs	Governorate		City	
	Growth	Share IDPs	Growth	Share IDPs
Damascus	0,3%	37%	0.3%	37%
Reef Damascus (Babella)	14.1%	40%	-58.8%	16%
Aleppo	-36.3%	32%	-49.2%	31%
Homs	-15.5%	31%	-18.4%	44%
Hama	-16.6%	19%	18.0%	20%
Lattakia	-8.8%	43%	38.6%	53%
Idleb	17.3%	52%	-20.0%	41%
Hassakeh	-35.6%	24%	-28.3%	52%
Deir Ez Zor	-11.1%	17%	-50.9%	38%
Tartous	-3.1%	29%	43.8%	36%
Raqqqa	-32.7%	31%	-17.0%	47%
Der'a	-8.5%	35%	-2.2%	34%
Sweida	-13.3%	16%	-10.9%	17%
Quneitra	6.3%	50%	-23.9%	41%

**Figure 2** Population growth by governorate and city 2011-2017. Source: HNO 2018

cities (Figure 1). By 2017, all but three governorates' capital cities had over one third IDPs among their populations. The relative change in population figures in the governorates and the capital cities suggests composite movement patterns. In some governorates the city population grew more than the governorate population, indicating that people moved from other parts of the governorate or from outside the governorate to the city. Cities with the largest reduction in population are within governorates that have grown overall, suggesting a population movement away from the city to other areas in the same governorates. Others have moved to relatively safer parts of their city, adding to the share of IDPs, but not the overall size of the population. Overall, informal areas have been among those most affected by conflict-induced damage, destruction, and displacement, but have also become the place of refuge for many who have been forced to flee. With the current outlook of the security and economic situation, it is likely that many Syrian cities will continue to attract displaced persons seeking relative safety, income-generating opportunities, and access to services.

Demographic changes in Syrian cities during the conflict period include cities with:

- **Significant reduction in population:** In the period from 2011 to 2017, cities including Babella (Rural

Damascus), Homs, Idleb, Al-Hasakeh, Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqqa, and Quneitra lost between 17 and 59 per cent of their populations. While the overall population decreased, many of these cities also received many IDPs. In Homs for example, close to 190,000 of the city's estimated 630,000 inhabitants were IDPs in 2021, most coming from other parts of Homs city and surrounding rural areas.<sup>19</sup>

- **Significant shifts in population over time:** For example, in the initial years of the conflict, Aleppo received more than 850,000 IDPs. However, as the conflict developed from 2013 onwards, many fled to the Aleppo countryside, other parts of Syria, or Turkey and the population was drastically reduced. By August 2018 the population was estimated to be 1.6 million, including 75,000 returnees and 216,000 IDPs. Similar demographic fluctuations have been seen in other cities, as the conflict frontline and focus has changed.
- **Rapid increase in population:** In the period from 2011 to 2017, cities including Lattakia, Tartous and Hama grew between 18 and 44 per cent. Certain informal areas, such as Dwellaa and Jaramana in the eastern part of Damascus, for example, grew at a rapid rate as IDPs arrived in large numbers. Jaramana, with a legacy as a migrant town, experienced a massive expansion during the first years of the conflict, growing more than three-fold from a pre-conflict population of around 185,000 to around 621,000 in 2019.<sup>20</sup>
- **Relatively stable population:** Damascus city experienced relatively less reduction in population compared with other major cities over the conflict period. In 2017, an estimated 1.25 million people remained in the city, including around 650,000 IDPs in GoS-held neighbourhoods.

## Displacement

While official population data is not available,<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Urban-S, "Homs Urban Baseline," 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Urban-S, "Jaramana City Profile," 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Lack of reliable, granular, up-to-date, and comparable data is a major challenge for actors operating in Syria. The Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) receives data from governorates and sometimes line ministries directly, but after 2011 regular and standardized reporting has broken down. Demographic data based on governorate population registries that are rarely up to date, in part due to the complexity of monitoring rapid demographic changes on the ground. CBS therefore largely relies on extrapolation of existing data. OCHA provides population data including data on displaced, however the data is only published once per year and based on estimates. UNHCR records registered refugees, but this leaves out many who flee to

estimates indicate the massive population movements internally and across borders over the conflict-period. From 2011 to 2020, 12.3 million people – over half the country’s close to 21 million pre-conflict population - have been uprooted.<sup>22</sup> Over the same period, an average of 2.4 million new displacements have been recorded every year,<sup>23</sup> and Syria has currently the largest number of IDPs in the world.<sup>24</sup> According to the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), another six million displacements could take place over the next decade if the current trends continue, while returns will remain limited.<sup>25</sup>

There are 5.7 million registered refugees in neighbouring countries (November 2021),<sup>26</sup> where more than 65 per cent of registered refugees live in Turkey, 15 per cent in Lebanon, and 12 per cent in Jordan. Of the 1 million Syrian asylum seekers and refugees in Europe, Germany and Sweden host 59 per cent and 11 per cent respectively. This comes in addition to many non-registered Syrian refugees (particularly in Lebanon, where registration was stopped in 2015). For most the situation remains extremely uncertain.<sup>27</sup>

While the number of IDPs have remained relatively stable over the conflict period (e.g., 6 million IDPs in 2013, 6.2 million IDPs in 2018, and 6.7 million by 2020),<sup>28</sup> the displacement situation in Syria is characterised by complex movement patterns within and between governorates, as indicated above. This is reflected in the high number of recorded displacements every year relative to the overall IDP population at 6.9 million. Close to four out of five IDPs have been displaced for at least four years, around 70 per cent have been displaced for more than five years, and close to one in four have been displaced at least four times.

Most internal displacement takes place within the

same governorate, near the original settlement. The large majority of displaced come from central and south Syria and displacement has, in general, been most widespread from areas perceived as being supportive of the former opposition including areas of Qaboun, Jobar, Darayya, and Eastern Ghouta in Rural Damascus.<sup>29</sup> IDPs and returnees make up more than half of the overall population in 27 sub-districts, 25 of which are located in Aleppo, Idleb and Rural Damascus.<sup>30</sup> Several of these governorates have also received many returnees, including Idleb, Aleppo, Al-Hasakeh, Homs, as well as Hama.

## Vulnerabilities and Coping Strategies

Dividing family members has been a widespread strategy among families who have been forced to flee, either with some family members staying behind or family members going to different locations. The practice of sending women and children back to Syria, where the cost of living is lower while the men stay in their host country to work, is reported as a common coping mechanism.<sup>31</sup> These dynamics have contributed to altering the social fabric of Syrian cities. Research from three neighbourhoods in Damascus shows that two out of three respondents had family members who had moved abroad, and close to one of five had relatives who moved across internal borders with non-GoS areas.<sup>32</sup> The gender and age profiles of those who leave and those who stay behind reflect the higher number of young male Syrians who go abroad while leaving their families in Syria. The majority of those who have fled to neighbouring countries are male (56 per cent of refugees)<sup>33</sup> while slightly more IDPs are female (52 per cent). Most who leave the country are young. Many Syrians are also born in host countries. About 87 per cent of Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon are under 40 years, compared to 77 per cent in Syria, and 47 per cent of Syrian refugees are under 14 years.

Family separation divides risk, where family members

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other countries, particularly to Lebanon, but for various reasons are not register with the government or UNHCR.

22 OCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic,” March 2021.

23 NRC, “The Darkest Decade: What Displaced Syrians Face If the World Continues to Fail Them,” 2021.

24 OCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic,” 2022.

25 NRC, “The Darkest Decade: What Displaced Syrians Face If the World Continues to Fail Them.”

26 UNHCR, “Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions,” Operational Data Portal: Refugee Situation, 2021, [https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria\\_durable\\_solutions](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria_durable_solutions).

27 UNHCR, “Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria.”

28 OCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic,” 2022.

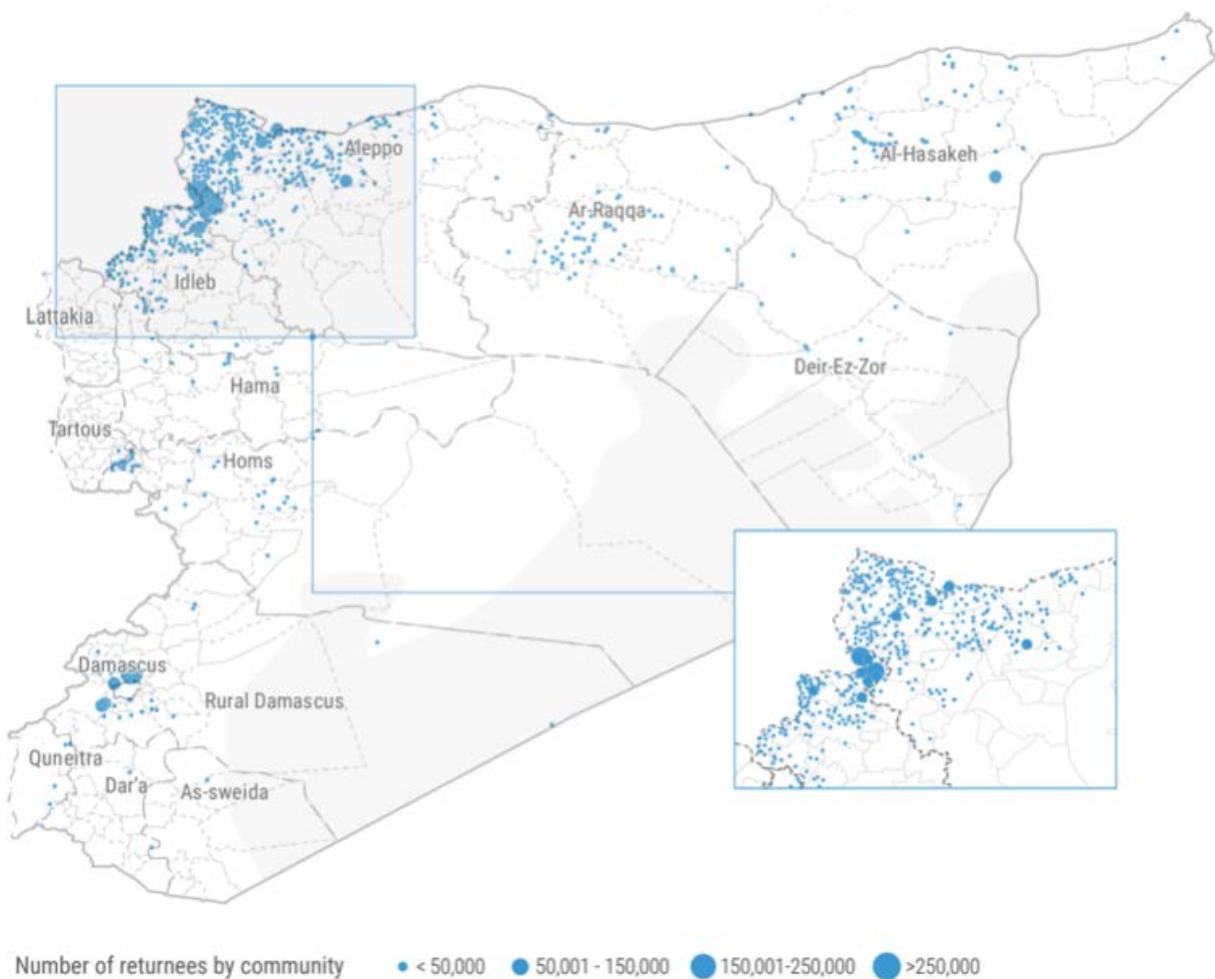
29 Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “HLP Rights, Migration and Business Activity in Syria,” February 2020.

30 OCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic,” 2022.

31 Save the Children, “Child Returns in Syria: Prospects for Durable Solutions,” 2019.

32 COAR, “Left Behind: Family Separation and Its Impacts in Three Damascus Neighbourhoods,” January 2022.

33 3RP, “Regional Needs Overview 2021.”



**Figure 3** Host communities where the total number of IDPs and returnees constitute more than 50 per cent of the host population. Source: OCHA, 2022

can follow depending on the situation in the places of displacement or return. However, the separation often constitutes protection risks, weakens social capital and support, and adds worries about other family members in a situation of already high distress. Above all, the economic consequences of family separation can be severe, particularly for women and vulnerable groups. Often, the loss of breadwinner(s) aggravates gender inequalities in terms of access to e.g., employment and shelter. Whether family members have moved to other areas within Syria or abroad have significance for remittances received by those who stay behind. There is further a positive correlation between having family members with disability and the number of times households have been displaced. Close to one third of displaced have a disability, compared to around one quarter of the

Syrian population overall.<sup>34</sup> Of IDPs above 12 years, 36 per cent have a disability.<sup>35</sup> Among households without members with disabilities, 47 per cent have been displaced more than three times, compared to 57 per cent for households with more than one member with disabilities.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, a larger share of female IDPs over the age of 12 have a disability (41 per cent) compared with male (30 per cent). Of the estimated 350,200 people who have died due to the conflict, 12 out of every 13 persons are men and close to one in 13 person a child.<sup>37</sup>

34 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "Returnee Report Series 2020: Disability Prevalence and Impact," 2020.

35 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "IDP Report Series 2020: Disability Prevalence and Impact," 2020.

36 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "Returnee Report Series 2020: Disability Prevalence and Impact."

37 United Nations, "UN NEWS Syria: 10 Year of War Has Left at Least 350,000 Dead," September 24, 2021, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2021/09/1101162>.



## Return

Long-term displacement in an urban context is likely to influence return aspirations and conditions that must be in place for return. Young Syrians living in displacement might have spent most of, or their whole, lives in a host city. Many cannot identify the specific location of where their family comes from and do not necessarily have a strong connection to that specific place. Being used to an urban way of life means that returning to a rural or semi-rural place is not necessarily a desire or an option. Those returning could be more likely to choose larger cities as destinations due to perceived better livelihoods opportunities. Among those who return but are not able to move back to their homes for reasons such as lack of formal homeownership documents or others occupying their homes, many seek alternative shelter in their city through renting, living with relatives, squatting, or in IDPs shelter. Return is not always static. Movement between place of living and work for example, may be an economic strategy for households. The breadwinner may stay, or go back and forth between, location of work (often larger cities) and the more affordable location of the family, such as the family house.

Almost all returns take place from within Syria. In 2020, 95 per cent of returnees had been internally displaced.<sup>38</sup> Among IDPs, less than 20 per cent have returned to their community of origin since 2011. Most returnees however, return to their governorate of origin.<sup>39</sup> Between 2018 and 2020, 1.95 million IDPs returned, while there was a significant reduction in returns in 2020 and 2021. From January and August 2021, 107,510 spontaneous return movements were registered,<sup>40</sup> around one third of return movement over the same period in 2020.<sup>41</sup> Most returnees had been temporarily displaced by upscale of hostilities, many in Northern Syria. Nearly half of IDP returnees had been displaced for at least six years, and almost all return to their own house.<sup>42</sup> The average displacement period is 3.7 years, and over half have

38 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "Syrian Arab Republic: Returnee Overview Annual Report January-December," 2020, <https://doi.org/10.18356/7b7a5161-en-fr>.

39 Samuel Hall, "Syria's Spontaneous Return."

40 IDPs who return to place of origin within six months after being displaced.

41 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

42 IOM, "Nearly 715,000 Syrian Displaced Returned Home Between January and October 2017 - Syrian Arab Republic," ReliefWeb, November 7, 2017, <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/nearly-715000-syrian-displaced-returned-home-between-january-and-october>.

been displaced two or three times. Most IDPs report to intend to remain in their current location, with a third being undecided and only 3 per cent reporting an intention to return within the next 12 months.<sup>43</sup> This is a significant reduction from 11 per cent who intended to return in 2020.

Between 2016 and June 2022, 325,551 Syrian refugees were verified/monitored by UNHCR to have spontaneously (self-organised) returned from neighbouring countries and Egypt.<sup>44</sup> However, the actual number of returns, including through informal routes, is likely higher. The number of returnees verified/monitored by UNHCR increased from 28,539 in 2016 to almost 95,000 in 2019 before dropping to 38,235 in 2020 and 35,836 in 2021. Covid-19 and related restrictions is reported as a contributing factor to fewer returns.<sup>45</sup> The largest share of refugee returnees originated from Aleppo, Idleb and Al-Hasakeh. There is limited information available on spontaneous returnees when they arrive in Syria. Of refugees who intend to return, almost all (47 out of 50 responses) would return to their area of origin.<sup>46</sup> Among refugees living in Europe, two out of three report that they would not seriously consider returning to live in Syria even if conditions become stable.<sup>47</sup>

Conflict and security, and livelihood opportunities remain the important factors influencing return decisions.<sup>48</sup> Assessments such as the Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme further suggests that an worsening economic situation in the place of displacement is an important driver of return for the majority of refugees.<sup>49</sup> Contrary to this, the World Bank study from 2020 shows that bad living conditions in a host country seemingly did not influence return decisions for refugees, while poor provision of education, health and basic services in Syria deterred return.<sup>50</sup> Other factors influencing refugees return

43 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

44 UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Durable Solutions."

45 UNHCR.

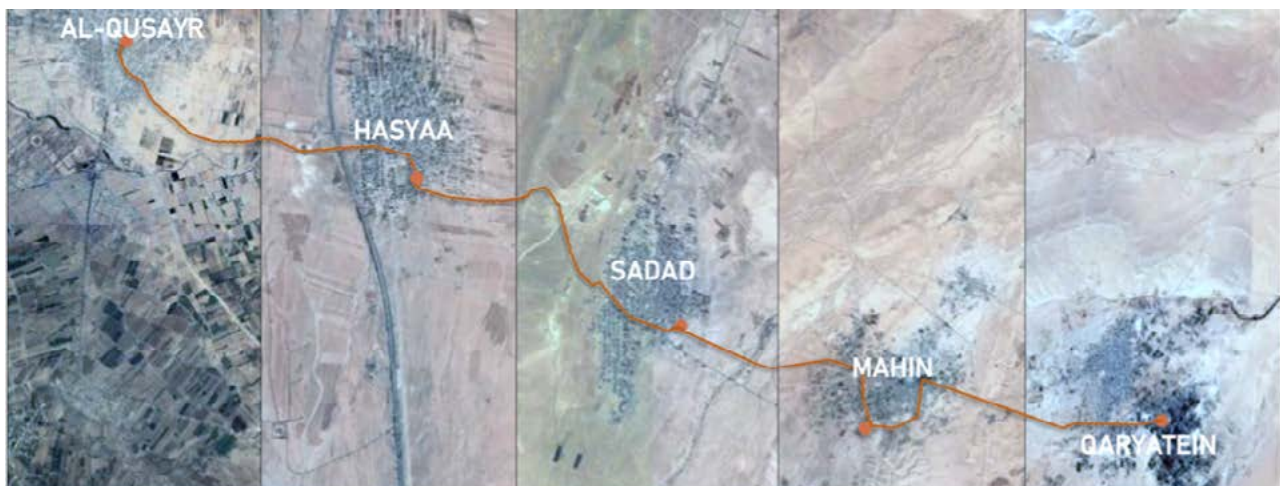
46 UNHCR, "Seventh Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria," no. March (2022): 1–17.

47 EASO, "Syria Situation of Returnees from Abroad: Country of Origin Information Report," 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2847/980660>.

48 OCHA, "Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Data," 2021. UNHCR, "Seventh Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria."

49 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "Syrian Arab Republic: Returnee Overview Annual Report January-December."

50 World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis, 2020." It should be noted that for this study, the World Bank used simulation on secondary data to understand how different factors impact



**Figure 4** Homs Recovery Corridor

may include pull factors such as needing to protect assets and properties, cultural ties, improvement of the security situation in the place of origin,<sup>51</sup> and a longing to go home, and push factors such as security, access to livelihoods, services, housing, and hostility among host community.<sup>52</sup>

## Recovery corridors and regions

### The ‘recovery corridor’

The major cities of Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Damascus, and Dar’a are connected through an economic axis linking Turkey with the Arabian Gulf and a transit axis aligned with the central M5 connecting the Turkish border in the North to the Lebanon and Jordan borders in the Southwest. This has been one of the main arteries for transporting commodities such as wheat and cotton in Syria. Over the course of the conflict, the GoS has gradually won back control over segments of these areas, including Aleppo in December 2016, with the last part of the economic axis being taken over in February 2020. Together with the coastal region, this is where 80 per cent Syria’s population lived before the conflict, and this is also where most displacement and building damages has been concentrated during the conflict. There is also variance in conflict-impact, including between neighbourhoods, cities, and surrounding rural areas

along these axes. These axes can thus be understood as ‘recovery corridors’ with potentially high return to certain areas.

The main cities in the recovery corridor have experienced different rates of displacement and arrivals of IDPs and returnees. In Aleppo, limited return has taken place. An estimated 216,000 persons, largely IDPs, had returned by 2019, constituting around 7 per cent of the city’s original population. Return is particularly low in eastern parts of the city that suffered large-scale damage, where reconstruction is slow, and security concerns are still high. In Homs, further elaborated below, return has also been limited but increasing since 2018. In Damascus, limited and reducing return is observed. It is estimated that just under 20,000 returnees arrived between 2018 and 2020, and only 162 in the first quarter of 2021.<sup>53</sup> This includes returnees to neighbourhoods that were on the frontlines but in GoS-held areas, where gradual rehabilitation of services by the GoS is carried out. It also includes returnees to neighbourhoods with extensive damage and where no notable rehabilitation efforts have taken place. IDPs in the northern neighbourhoods of Dar’a started to return to their homes in the south of the city by 2019, however overall return remains limited.

### Homs recovery region

The Homs Recovery Region links the Homs Recovery Corridor, the Homs Northern Triangle and Homs City. These connections are economically significant and will be critical to stabilise the region, promote

return prospective for Syrian refugees. This was based on UN surveys and remote sensing in Syria and official data, vulnerability surveys and WB verification surveys in host countries.

51 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, “Syrian Arab Republic: Returnee Overview Annual Report January-December.”

52 Joint Agency NGO Report, “Into the Unknown: Listening to Syria’s Displaced in the Search for Durable Solutions,” no. June (2020).

53 iMMAP, “Central Syria Return and Reintegration Area Profiles: Damascus, Homs, Harasta, and Douma,” 2021.

resilience and support integration and reintegration.

### Homs City

Homs has suffered large-scale damage and displacement from the conflict, particularly in certain areas of the city. By 2019, the population was reduced by between 45 and 63 per cent, with an estimated population of just under 500,000 persons.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, Hom s also received IDPs, and in April 2021 close to 190,000 of the city's estimated 630,000 inhabitants were IDPs, mostly coming from other parts of Hom s city and surrounding rural areas. Return to Hom s remains limited, with around 36,000 returning to Hom s over the 2018-2021 period. In 2018, around 500 displaced persons returned to Hom s per month, and in 2019-2020 this doubled to around 1,000 per month, before returning to 2018-levels by 2021.

### Homs Recovery Corridor

South of Hom s City, a recovery corridor connects Al-Qusayr, Hasyaa, Sadad, Mahin, Qaryatein (Figure 4). This corridor is an important transit axis, linking the north-south roads and railways. The corridor is only 15km east of the Lebanese border and the Aarsal region in Lebanon. In the Syrian desert southwest of the corridor is the Rukban camp. With its industries and natural resources, this axis is important economically; this is where the country's red and white sand is produced, and where salt mines, phosphate plants and the industrial city Hasyaa is located. Over the course of the conflict, large-scale displacement has taken place, with more than half

of the pre-crisis population having left the five cities. Most have relocated to Hom s City, Damascus, Rural Damascus, Idleb, Aleppo, Al Nasara Valley, Rukban Camp, Lebanon, Turkey, or Jordan. With changes in territorial control from 2018, significant return rates have been reported to Hom s City, Al-Qusayr and Qaryatein.

### The Northern Hom s Triangle

The Northern Hom s Triangle, also known as rural Hom s (see Figure 5), has been severely impacted by the conflict, particularly during the five-year siege. Prior to the conflict, the population was religious and ethnic diverse and governed by traditional leaders. Most of the roughly 550,000 inhabitants made a living from farming and, from the 1990s increasingly also from the transportation and construction sectors. During the conflict, the population was reduced to some 250,000 people. Of those who left, 150,000 persons arrived in Lebanon.

Return to the area depends on several factors. The region is still not stable, safeguards are not in place, and there is a risk of escalation, tightening security control and further population flight. Barriers to return include the destruction of properties, occupation of agricultural properties (mainly in the northern parts of the triangle), distorted water access rights, degradation of agrarian land due to neglect, lack of capacity and financial means, limited access to electricity with reduced industrial activities and production, and inappropriate measures to address market restrictions. Agriculture remains critical to restore and strengthen value-chains and livelihoods in the Northern Hom s Triangle.

54 ESCWA, "Localised Needs Assessment," 2021.

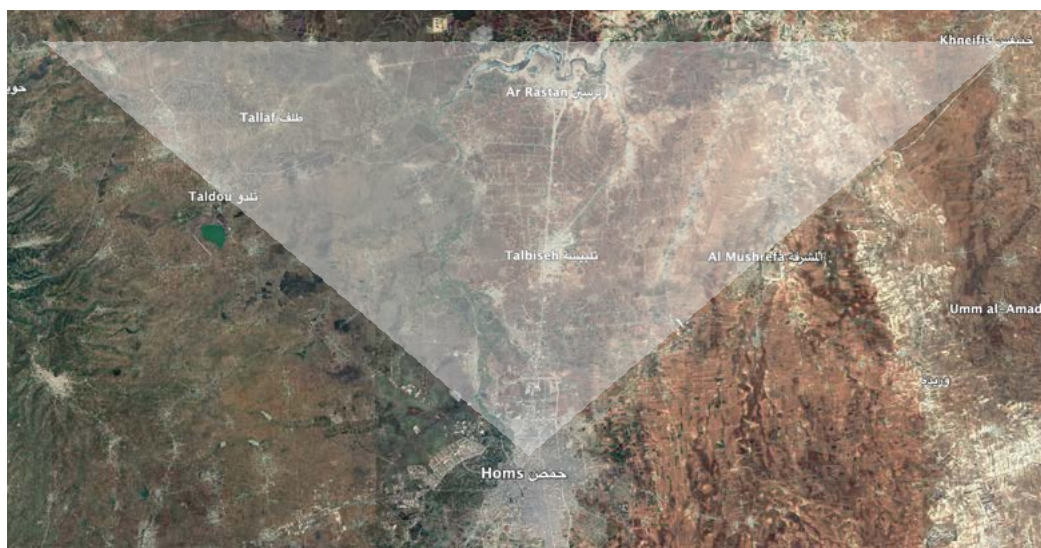


Figure 5 Northern Hom s Triangle. Source: UN-Habitat. Image Google © Maxar Technologies, 22 NES / Airbus

## The URF in a displacement context

To support programming and implementation in cities with displacement and potential return, a cross-sectorial approach that considers both the emergency perspective typical of humanitarian response and the development-perspective of the city,<sup>55</sup> is needed. This chapter looks at key elements that must be accounted for in the implementation of the URF and other ongoing area-based return efforts. The discussion focuses on root causes and structural challenges in Syrian cities, how these have been exacerbated or shifted by the conflict, and what this means for IDPs, returnees, and host communities. It considers both Enabling and Built components of cities, with challenges linked to housing, land and property (HLP) rights; safety and security risk; weakening of common identities and hope for the future; limited and unequal economic opportunities; poor or no access to basic services and infrastructure; environmental and cultural heritage threats; inadequate governance and resources; and lack of accountability. For further reading on how the URF can help support efforts to address these issues, see relevant thematic papers in the Urban Recovery Framework policy paper series.<sup>56</sup> The policy recommendations in this paper respond to identified challenges, gaps in response, and areas of potential impact discussed in this chapter, and are intended as a contribution to ongoing discussions on area-based, displacement-sensitive recovery.

### Housing, land and property rights and restitution

Risks related to housing, land and property (HLP) rights in Syria are high and land grievances are accumulating. This affects repatriation and reintegration prospects for displaced persons and

has significant implications for how the society will transform and evolve in a post-conflict setting. Two trends are driving a changing HLP situation in Syrian cities. Firstly, displacement is contributing to shifting socio-spatial conditions and weakened HLP rights. Secondly, new land legislations are creating an enabling environment for land readjustment and redevelopment, particularly in informal areas. Pre-existing structural and institutional conditions have contributed to this, including a housing shortage and population pressure in Syrian cities; weak land administration and informality with a lack of tenure documentation and complex and unclear ownership and competing use rights; and structurally unsound buildings. The conflict has exacerbated and added to these HLP issues. These include large-scale damage and destruction to buildings, widespread loss of civil and HLP documents, unregistered civil events and missing people, presence of explosive remnants of war (ERWs), squatting and looting of land and property, and illegal, undocumented, malicious property transactions or transactions made under duress, and lack of a due process, safeguarding and engagement of displaced communities in land readjustment and redevelopment processes.

### Informal expansion of Syrian cities

In the 1990s, an increasing mismatch between the demand for affordable housing and supply of housing catering to the middle class, was observed. This was driven by private sector and particularly large businesses, who to a large extent replaced the State's ambition to implement an affordable housing model. As cities grew, housing through the formal market thus became increasingly unattainable for most while informal areas, often at the outskirts of cities, expanded rapidly to accommodate an increasingly urban population. The development of such informal areas was in part made possible through political and

<sup>55</sup> UNHCR and UN-Habitat, "Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas."

<sup>56</sup> The Urban Recovery Framework thematic papers, published in 2021 and 2022, look at urban heritage, environment, governance, infrastructure, housing and monitoring.

clientelist deals and expropriation of land.<sup>57</sup> Many informal areas had access to basic services and infrastructure,<sup>58</sup> but the legal recognition of tenure or construction status were usually lacking. The process to regularise informal developments were slow and ineffective, and required adjustments of larger masterplans. In the years prior to the conflict, there was a drive to formalise informal tenure documents in cities such as Homs and Damascus. However, the lack of individuals who could take on the political responsibility to push such initiatives forward made progress slow.

Over the conflict period, many displaced persons have sought shelter in neighbourhoods with a relatively low social status and a high degree of informality. In such neighbourhoods, housing conditions are largely inadequate and characterised by high degree of damage and overcrowding with a lack of space and privacy. While homeowners in informal areas have a greater risk of their property being squatted, many homes in more affluent neighbourhoods, characterised by a higher degree of property rights and formal planning, remain vacant. The owners of such houses might either plan to return or sell in a post-conflict scenario.

An estimated 600,000 dwellings, mostly informal, have been built during the conflict. Most of the expansion has been vertical, adding to existing housing units rather than territorial expansion through construction of new buildings. In addition to self-construction, such as adding floors to existing buildings, housing strategies for IDPs and returnees living in informal areas involve renting (60% of IDPs), family provision and moving in with extended family (26 per cent of IDPs are hosted for free) and squatting of abandoned homes.<sup>59</sup> In 2021, 84 per cent of IDPs lived in finished apartments or homes.<sup>60</sup>

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57 Urban Recovery Framework, "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Pursuing Environmental Sustainability through Urban Recovery in Syria."

58 According to the national survey on informal housing by the Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) in 2008, 99 per cent of informal housing in Syria had access to electrical power, 97 per cent to public drinking water networks, 94 per cent to public sewage networks. It further showed similar demographic, social and economic conditions across formal and informal housing residents, indicating that poverty was not a primary factor of informality.

59 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "IDP Report Series 2020: Shelter Conditions."

60 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

## Tenure system and property records

The complex tenure rights system in Syria builds on multiple transitions over the last century from the French mandate (1920's), post-independence (1949), economic prosperity after the 1973 war (1970's) and market liberalisation (2000s). This has led to contradicting and unresolved legal reforms and mandates across urban planning, land management, financing, taxation and so forth that in turn has manifested in variations between municipal and cadastral boundaries, a range of ownership mechanisms, and codification and discipline based on old tenure patterns of land that have been embedded in informal city expansions.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, asymmetrical applications of new laws across the country, where mandated institutions often lack the resources to apply legal changes, has led to varying de-facto and de-jure mechanism to assert tenure rights in different urban areas. In the conflict-period, shifting power structures, with parts of the country falling outside government control before largely being regained by GoS, increased fragmentation of land administration systems and practices. Tenure rights thus cover a spectrum of formality that range from formal/secure (free hold/ownership through the General Directorate of Cadastral Affairs [GDCA] registry or temporary registry through municipalities or other specialised registry such as housing cooperatives or military housing entities) to informal/very insecure (squatting). Between one third and half of properties in Syria have not been registered in formal registers.

In the decades preceding the conflict, national policies, land management processes and financial instruments encouraged homeownership. In 2010, homeownership was estimated to make up 86 per cent of the housing stock. This is reflected in the high rate of homeownership among IDPs, where 83 per cent of IDP households reports to own a property in the place of origin. The highest share of homeowners among IDPs come from Northeast Syria where 91 per cent report to own property. However, close to one in four IDPs who possess a form of formal homeownership report that their property has been damaged or destroyed, where the highest share of damaged or destroyed shelter owned by IDPs are found in Central and South Syria.<sup>62</sup>

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61 UN-Habitat, "Housing Sector Recovery Framework", n.dd.

62 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "IDP Report Series 2020: Shelter Conditions." 2020.

The lack of recognised guarantees of informal land tenure is a key barrier for many displaced Syrians to claim their properties and to retain the option to return to their homes. As informal areas expanded in the pre-conflict period, many homeowners did not obtain formal tenure documents but relied on informal mechanisms to verify their tenure rights. In cases where there are overlapping ownerships of a property, approvals and documentation must often be secured from the owners, who may have died or gone missing during the conflict. Social means of tenure protection through local networks have acted as an important vehicle within this varied landscape of formal and informal rights. However, local networks have also been disrupted or changed as people have been displaced and neighbourhoods changed, and homeowners have thereby lost an important informal mechanism to prove land and property rights.

For homeowners who do possess a form of ownership documentation, including a reported 71 per cent of IDP homeowners,<sup>63</sup> securing HLP rights still represent a challenge. During the conflict there has been widespread damage, destruction, and loss of cadastral records. Displaced persons are at even greater risk of either being unable to secure or to have lost their civil and cadastral records. In Aleppo for example, at least 70 per cent of IDPs are missing at least one form of documentation.<sup>64</sup> The damage to the Directorate of Cadastral Affairs (DCA) office in Aleppo city and the loss of 33,000 HLP records have contributed to this situation.

There are also reports of falsification of documents and unlawful sale of homes owned by displaced

persons. In Jasim city outside of Dar'a, for example, a local lawyer forged documents and transferred at least 200 properties to third parties without the owners' knowledge or consent.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, sales to third parties during the conflict, including those following fraudulent transactions, have usually not been registered due to the breakdown of government administration. Many land registry offices are lacking resources to process cases they receive. These factors add further challenges for people to protect their HLP rights and are likely to create future disputes around the rightful ownership of properties. For example, returnees to Damascus, particularly to neighbourhoods that have suffered a high degree of damage and where limited rehabilitation efforts have taken place, report challenges in reclaiming their homes, where lack of formal homeownership and the property having been taken over by other people in the meantime, are among the contributing factors.<sup>66</sup>

Women and girls face additional HLP challenges. Inheritance is one of the main ways for Syrian women to exercise independent HLP rights, but women rarely have title deeds or other property documents for properties in their names. According to the Personal Status law, women are entitled to half the share of men, however many families deprive women also of this share. With the conflict, women's HLP rights have been further weakened, where displacement, violence and destruction of property deprive many of the ability to claim ownership of their properties.

63 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme.

64 Urban-S, Urban Baseline Aleppo, 2019.

65 The Syria Justice and Accountability Centre (SJAC), "Return Is a Dream: Options for Post-Conflict Property Restitution in Syria."

66 Unless indicated otherwise, the information is taken from iMMAP, "Central Syria Return and Reintegration Area Profiles: Damascus, Homs, Harasta, and Douma."



Harasta, 2022. @ UN-Habitat

## Box 1 Housing, Land and Property, and urban development laws

Syria has a strong legal tradition with a considerable body of laws and legal frameworks. This provides a basis for regulating return-related issues, including HLP. Over the conflict-period, a considerable number of laws and legislative decrees have been enacted or amended, many of which have been intended to confirm the sovereignty of the state, promote war-specific objectives, or address HLP issues. The rapid change in normative frameworks over the last decade has not been adequately taken up by Syrian institutions, and the application of new laws remains largely provisional. The more than 60 laws regulating property rights that have been introduced since 2011 alone are contributing to central aspects of the law, which impact conditions for IDPs and returnees, not being clear. For example, while the courts have forbidden eviction on an in-absentia basis, the court has also stated that if a property is vacant for more than a year this may be sufficient to terminate lease.<sup>67</sup>

Below is an overview of the main laws regulating HLP rights and urban development in Syria. For a detailed overview of urban laws and legal structure, see for example UN-Habitat's Land Administration in Syria: Analysis and Recommendations, 2021 (unpublished). For an overview of urban governance in Syria, including central laws and regulation, see the URF thematic policy paper "Local Governance and its Role in Local Recovery Planning".

### HLP rights

The Syrian Civil Code of 1949 asserts that if a property is destroyed during lease, the contract is automatically terminated. If the property is partially destroyed or becomes unfit for use, the tenant can seek to either decrease the rent or terminate the contract if the landlord fails to restore the property to its original condition within a reasonable time.

- Law No. 5 of 1982 with update Law No. 9 of 1974, Law No. 23 2015, Law No. 66 of 2012, Law No. 10 of 2018 and Law No. 15 of 2008 establishes the implementation of master and site plans through a rezoning process that includes land division, property valuation, and redistribution procedures. The law allows for the administrative acquisition of lands for free and requires landowners to divide their land within three years of notification of the zoning announcement. It furthermore requires landowners to present proof of ownership documents issued by the Land Registry to apply for land division, documents which many Syrians may have lost over the course of the crisis.
- Law No. 20 of 1983 regulates the expropriation process of built and unbuilt private properties for public interest defined as the construction of roads, public facilities, agrarian and energy projects, defence necessities and low-income housing projects
- Law No. 15 of 2008 facilitates private sector urban development and housing provision, including development of informal settlements, and construction of affordable housing to host the evicted residents of such processes.
- Law No. 33 of 2008 aims at regularising tenure status of informal settlements, particularly settlements characterised by illegal subdivision of legally owned land.
- Law No. 59 of 2008 replaces Law No. 1 of 2003 on building violations, with reinforced harsh penalties as well as opportunities for municipalities to settle violations that predates Law No. 1.
- Legislative Decree No. 66 of 2012 allows for the establishment of two zoned areas within the governorate of Damascus and the Master Plan of the City of Damascus. This decree enabled the Governorate of Damascus to enforce a new urban planning regulation to clear out neighbourhoods of high potential rentability, where existing owners could claim their rights to their property to in turn receive commercial shares. An implication of the decree is that displaced persons were unlikely to claim their tenure right to their properties, and in effect were losing their properties. For those who were successful in claiming their rights, women's inheritance of such commercial shares would become half of men's (in accordance with Shari'a law). Further, compensation to displaced households with shares in accordance with the value of the original tenure, were very low and below housing market value in the area.
- Law No. 23 of 2015 on urban planning replaces Law No. 9 of 1974 and Law 60 of 1979. Key aspects

<sup>67</sup> Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "HLP Rights, Migration and Business Activity in Syria."

of the law include the possibility to revoke older masterplans and their development rights, deregulate mechanisms for valuation assessments, and to base land prices in redevelopment areas on market prices. Unlike the Law 10 of 2018, Law 23 does not permit transfer of property to Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) but makes local authorities responsible for redevelopment projects and individual owners for the development of their properties.

- Legislative Decree 19 of 2015 governs joint stock holding companies between local councils and private companies. The law regulates the establishment of Syrian private joint stock holding companies based on social, economic and organisational considerations, with the aim of managing and investing the properties of administrative units or part of them.
- Law No. 5 of 2016 regulates and incentivises PPPs in urban redevelopment projects. There are few safeguards in place to secure tenure rights when applying such PPPs.
- Law 33 of 2017 aims at reconstituting cadastral documents that were lost or damaged as a result of the conflict. Two reconstitution methods can be used: The administrative method when the evidentiary document at the possession of the competent directorate of cadastral affairs allows the reconstitution process to take place without the need of external sources; otherwise, the judicial method is to be followed where the available documents are supplemented by information provided by the rights claimants.
- Law no. 3 of 2018 regulates the confiscation, removal and sale of debris in areas allocated by Government appointed commissions. The main aim is to register private debris and belongings in the name of their owners before the rubble is removed from people's properties. The law sets out criteria for identifying, removing and selling debris from damaged buildings. Claims for ownership of the debris can be filed by the owners or relatives close to the owners, either by proof or, in cases where this is not possible, by describing the property. Any decision by the Court of Civil Appeal can be objected to within 30 days of making the claims. The law pertains to entire cadastral zones, including both damaged and undamaged buildings, and allows the local authorities to start the process of removing existing buildings even without the presence of owners.<sup>68</sup> This law has been applied by governorates of Rural Damascus, Homs and Aleppo, where private companies have been awarded large contracts to remove rubble from streets.<sup>69</sup>
- Law No. 10 of 2018 supports the creation of Urban Development zones in a Master Plan. The government adopted Law No.10 in April 2018 as an extension of Decree 66. The law aids expedited expropriation procedures that support reconstruction efforts and redesign of informal housing areas. This allows landholders' properties to be converted into exchangeable share as well as the establishment of real-estate development firms. The application of Law 10 has been focused on up-market projects. Initially, a 30-day deadline was established for people to prove ownership over property subject to expropriation but has since been expanded to one year through the amendment Law 42, which also allows Syrians to take their claim through normal courts rather than dedicated judicial committee. Moreover, the legal representation on behalf of absentee claimants has been expanded if the person is not able to be there in person. Once the deadline has passed, homeowners will not be compensated, and property rights will revert to the state or local authorities. Particularly for displaced persons who may face additional challenges in proving ownership due to lost documentation, not being aware of redevelopment projects, or being unable to travel or provide legal representation, Law 10 does not provide adequate security of HLP rights.

### Urban governance

- Law No. 15 of 1971 and Law No. 107 of 2011 guides the governance structure in Syria. Administrative units enjoy a legal personality, as well as economic and administrative independence, higher councils supervise the lower local councils within their jurisdictions. Municipalities and city councils are responsible for providing all services within their administrative boundaries. Decentralization of administrative authorities has changed the municipality's work scope from merely providing services to being responsible for development. With the September 2018 local elections, local political structures operating independently of Damascus have largely disappeared.

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68 A Al Zien, Philippa Lumley, and Alexander Foster, "Legal Obstacles to HLP Rights in Syria," 2019.

69 Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "HLP Rights, Migration and Business Activity in Syria."



## Conflict-impact on housing

The conflict has led to large-scale damage and destruction to the housing stock in Syria.<sup>70</sup> Around 330,000 dwellings are estimated to have been destroyed or severely damaged, and between 600,000 and 1 million moderately or lightly damaged. It is estimated that around 70 per cent of damage to the housing stock has been in informal, peri-urban areas around major cities. The impact varies greatly between cities and between neighbourhoods. Combined with growing poverty levels and arrival of IDPs, pressure on the low-end housing market has further increased in many cities. One study finds that lack of housing to accommodate the population ranges from between 48 per cent in Idlib to 18 per cent in Tartous and 11 per cent in Quneitra.<sup>71</sup> Aleppo city is the most damaged city in Syria, where

as much as 87 per cent of informal areas have been damaged. This has made neighbourhoods in the eastern part of the city inaccessible in periods and with limited return, while in the western part of the city there has not been sufficient capacity to house the population. The estimated housing deficit of 50,000 units in Aleppo in 2019 illustrates the overcrowding and limited capacity to accommodate new arrivals and returnees in the city. In addition to direct damage from the conflict, dilapidation and looting have made other buildings unfit for living and many neighbourhoods remain deserted.

ERW is a major issue in both rural and urban areas. Risks linked to making buildings inhabitable include debris removal, and infrastructure and housing rehabilitation. Moreover, economic activities, such as agricultural production and garbage collection, are limited, as are delivery of aid and rehabilitation of services and infrastructure. New arrivals and returnees are particularly at risk as they may not be aware of contamination in specific areas.

70 For a comprehensive overview of the housing, land and property situation in Syria, see: UN-Habitat, "Housing Sector Recovery Framework," n.d.

71 World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis."

### Box 2 HLP issues in Homs and Harasta

## Homs – reintegration considerations for highly damaged areas of the city

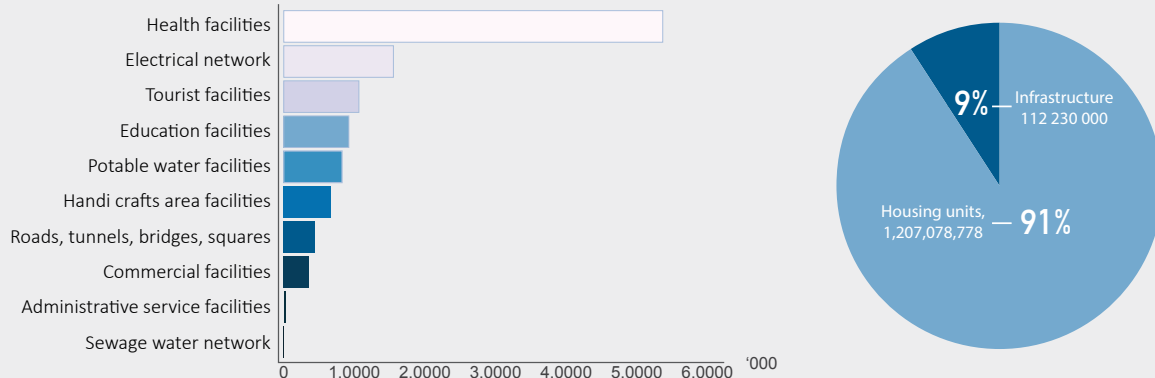
Prior to the conflict, housing development and construction was high in Homs, responding to housing needs and investors buying housing in the city. Housing has suffered significant damage over the conflict-period. According to the Homs Baseline from 2020,<sup>72</sup> an estimated 57 per cent of the housing stock was damaged and inhabited. This encompassed a large share of multistorey buildings. The damage has been more intense in informal areas (69 per cent), affecting nearly three in four inhabitants in the city. Reconstruction of housing has been slow and with large variations between neighbourhoods.

A damage costing across sectors in Homs City carried out in the beginning of the year 2022,<sup>73</sup> shows that the cost of reconstruction of housing to constitute more than 91 per cent of the total cost of more than USD 1.3 billion (Figure 6). The study also looks at the loss of revenue due to the conflict, in a city that was expanding in all sectors at a rate of more than two per cent annually.

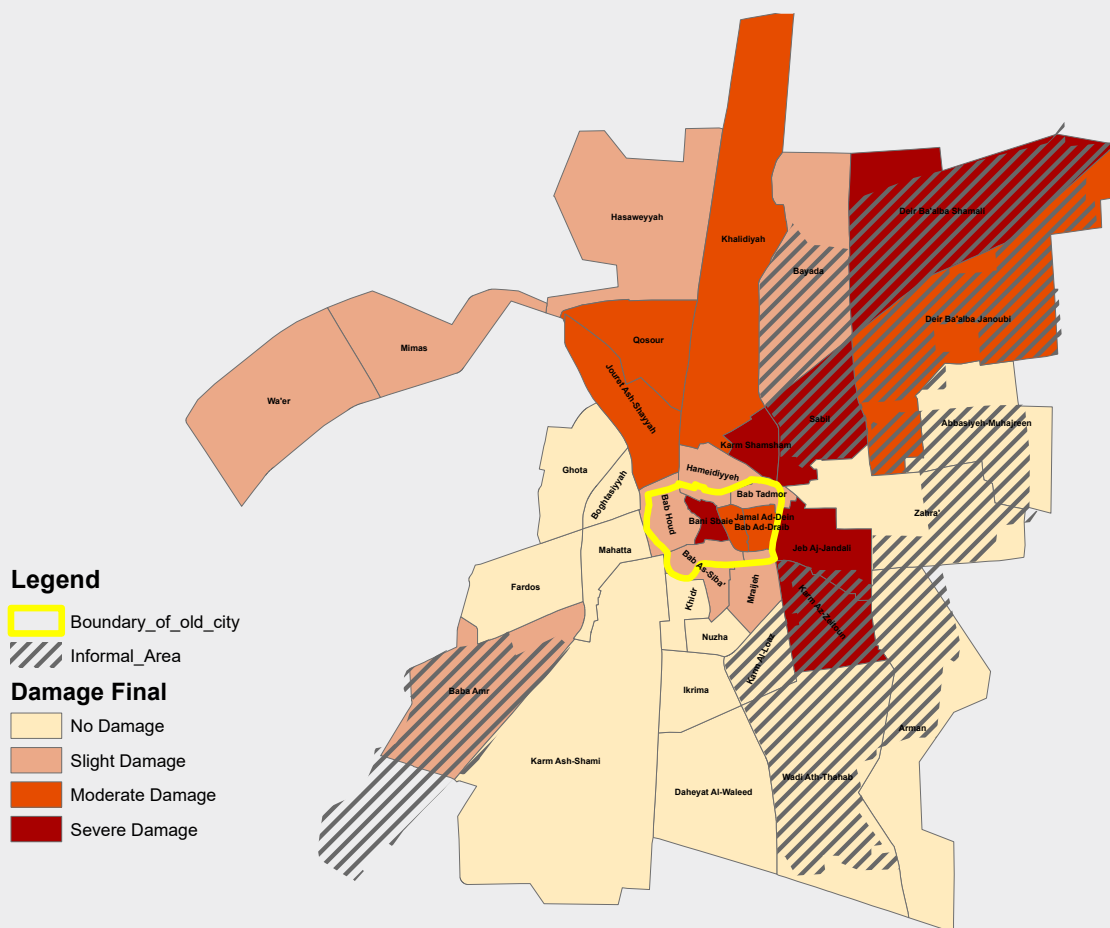
Figure 7 shows the damage to infrastructure networks and service facilities in Homs, where the city centre including the old city, as well as the north and eastern parts of the city has been the most damage affected. The costs of damages were estimated according to a number of sub-categories including: road, sewerages, drinking water, electricity and communication, health education, commercial, Tourism, administrative services, of which health facilities (USD 53.6 million will require more than two times more than the second highest reconstruction costs for electrical network (USD 15.5 million) (Figure 6).

72 Urban-S, "Homs Urban Baseline - March 2020," 2020.

73 Urban Recovery Framework, "Homs Response Plan & Digital Tools Homs City - Urban Damage Costing," 2022.



**Figure 6** Left: Estimated costs of damage to infrastructure networks and service facilities in the city of Homs. Right: Costing of reconstruction across sectors for Homs city is estimated to more than USD1.3 billion, of which more than 90 per cent is related to housing. Source: Urban Recovery Framework, 2022.



**Figure 7** Damages across Homs neighbourhoods. Source: Homs Urban Profile, UN-Habitat, 2022

HLP issues to address in Homs include the development of plans for modern, mix-use projects that would be carried out through land appropriation with eviction of residents. Moreover, a high share of informal housing and complicated, overlapping jurisdictions over land ownership, and presence of ERW in certain neighbourhoods, including mines, cluster ammunition and explosive traps constitute significant HLP risks.

The previous city council initiated new urban plans for all areas of Homs affected by the war, based on the adaptation of Law No.10 of 2018 (see Box 1 Housing, Land and Property, and urban development laws). As part of this initiative, a new detailed urban plan for the Baba Omar neighbourhood was developed. This was an area that had been used for military operations during the conflict, and while the proposal was controversial, the interest in redevelopment was high. The pretext for redevelopment of the Baba Omar neighbourhood was the severity of housing damage. However, the current city council stopped the plans based on what they deemed moderate levels of damage and the possibility to restore the existing buildings. A few studies have sought to analyse the reality of tenure with Homs city, specifically focusing on the repercussions of the conflict on tenure security, given that the city witnessed a tangible return of IDPs and refugees to their homes in affected neighbourhoods. This was particularly important given that most of the eastern neighbourhoods of the city, in addition to Bab-Omar, are informal housing areas (referred to as 'Common Tenure') covering 1800 hectares, or 46 per cent of the total area of the city. The rest of city is made up of other tenure typologies (Permanent Record, Temporary Record, General Establishment for Housing, Military Housing Establishment), which are considered more secure, even in the case of their loss or damage. Law 33 of 2017 creates an opportunity to replace lost or damaged real estate documents; once implementing provisions are agreed, this should empower returnees whose documentation has been lost or damaged.

In 2008, Homs city council sought to address the problem of Common Tenure based on the provisions of Law 26 of 2000. This Law was considered as a planning implementation law for central cities of the Governorates, according to the Article 7 (dealing with areas of collective irregularities, or "informal housing"), following the provisions and procedures of Law 9 of 1974, which focuses on the redistribution of properties according to approved detailed Master Plans (detailed urban studies). Consequently, the Homs Master Plan updated in 2008, and 22 related detailed urban studies, recognised the informal areas within the urban fabric (three-stories residential buildings). This was a very important step in the process of resolving the problem of Common Tenure for the residents in informal areas. Related local committees (primary assessment, dispute resolution and arbitration evaluation committees) completed their tasks and the process took over two years to complete.

Despite these achievements, direct damage to the city council as a result of the conflict led to the loss of the documents and committee reports. Furthermore, damage to residential buildings in informal areas has been extensive and has increased the risk of tenure insecurity, thereby impacting on potential returns of IDPs and refugees.

## **Harasta and Qaboun – community involvement to counter top-down redevelopment plans**

Harasta is located adjacent to Damascus, on the M5 highway to Homs. Like other cities in Eastern Ghouta, Harasta has been characterised by informal and unregulated growth and poor service delivery. To accommodate more people, the city expanded vertically as well as onto agricultural lands, disregarding existing urban plans and regulations. Around 45 per cent of buildings were partially damaged and 14 per cent destroyed during the conflict. Initial discussions concerning the redevelopment of Harasta were met with strong community resistance. Inhabitants carried out an alternative damage assessment with support of a volunteer engineering group and presented an alternative plan focused on limiting construction work and promoting recovery. Another pressing HLP concern related to the existence of a tunnel network (constructed

while Harasta was under opposition control underneath the city), which threatens building safety and harms sewage and water networks. All of the above issues were addressed in city's Recovery Plan, which has subsequently led to the implementation of integrated housing and service functionality projects, resulting in new returns of IDPs from the city, who mostly reside in Damascus and Rural Damascus Governorate.

In September 2021, Decree no. 237 established a new urban development zone in Qaboun industrial area (in Damascus). This followed an earlier assessment by the Ministry of Public Works and Housing and Rural Damascus Governorate to assess the level of damage. The assessment found that the city was highly damaged and in need of full reconstruction. In addition, there are now ongoing discussions concerning the possible adoption of a decree for the redevelopment of primarily informal areas of Harasta residential district, using Law 23. If carried out, this would entail demolishing and re-zoning informal housing.

## Housing prices

In most cities, housing prices are very low, and many properties have been sold at extremely reduced rates. Homeowners who can wait with selling their properties in the current market, therefore often do. Others sell at a very low price out of need, or due to the high risk of losing the property altogether. Refugees have been reported to sell their properties to finance their illegal crossings to Europe (costing approximately 2,500-5,000 USD), Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon (costing about 350 USD).<sup>74</sup> Speculators in this highly uncertain housing market includes well-off Syrians who have started to buy land in anticipation of land value increase in the longer-term, as well as foreigners. In Homs, one key informant said that Lebanese and Iranians have started buying properties from people who can no longer afford their housing or repairs of damage.<sup>75</sup>

In certain cities, however, housing pressure combined with predatory credit practices have led to a surge in housing and rental price levels.<sup>76</sup> In Jaramana for example, large-scale influx of IDPs during the conflict contributed to a six-fold increase in value of some properties. This has forced people to look for alternative housing solutions, often in overcrowded informal housing such as partly finished buildings or additional stories of existing buildings.

74 UN-Habitat, "Housing Sector Recovery Framework," 2021.

75 "Local Needs Assessment Homs", 2022.

76 Urban-S, "Jaramana City Profile."

## Informal upgrading and urban renewal

In Syria, both urban upgrading and urban renewal have been used to regularise informal areas.<sup>77</sup> Urban upgrading involves improvement of existing informal structures and places combined with legalisation to formalise land tenure. Urban renewal, on the other hand, refers to plans and activities to upgrade neighbourhoods and suburbs that are in a state of distress or decay. This may include clearance through demolition and rebuilding based on structures being either deteriorating, obsolete, or unsatisfactory.

In the years leading up to and during the early conflict-period, upgrading was seen as the preferred option. Over the conflict-period, the legal framework has leaned towards urban renewal to regularise informal areas, rebuild conflict-affected neighbourhoods, and increase the value of the land. This process is expected to be carried out through land readjustment,<sup>78</sup> where municipalities can pool individual properties into a common property, redevelop the property, and redistributing parcels to rightsholders. The redistribution of land parcels is contingent upon the value of the prior property and/or rights at the time the area is designated

77 UN-Habitat, "HLP Rights and Security of Tenure in Informal Settlements," 2021.

78 Land readjustment is a land acquisition tool according to which private landholders give up part of their properties in exchange of on a better development of their lands in terms of infrastructure and public services and most important their lands, smaller though, become ready to host multi-story buildings instead of the poor single-story houses. This takes place through a process of land pooling, re-planning, infrastructure and public space servicing, and land reallocation. See UN-Habitat, "Housing Sector Recovery Framework," 2021 for more.

for redevelopment. Those with legally registered or recognised rights are entitled to compensation through shares in the designated zone. However, government administrations have insufficient funds to compensate all HLP rightsholders in such processes, which will likely render rightsholders without due compensation for long periods of time and/or compensated at minimal rates below market value. Usually, compensation is much lower than the price of a land parcel in the development zone. This means that compensated rightsholders may be forced to sell their shares through public auctions and relocate to more affordable areas. Occupants are entitled to a 2-year rental compensation, and squatters only to the debris of their construction. Such processes represent a high risk to tenure rights both for current residents and displaced persons, and it is therefore not surprising that expropriation of properties is a main HLP concern among IDPs and refugees.<sup>79</sup> Municipalities can also apply a public-private partnership (PPP) model, whereby it expropriates the land and transfer it to private real estate development companies, who in turn develop the land as profitable public purpose projects.<sup>80</sup> Combined with sanctions on companies and individuals and a challenging business environment, this has concentrated real estate development by private sector to an economic elite.

Public safety regulations are used to decide if buildings pose a threat to public health, and if such conditions are in violation of the building code and the building therefore must be demolished.<sup>81</sup> Even formal housing constructed with building permits may be declared to violate the code if there is damage to the building. Several entities have jurisdiction over such decisions. Owners who hope to evacuate long-term tenants or co-owners and redevelop their property have been seen to encourage these processes. There have been reports of cases where the severity of damage to properties has been inflated to legitimize land readjustment procedures. In the current context, with collective damage and destruction of housing across neighbourhoods or areas of cities, this does not constitute a reliable approach for damage assessment or decisions on whether residents can return to their homes.

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79 World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis."

80 See Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "HLP Rights, Migration and Business Activity in Syria." for more on how private companies have engaged in activities contributing, directly and indirectly, to displacement and HLP rights violations.

81 UN-Habitat, "Housing Sector Recovery Framework," 2021.

Moreover, debris removal is often carried out rapidly and prior to damage assessment, even though debris is important to detect level of damage to original fabric. In informal areas where cadastral records are limited, outdated or non-existent, this poses a risk of removing the evidence of demarcation between plots or subdivisions of properties.

In several cities, informal, highly damaged areas have been subject to implementation of multiple urban redevelopment and rezoning plans. In some places, this has been made possible by demolition of damaged buildings based on damage assessment. In Aleppo for example, the informal neighbourhoods of Tal Al-Zarazir and Haydaryya have been categorized as reconstruction areas under Law 15/2008. However, there are also several examples where urban renewal projects have been challenged and, in some cases, abandoned. This include the Yarmouk camp (resident have recovered their properties) and the industrial part of Qaboun neighbourhood in Damascus (local business owners are challenging plans), and Baba Amer neighbourhood in Homs (original plans cancelled).<sup>82</sup>

A key lesson from neighbouring Lebanon is the economic and social repercussions of large-scale reconstruction of valuable inner-city land without proper safeguards in the aftermath of conflict. In Beirut, following the redevelopment after the civil war, the result has been a massive mismatch between supply of high-end housing and the acute need for affordable housing.<sup>83</sup> This includes housing needs for refugees, which constitute an estimated 25 per cent of the city's population. The redevelopment and reconstruction have pushed people out of the city or into overcrowded, disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the central areas of Beirut. Further, the reliance on property development as non-productive assets to grow the economy has been a primary driver of extreme inequalities and the country's current financial and economic crisis.

## Rehabilitation, reconstruction and expansion of housing

The legal process to obtain permits for modification, rehabilitation, reinforcement or supplementary parts of a building draws on the legacy of the rapid

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82 UN-Habitat, "HLP Rights and Security of Tenure in Informal Settlements", 2022.

83 UN-Habitat, "Beirut City Profile," 2021.

expansion of informal housing and efforts to control such informal developments. Building permits, provided by municipalities, have been a tool to control building violations for new buildings and additions to buildings in both formal and informal areas. Despite the introduction of successive new laws and occasional re-assertion of public authority to enforce such building regulations, building violations have become a de-facto reality in Syria, where illegal building activities continue in formal and informal areas.<sup>84</sup> The recognition of such illegal additions to buildings varies between cities. In Aleppo, more than 30 per cent of housing units' space have, on average, been built in violation of regulations. Rather than applying for permit fees to build, many have preferred a more effective process of paying fines from violation of permit conditions. Such violation fees, which have often been collected prior to building, has become an important source of income for the municipalities, and a means of corruption.

Shelter repairs, reconstruction and expansion is a critical need for Syrians across displaced, host communities and returnees. Among IDPs, an estimated 3.4 million live in inadequate shelter with some form of damage. Among returnee households, of whom most return to a property they own, 20 per cent report some damage to their housing, while nine per cent report significant damage.<sup>85</sup> If rehabilitation of damaged housing is undertaken without a permit or in violation of permit conditions, the building is subject to demolition and violators may be sued. To acquire permits, proof of ownership and security clearance is needed. Security clearance further require vetting by intelligence services. Costs related to shelter repairs is contributing to increased household debt among households, including returnee households. Under Law 21 of 2015, updated by Law 39 of 2017, exemptions from fees to obtain building permits pertains to those whose property was partially damaged "by terrorist acts" during the conflict. However, the law was only in effect for one year from issuance and has thus expired.

## Policy implications

Land restitution and securing HLP rights for people in Syrian cities depends on finding mechanisms to address complex and interconnected issues for which there is no single solution. As part of this, current as well as former, now displaced residents, must be engaged

in legal and planning processes to. Longer-term risks linked to large-scale redevelopment processes of valuable inner-city land must be addressed as part of such efforts. An example of this practice has been applied by UN-Habitat and partners under the URF, to successfully advocate for a range of participatory mechanism in recovery planning at all stages: (i) joint damage assessment with representatives of the local community; (ii) proposing solutions and setting priorities at neighborhood level; (iii) following up on the implementation of priorities identified in recovery plans, including representatives of the returnees, or potential returnees, to these neighbourhoods. URF localised needs assessments help capture the voices of the displaced, as a contributor to the recovery planning process.

Specifically, clarifications of rights must take place before land readjustment and redevelopment projects are initiated. Due diligence and rights-based mechanisms should be applied for a careful analysis of HLP risk factors;<sup>86</sup> consideration of improved or alternative instruments for dispute resolutions, replacement of lost or damaged HLP documents, access to cadastral records, and agreement on principles for such processes including participatory damage assessments to provide evidence of damage, and requirements for documentation of tenure.

Under the Technical Working Group on HLP, a comprehensive body of analysis and guidance on a wide spectrum of HLP issues has been developed<sup>87</sup>. These products have provided a clearer understanding of the legislative and institutional context to optimize protection of HLP rights and support advocacy, policy and capacity building to address each HLP challenge in a context and risk sensitive manner. Further work is now required to raise HLP awareness, enhance policy advocacy, provide technical advice, increase HLP awareness, support local dispute resolution and social cohesion and enhance HLP service provision, to allow for unhindered access to HLP documentation.

While maintaining a focus on specific and necessary analytical work to further unpack known issues and to clarify emerging issues, the action will include a stronger focus on implementation, with the aim to

84 UN-Habitat, "Housing Sector Recovery Framework," 2021.

85 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

86 UN-Habitat has developed a risk analysis matrix which includes the following 13 risk categories, with a number of sub-categories for each: Politics of exclusion; damage to property; housing shortage/population pressure; issues related to natural resources; capture of state instruments; competition over use rights; nation state fragmentation; poverty and lack of access to livelihoods; occupation of land and property; political competition between power blocks and plural legal systems; weak land administration; demographic change; and safety and security barriers for return.

87 A selection of HLP analytical papers and guidance notes can be found at [Syria – GLTN's Arab Land Initiative](#).

increase the ability of those affected, including host communities, internally displaced people, refugees and returnees, to assert their HLP rights through the provision of support to affected communities and service providers, whilst also building the capacity of HLP actors in Syria and in the region, to respond and advocate for HLP issues.

The above actions must be undertaken carefully, and in close coordination with, a range of different actors, including local governance bodies, UN, NGOs, universities, private sector interest groups, and displaced communities. Without proper due diligence and safeguard measures, UN or INGO programming may reinforce acts of exclusion and deny vulnerable groups their HLP rights

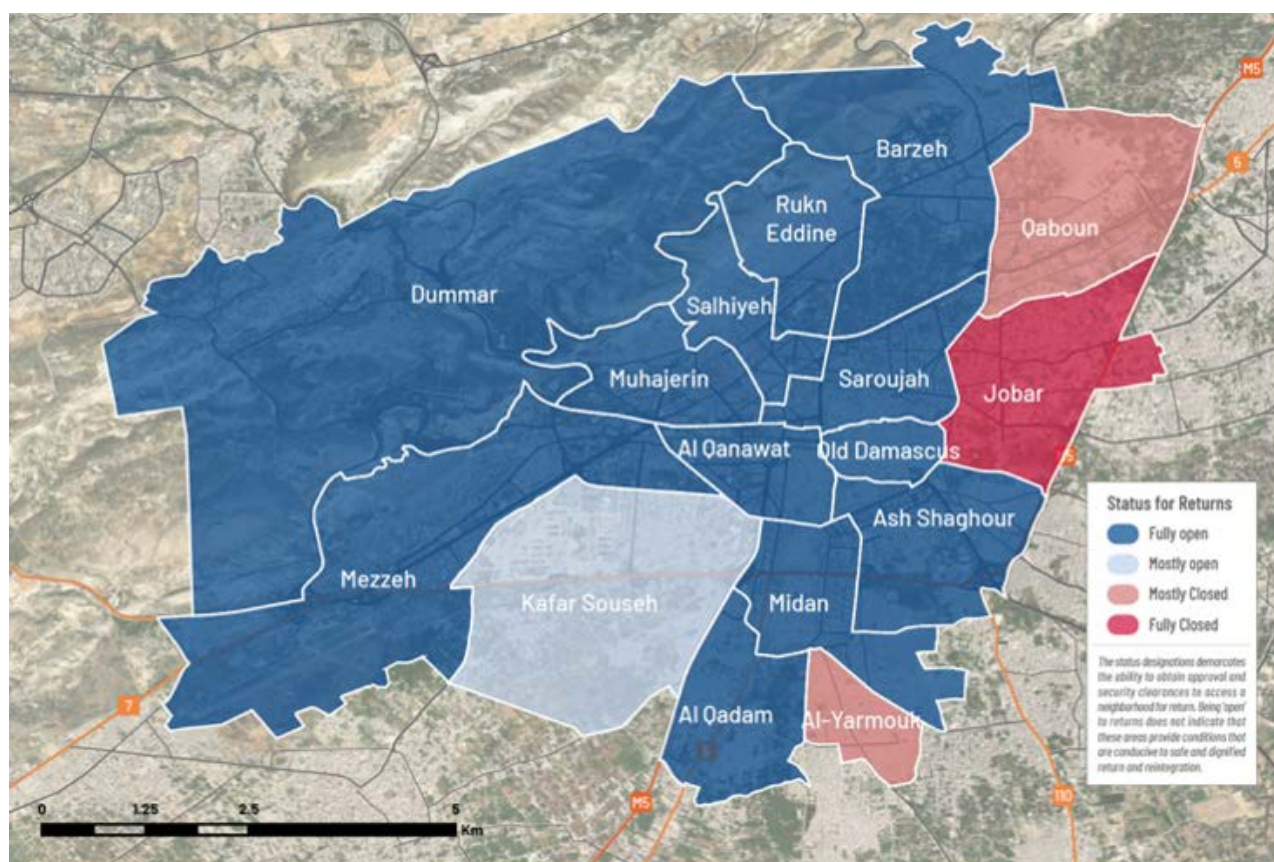
## Conflict dynamics, security, safety, and protection

Changing conflict dynamics and hostilities continue to drive displacement and impact return, with large-scale displacement along frontlines of intensified

conflict and new arrivals and return to relatively safer areas. Those living in urban areas are exposed to other safety and security risks linked to, among others, the presence of armed actors, check points and different enclaves within the city, destroyed infrastructure and buildings, inadequate housing, and the presence of explosive remnants of war (ERW). In certain, often informal, neighbourhoods return is not allowed or highly restricted by GoS due to the damaged and destroyed infrastructure, lack of basic services and other security concerns. In other neighbourhoods, approval and security clearance is required.

## Urban safety and security risks

Urban residents, particularly in informal and/or highly damaged areas, are exposed to urban-specific safety, security, and protection issues. These relate to the presence of armed actors and control of city areas, inadequate living situations characterised by overcrowding and precarious building conditions, damage to infrastructure, unlit streets and public spaces, and lack of social networks and social safety mechanism which increases risks of attacks



**Figure 8** Overview of areas in Damascus city where one can and cannot obtain approval and security clearance to access neighbourhoods for return. Source: iMMAP, 2021.

and harassment etc. One study finds that host and returnee populations in rural areas, while having less access to livelihoods, documentation, and basic services, had a safer environment compared with those living in urban areas.<sup>88</sup>

Many cities are divided into zones controlled by militias or GoS military units, and checkpoints are widespread. Checkpoints are used to search vehicles and individuals, check personal identification and background, and checking the status of the mandatory military service for men. This is a barrier for movement within and through cities and pose a high security risk, particularly for people who lack civil documentation or security clearance, or for various reasons want to remain anonymous. In some neighbourhoods, a security permit must be obtained to pass check points and access the areas, which may entail submitting proof of property ownership.

In Damascus city, for example, certain areas require approval and security clearance to return to specific neighbourhoods (Figure 8). In former opposition-held neighbourhoods in southern and eastern Damascus, return is not allowed or highly restricted due to a number of stated concerns such as damaged and destroyed infrastructure, lack of basic services and other security concerns.<sup>89</sup> As shown in the map, Qaboun area is the area with the highest degree of destruction and suffers from very low functionality for infrastructure and services. Jobar is still closed because of ERW concerns, high risk of buildings collapsing, and tunnels repartition at many levels. Yarmouk presents a specific case for Palestinian return, in addition to the damage impacts on all urban sectors in the area.

Destroyed and frequent contamination of housing and property by explosive remnants of war (ERW), represent a significant safety issue and a main barrier to return. The risks of injury, death, disabilities and potential loss of livelihoods and long-term physiological impact has affected an estimated 10.3 million people. While there is great variance between areas, it is estimated that one in three neighbourhoods is potentially contaminated, with risks being particularly high in Idleb, Homs, Hama, Aleppo, Ar-Raqqa, Deir-ez-Zor, Al-Hasakeh, Damascus, Quneitra and Dar'a.<sup>90</sup> Close to one-quarter of victims

of explosive ordinance incidents in 2019 were children, and in 2020 the United Nations recorded 76 explosions per day. Returning to a contaminated area adds both a physical and psychological risk with significant implications on economic, physical and mental health needs. The presence of ERW is expressed as a safety concern among 31 per cent of returnee households.

## Continued safety and security concerns

Safety and security concerns remain a deterrent for return and barrier for integration and reintegration. Requirements such as security clearance, status settlement, and depending on area of return also additional formal procedure depending, have not guaranteed safety or protection upon return.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, displaced and returnees may be less familiar with the situation locally, and often have less social, economic and political capital to respond to events when they arise. Around one third of returnee households report to fear arbitrary arrest and detention (35 per cent), limited mobility due to physical and logistical constraints (32 per cent) and presence of explosive ordinance (31 per cent).<sup>92</sup> Civil documentation is a critical factor to secure rights, such as accessing basic government services, including education and medical care and for those living outside of Syria, obtaining legal residence and long-term residency rights, and tenure rights.<sup>93</sup> Without civil documentations and/or security clearance, returnees are at risk of being detained, arrested, harassed, or assaulted, while increasing risks associated with being stateless.

Displacement and return pose gender-specific risks. The fear of sexual violence is reported to be a leading cause of displacement among women.<sup>94</sup> This includes the threat of rape, forced marriage to armed group fighters, early and forced marriage, trafficking and sexual enslavement, which all have been reported to have increased in scale and scope during the conflict period. Risks are heightened for those enduring multiple displacements and during return,

88 Samuel Hall, "Syria's Spontaneous Return." Samuel Hall.

89 iMMAP, "Central Syria Return and Reintegration Area Profiles: Damascus, Homs, Harasta, and Douma."

90 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

91 World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis"; UN Human Rights Council, "A/HRC/48/70," August 13, 2021.

92 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

93 NRC, "The Darkest Decade: What Displaced Syrians Face If the World Continues to Fail Them." NRC.

94 World Bank, "The Mobility of Displaced Syrians: An Economic and Social Analysis"; European Asylum Support Office, "Syria: Situation of Women," 2020, <https://doi.org/10.2847/419604>.



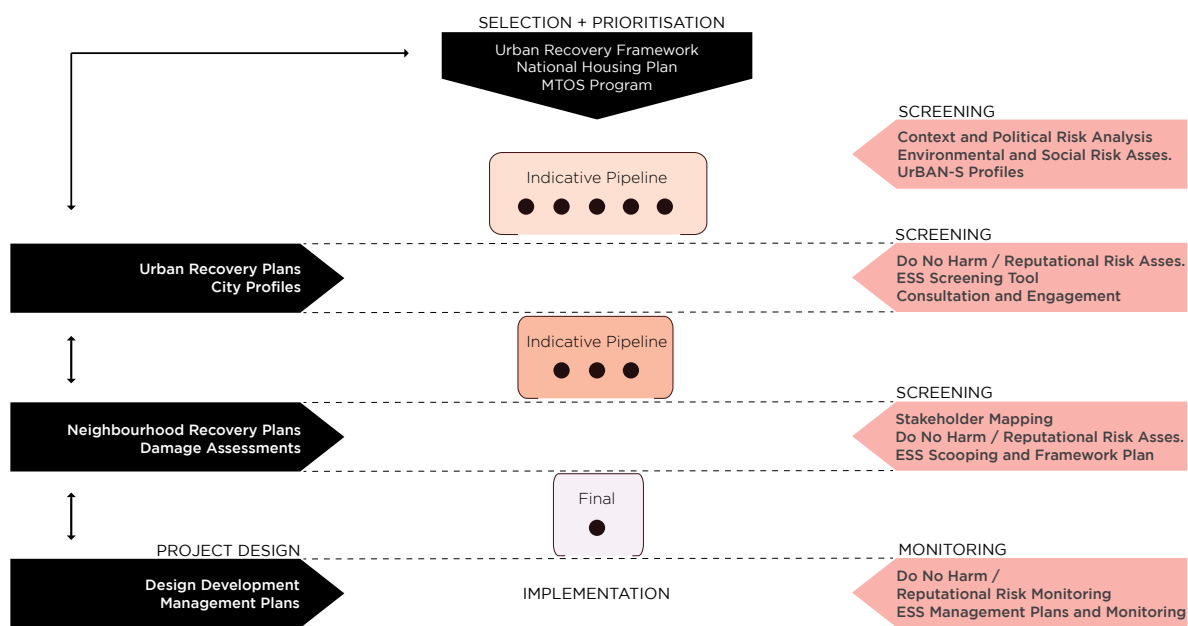


Figure 9 Due diligence measures at every step of the URF process.

linked to, e.g., sexual violence while traveling, early or forced marriage to cover costs of return, and violence connected to property ownership.<sup>95</sup> For women and girls, sexual and gender-based violence may occur more frequent in urban areas where families are living in overcrowded housing where displaced or returnees must share communal and/or private spaces with strangers, or where family members have been separated. While detention is more common for men, women who return from detention are at greater risks being rejected by their communities as well as by families and husbands.<sup>96</sup> For many displaced women and girls living in urban areas, overcrowded buildings, a lack of privacy, and limited movement, are factors that increase risks of violence against women and girls (VAWG).

One in every two children have not lived to experience life outside a conflict-context. Trauma, protection issues and the lack of hope for a better future are even more pronounced for children living in displacement situations and for girls and boys who have returned to their place of origin.

## Policy implications

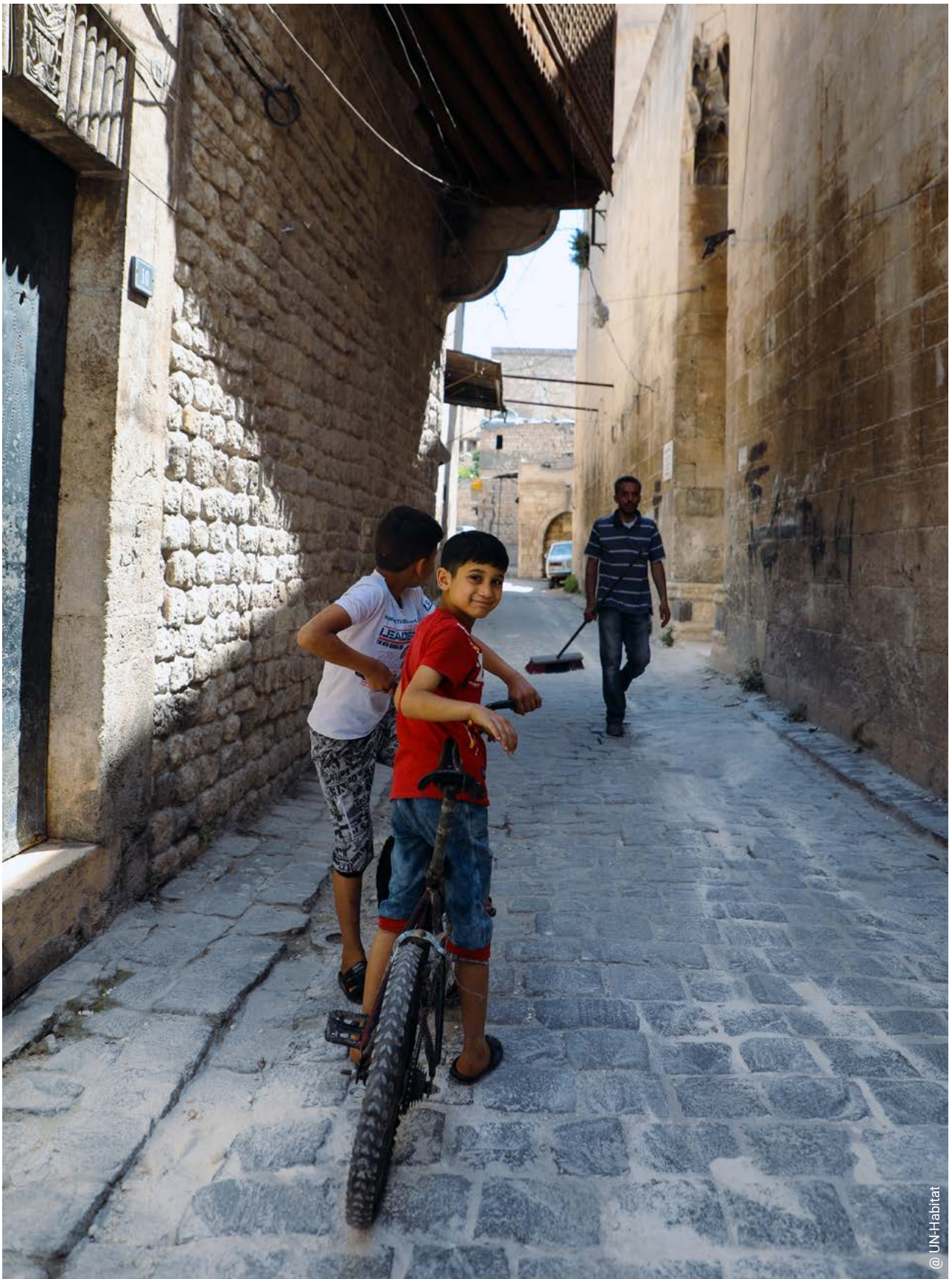
Protection, safety, human rights, and privacy consideration must be integrated into all responses in urban areas, particularly as they relate to displacement and reintegration.<sup>97</sup> Due diligence processes should be adopted at all stages to identify opportunities and risks for affected populations, with protection risk analysis and protection mainstreaming as fundamental dimensions to any activity, such as urban profiling, recovery planning, project package risk screening, individual project risk screening and identification of mitigation measures. Figure 9 shows the due diligence measures used at every step of the Urban Recovery Framework process.

Participatory damage assessments can provide evidence that supports a justification for return when GoS is reluctant to give approval, as well as integrated area-based programming (rubble and ERW removal, housing, services, etc.) to promote adequate safety and security conditions for return.

95 GBV AoR, "Voices from Syria 2022: Assessment Findings of the Humanitarian Needs Overview (Draft)," 2022.

96 GBV AoR.

97 UNHCR and UN-Habitat, "Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas."



© UN-Habitat

## Social cohesion

The conflict and large-scale displacement have contributed to drastically changing the demographic composition in cities, where some neighbourhoods have become more heterogenous and others more homogenous. Many displaced and returnees have settled in informal areas, often with limited access to services, including electricity, and lack of livelihood opportunities. Social cohesion is reported to be low, particularly in areas with a concentration of returnees. While more information is needed for a nuanced understanding, tension between groups including hosts, IDPs and returnees appears to be increasing, fuelled by competition over livelihoods, housing and services. This may in turn impact local identities and sense of belonging for inhabitants as well as return decisions among displaced. Particularly young people express insecurities about whether one will belong in the event of return in the future.

### More divided cities and increased tension as needs rise

Cities in Syria have historically been heterogenous, bringing together residents from diverse religious backgrounds. As people from more homogenous rural areas migrated to cities in recent generations, this added to an already diverse population. Over the conflict, the demographic composition changed drastically, and new social fault lines emerged. In some of the larger cities, concerted efforts have been made to evacuate residents in certain areas out of the city. In Homs, for example, the depopulation and transfer of residents during the siege was largely along sectarian lines. Combined with selected reconstruction in certain neighbourhoods, this altered the social, economic, and ethnic configuration in the city. Large-scale displacement, both as people were forced to flee and through organised movements of civilians, contributed to shifting neighbourhoods' social structures in two directions. Most communities that host a high number of IDPs continued to grow more heterogenous. At the same time, communities that rejected IDPs and those where certain population groups fled, became more homogenous.<sup>98</sup>

Many returnees settle in informal areas, usually

<sup>98</sup> Omar Abdulaziz Hallaj, "Formality, Informality, and the Resilience of the Syrian Political Economy," 2021.

scattered across neighbourhoods. These neighbourhoods are often characterised by limited or no access to services including health, education, electricity, adequate housing, poor infrastructure, as well as lack of livelihood opportunities. Electricity is the main priority service need reported among the population (47 per cent), including returnee households (39 per cent), with only food assistance and livelihood support being higher priorities.<sup>99</sup> This underscores the importance of electricity in recovery as a cross-cutting and enabling factor for, among others, economic activities, safety and access to water, heating, cooking and storage of food. Many displaced and returnees live in rented accommodation or with host families. This is adding further strains to already limited resources in areas with a high number of displaced and/or returnees. Immense needs, high poverty, lack of access to services and jobs has been seen to increase competition, racism, and discrimination among host communities, IDPs and returnees.<sup>100</sup> Tension with communities are five times more likely to be reported by returnee households than other households.<sup>101</sup> Women and girls are disproportionately affected by factors such as lack of resources, privacy, mobility, or access to basic services, and their displacement or returnee status.

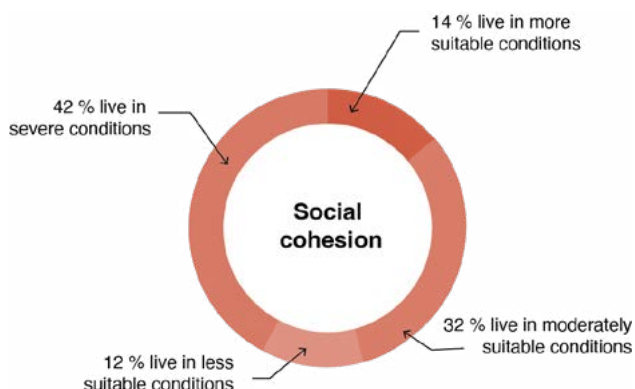
### Sense of belonging and future

Large-scale displacement and returns continue to shape people's individual and collective identity at the local level. Among refugee youth, a sense of belonging has been reported as both a factor for wanting to return "home", and a contributor to insecurities around whether one will belong in the event of return. This is especially common among girls and young women. Identity and sense of belonging is influenced by and contributes to the degree to which host population, IDPs or returnees take part in activities and decision-making in their neighbourhoods. There are reports of beneficiaries from returnee targeted programming that is not comfortable participating in community activities. Without taking part in decision-making, opportunities to influence and impact one's own future remain low. Adding to this is the severe mental toll the conflict and displacement situation has taken on people, particularly young people. Psychological

<sup>99</sup> OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

<sup>100</sup> Samuel Hall, "Syria's Spontaneous Return."

<sup>101</sup> OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.



**Figure 10** Social cohesion among returnees in GoS controlled areas. Source: Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, 2020.

distress is high in returnee households, with around 50 per cent of all adults, 35 per cent of girls and 27 per cent of boys reporting signs such as anxiety, sadness, fatigue or frequent trouble of sleeping.<sup>102</sup>

## Low social cohesion in areas with returnees

The degree of social cohesion reported by IDPs and returnees varies across Syria.<sup>103</sup> In GoS controlled areas, 42 per cent of returnees report to live in 'severe' neighbourhoods, 12 in 'less suitable' neighbourhoods, 32 per cent in 'moderately suitable', and only 14 per cent in 'more suitable' neighbourhoods (Figure 10). The number of IDPs who report living in the 6 'severe' communities is high (18 per cent), yet significantly lower than returnees (31 per cent). In the 176 'less suitable' communities, 29 per cent are IDPs and 9 per cent are returnees. There is a concentration of returnees and IDPs living in severe conditions in Rural Damascus, where particularly the lack of reintegration and inter-group tensions contribute to low social cohesion. Further, low social cohesion is linked with other vulnerabilities. In Rural Damascus for example, areas with low social cohesion generally also report issues related to services and infrastructure (particularly electricity, fuel, health

<sup>102</sup> OCHA.

<sup>103</sup> The indicators used for social cohesion include exposure to retribution/revenge attacks; cooperation between households; presence of reintegration processes; occupation of property without permission; and tensions between population groups. Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "Community of Return Profiling," vol. 6, 2020.

and water and less education), mobility, safety and security (particularly freedom of movement and to a lesser extent perceptions of safety and forced recruitment), and access to livelihoods.

## Policy implications

Data on how economic, social and spatial inequalities in urban areas disproportionately affect certain groups and contribute to increased tensions, competition and discrimination at the local level is needed to support cross-cutting, displacement sensitive recovery.

Monitoring progress of area-based return support and urban recovery plans in locations experiencing relatively higher numbers of return through a set of indicators that can be measured at sub-city levels, and against available urban analysis baselines, can contribute to identify and address such inequalities, and identify suitable response models to address vulnerable household and community needs.

Sustainable integration and reintegration in locations experiencing relatively higher numbers of return, especially for young people, requires a sense of purpose, belonging and positive prospects. As such, programming must respond to young people's expectations and outlook on life, including where to live and how to sustain oneself.

Access to technologies and communication platforms opens for new forms of engagement but may also contribute to reduce social cohesion, exacerbating existing tensions and increase or accentuate inequalities. It is thus important to better understand the role of social media and communication platforms in sharing of information and misinformation, creating or maintaining social networks and support systems across locations as people move, as well as for how recovery efforts are perceived and how they can reach.

## Economy and livelihoods

The conflict has added to and exacerbated pre-conflict challenges, where economic growth did not keep up with rapid urbanisation and the youth bulge. During the conflict period, Syrian cities have suffered from large-scale destruction of their industrial base and loss of productive, human and financial capital. Conflict casualties, migration and displacement have significantly reduced human capital in terms of workers, knowledge, and skills, yet livelihoods

opportunities are few and income insufficient to meet the basic needs of all household members. Despite the transition from active conflict to more stability in parts of the country, the debt burden, economic and financial crisis in Lebanon, Covid-19, and the Caesar Act have accelerated a Syrian economy in freefall. At the same time, economic opportunities are becoming an even more prominent condition for integration and reintegration.

Increased economic activities, particularly in contracting and reconstruction sectors, have been observed, but economic recovery still requires addressing a range of interlinked issues. These include damage and destruction to infrastructure and buildings, energy, transport, and water access, lack of (skilled) labour and affordable housing in proximity to jobs, cost of fuel, weak supply chains and linkages between industrial centres in cities and rural areas with (in many places limited production of) raw material and labour.

## Existing and emerging economic actors

The privatisation of the economy in the 2000s built on and expanded the role of private sector within the existing governance system and centralised value chains. The system, characterised by clientelism, grew out of formal and informal governance structures that tie the government to the local population.<sup>104</sup> Gains from privatising the economy have largely benefitted a small elite of well-positioned businessmen and have allowed the GoS to strengthen its network ties at the community level, particularly in urban areas. Despite reforms to formalise sectors, the informal economy remained important. While the GDP grew over the 2000-2010 period, the labour force participation rate fell from 52 to 45 per cent, and employment to population ratio fell from 46 to 39 per cent.

The progressive privatisation of the economy continued throughout the conflict period.<sup>105</sup> While largely maintaining the centralised governance structure, the engagement of private actors to respond to gaps in state services has led to a more deconcentrated system. Lack of service provision, formal banking mechanisms and free flow of goods

and commodities presented opportunities for already prominent business elites as well as new business, societal and political actors to profit as others left. This included many businessmen and wealthy individuals who fled during the conflict, some taking available capital with them. Others have suffered from heavy economic sanctions and restrictive measures. The vacuum created has allowed other, often mid-level, businesses to rise to prominence. Political supporters in the business community have increased their importance, and rent-seeking activities have become prominent. This included gains within basic necessities such as fuel, electricity, water, internet, as well as within the real estate and construction sectors.

Large-scale displacement and a rapidly changing demographic composition in Syrian cities has affected the governance situation at the local level. The geographical fragmentations across Syria, including between different regions and rural and urban areas shifted and cemented local power structures and economic opportunities. This included the establishment of oligopolies that control the cross-border foreign trade, and smuggling and control of internal crossing points for goods and services linked to local warlords. In Douma for example, one security crossing was said to generate one million SYP per hour in bribes.<sup>106</sup> New actors that have risen to power by operating in the margins of legality have, on the one hand, extracted values from communities.<sup>107</sup> On the other hand, this has often provided protection, order, and basic goods, with predictability for local markets of potential patronage networks and support of new types of entrepreneurs. In areas experiencing return, particularly in reconciled areas, armed group forces have increasingly become an income-generating activity by providing a degree of relief from security threats to those recruited.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, the loss and partially regained control over key infrastructure and resources such as major highways and agricultural lands by the GoS has changed local dynamics. Humanitarian aid, while providing urgently needed relief has also been seen to distort local markets for locally produced goods.

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104 Kevin Mazur, *Revolution in Syria*, 2021.

105 COAR, "Beyond Checkpoints: Local Economic Gaps and the Political Economy of Syria's Business Community," March 15, 2019; Mazur, *Revolution in Syria*.

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106 Urban-S, "Douma City Profile," 2019.

107 COAR, "The Syrian Economy at War: Captagon, Hashish, and the Syrian Narco-State," April 2021.

108 Ibid.

### Box 3 Syria's industries: urban-rural connections

Manufacturing has been the main driver of the Syrian economy. During the 2000s, banking, tourism and construction also became more prominent economic sectors. A geographical fragmentation of productive sectors has also taken place, with a shift in prominence away from the industrial cities of Homs and Aleppo towards the port cities of Latakia, Tartus (particularly after the port explosion in Beirut in August 2020), as well as Hama as the situation has evolved.

Manufacturing has been the engine of the urban transformation in the country, where people have moved from rural areas to the cities looking for employment. The sector has been severely weakened over the conflict period, with an estimated 70 per cent decline in manufacturing as share of GDP by 2015. Many establishments were destroyed or looted, and activities stopped. The conflict-impact has been concentrated in the main industrial cities Aleppo, Homs, and the suburbs of Damascus. In Aleppo for example, the number of industrial establishments had fallen to between 65,000 and 71,000 compared to around 130,000 prior to the conflict, and many of the industry owners moved to Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan (see Box 4 Aleppo: the economic capital of Syria). Lack of access to energy, particularly electricity and fuel, damaged road infrastructure, and limited equipment and raw materials have contributed to the decline in manufacturing. Oil has been important for the Syrian economy. In addition to constituting a large share of export (more than three-quarters of exports in the early 2000s and around 45 per cent by 2010), energy is an important input into manufacturing, transport, water access etc. By 2015, the oil sectors' contribution to GDP was estimated to be only 13 per cent of its pre-conflict levels. Fuel products are subsidised by GoS, but the quantities people can access through 'smart cards' are very limited, while access through the black market with very high prices remains unattainable for most.

The Syrian economy is heavily reliant on agriculture. Prior to the conflict, agriculture was estimated to account for 20-25 per cent of GDP and was the main source of income for almost half the population. There has been significant reduction of agricultural production over the conflict period. This has intensified over the last couple of years due to the water crises and drought in Syria combined with factors such as loss of agricultural land, infrastructure damage and lack of maintenance, and high cost of production input and energy. However, the contraction of the overall economy has been larger and the agriculture sector's share in contribution to GDP has increased substantially, from 20 per cent in 2010 to 40 per cent in 2019.<sup>109</sup> A major barrier for manufacturing has been weakened supply chains with the separation of cities from surrounding rural areas where many live and where raw material is being produced.

109 World Bank, "Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing, Value Added (% of GDP) - Syrian Arab Republic," 2022, [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.AGR.TOTL.ZS?locations=SY&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NV.AGR.TOTL.ZS?locations=SY&most_recent_year_desc=true).

### Box 4 Aleppo: the economic capital of Syria

Prior to the conflict, Aleppo was the largest city in Syria and contributed with almost one quarter of GDP.<sup>110</sup> The economy centred on industrial and agricultural activities and trade. A large share of industrial production, including textile, engineering, chemical and food, came from small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) located in informal areas of the city, as well as from industries located in industrial areas. In 2011, the Sheikh Najjar industrial city 15km northeast of the Aleppo city, contributed with 166 billion Syrian pounds (SYR) (around USD 3 billion worth) of exports.

110 Urban-S, Urban Baseline Aleppo, 2019.

The conflict led to large-scale damage to industry, businesses and markets, and isolated the city from its rural base and surrounding markets, including raw production material and labour force. Business and industries located in the city were severely damaged, and while official industrial areas suffered less damage, production in these areas were shut down. Many industrialists and businessmen fled from Aleppo to the Syrian coast, southern Turkey and other countries, some taking with them capital and equipment to start production elsewhere. A black-market economy also emerged in Aleppo, with actors benefitting from activities that responded to gaps in service delivery or other state functions, and others engaging in coercive financial systems, lootings, extortion.

Increased activities in contracting and reconstruction sectors have been observed in recent years. In industrial areas, enterprises have resumed activities. In Sheikh Najjar industrial city, for example, 600 establishments were operating by 2020. At the same time, many business owners who fled to Turkey and Europe have reportedly begun selling their properties and businesses in Aleppo in the past year due to slow recovery progress.

Yet, several obstacles for equitable economic recovery in Aleppo remain. With the destruction of Aleppo's power plant, energy supply from other part of Syria remains limited. Businesses and production are thus reliant diesel generators, that are both costly and harmful for the environment and public health. It should be noted that restoration of turbines of the Aleppo power plant by beginning of July 2022 has allowed for increased supply of electricity, particularly to the industrial areas. Destroyed water systems necessitates water trucking from Jibreen, an industrial area at the outskirts of Aleppo. A small labour force, due to displacement, death and military services, is limiting production capacities, also in cases where machinery and infrastructure is in place. Despite the positive economic impact of re-opening the M5 highway linking Aleppo with major cities in Syria and neighbouring countries, the cost of fuel for transportation of goods is making distribution and trade costly. With the destruction of houses in Aleppo's informal areas, workers accommodation has been lost. For agriculture production, high costs of input, damage to irrigation networks are major issues. Resolving some of these interlinked issues will be pivotal for economic recovery in Aleppo and the region.

## Access to economic opportunities and markets

Livelihoods is a primary consideration for return.<sup>111</sup> At the same time, employment opportunities are few. Unemployment was estimated to affect half of the working age population in 2020, with a 42 per cent rise in unemployment in 2020 alone.<sup>112</sup> Approximately 36 per cent of households report no employed household member and income deficits are growing.<sup>113</sup> More than three in four households are not able to meet the basic needs of all members and only 10 per cent have an income above the Syria Minimum Expenditure Basket. Hyperinflation has weakened purchasing power and contributed to rising

poverty. From 2019 to 2020, the number of people living in absolute poverty rose from 50-60 to 60-65 per cent, and by end of 2020,<sup>114</sup> and ninety-seven per cent of the population live below the poverty line.<sup>115</sup> Limited income and affordability is highest among IDPs, as well as households headed by a person with disability and female-headed households.

Employment is often intermittent and poorly paid across sectors.<sup>116</sup> Daily wage for manual labour in many areas is SYP 5,000.<sup>117</sup> The government is the largest single employer in Syria, divided between public servants (56 per cent in 2018) and public enterprise. While labour conditions are often poor and salaries insufficient to cover cost of living

111 UNHCR, "Seventh Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria"; OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022

112 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," March 2021.

113 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

114 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," March 2021.

115 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

116 COAR, "The Syrian Economy at War: Labor Pains Amid the Blurring of the Public and Private Sectors," November 19, 2020.

117 iMMAP, "Central Syria Return and Reintegration Area Profiles: Damascus, Homs, Harasta, and Douma."

also for public employees,<sup>118</sup> the informal nature of political power means that public servant employees may enjoy some benefits. Securing these positions thus often depend on patronage and connections. Returnees are reporting difficulties in gaining meaningful employment with public and governmental agencies.<sup>119</sup> In-depth security clearance to obtain a public sector job act as a barrier for many returnees.

Access to economic opportunities is linked to geographical location and status.<sup>120</sup> For example, many civil servants who were dismissed from their jobs based on Law No. 20 of 2012 have lost their salary, compensations, and pension, face the possibility of seizing of their movable and immovable money if convicted. However, among those who have returned to Eastern Ghouta many reportedly regained their jobs and benefit from better access to basic services and aid than those who remained.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, while there is no significant difference between returnee and host households in terms of source of income, more people living in Homs governorate (20 per cent) live in households with three or more sources of income compared to Aleppo (6 per cent) and Idlib (3 per cent). In Aleppo, host community households reportedly had much better access to livelihoods and basic services compared with refugee returnees, while in Idlib and Homs there were no significant differences. Returning refugees who subsequently become IDPs are found to be significantly worse off in terms of livelihoods regardless of where they live.<sup>122</sup> Market access is similar across demographic groups, where unstable and frequently fluctuating prices is the primary barrier to access markets followed by essential items being available but unaffordable, poor quality, the price and lack of transportation to markets, distance to market, and feeling unsafe travelling to markets.<sup>123</sup>

## Economic vulnerabilities among returnees

For returnees, expenses such as costs of repairs of homes, replacing goods and equipment, and

payment of fines, bills, and taxes represent heavy financial burdens. For example, after eight years in displacement, one returnee in Homs reported having to pay 250,000 SYP to restore electricity alone (given a daily wage for manual labour of around SYP 5,000, this equals 50 working days).<sup>124</sup> Utilities such as fuel is often inaccessible and a huge financial burden, which forces many to seek alternatives in the black market. To cover basic needs, 90 per cent of returnee households resort to borrowing, followed by remittances and spending of savings.<sup>125</sup> Remittances, which close to half of the population relies on, were reduced by 50 per cent from 2019 to 2020, but with a slight increase by mid-2021.

Displaced women and girls often face increased economic responsibilities and financial burden yet have less access to livelihood opportunities and decision-making compared to men. The implications of more economic responsibilities on decision-making or economic empowerment are not clear. The expansion of roles beyond traditional “female” tasks such as caregiving and household work has increased economic responsibilities. At the same time, family restrictions and constraints on social roles have, in general, increased over the conflict period. Women report that they are much more likely to be consulted in decisions if they are earning an income. However, this increased decision-making appears to be strictly linked with economic contributions that does not extend to a recognition of broader rights.<sup>126</sup>

Lack of education, especially higher education, for girls in Syria and host countries in the region limits their opportunities to enter the labour market. While two in three returnee households increased their debt in 2021, the figure was almost four in five among female-headed households. Employment over a three-month period was reportedly much lower among female IDPs (18 per cent) compared to male IDPs (83 per cent) in 2021, while income was one-third less.<sup>127</sup> This is still higher than the pre-conflict labour participation of 13 per cent in 2010.<sup>128</sup>

Household members with disabilities represents

118 COAR, “The Syrian Economy at War: Labor Pains Amid the Blurring of the Public and Private Sectors.”

119 Central Syria Return and Reintegration Area Profiles – Damascus, Homs, Harasta, and Douma. April, 2021, iMMAP.

120 Samuel Hall, “Syria’s Spontaneous Return.”

121 ESCWA, “Localised Needs Assessment,” 2021.

122 OCHA, “Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Data.”

123 Ibid.

124 ESCWA, “Localised Needs Assessment,” 2021.

125 OCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic,” 2022.

126 Common Agenda, “Common Agenda: Combating Violence against Women and Girls as a Major Barrier to Women’s Participation in Syria,” 2021.

127 OCHA, “Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic,” March 2021.

128 Common Agenda, “Common Agenda: Combating Violence against Women and Girls as a Major Barrier to Women’s Participation in Syria.”



an added economic responsibility for households. Access to economic opportunities in the place of return is relative more important for households with several members (54 per cent) with disabilities, compared to one member (52 per cent ) and households without a member with disabilities (47 per cent).<sup>129</sup> Once returned, a larger share of households with members with disabilities (22 per cent) found that the situation there was worse or much worse than they expected compared to households without members with disabilities (15 per cent).

## Policy implications

As the economic situation in Syria and the region is going from bad to worse, economic opportunities are becoming an even more prominent factor for integration, repatriation and reintegration. A move towards economic recovery depends on addressing interlinked structural issues, strengthen rural-urban linkages and supply-chains, and improved access to raw material, energy, water for production, and labour. As an example, reintegration in Homs will require a resurgence of Homs industrial zone to secure livelihoods. This depends, among other, on improved access to local electricity supply, transportation, water, labour and capital. Integrated urban recovery plans, considering both household service needs, and those of value-chains are needed. Mapping of value chains across the rural-urban continuum could be important in this regard, identifying entry points to enhance performance and economic outputs in local, regional or national markets. Continued support to recovery efforts of old souks and market areas will be essential to restore local small and medium sized businesses, and associated livelihoods.

Economic recovery efforts must be based on a solid understanding of existing economic systems, actors, and local power structures and account for direct or indirect effect of new initiatives. It must further balance initiatives to bolster local economic development with livelihood initiatives that support opportunities for groups of concern, including women and displaced, in a manner that contributes to reduce inequalities and vulnerabilities.

Research on migration and development<sup>130</sup> suggests that improved economic conditions would enable

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129 Humanitarian Needs Assessment Programme, "IDP Report Series 2020: Disability Prevalence and Impact"

130 PISM, "Development Assistance and Root Causes of Migration: A Risky Road to Unsustainable Solutions," December 2021.

people to access more expensive migrations routes and there therefore remains a minimal risk that more Syrians may decide to leave the country. From an economic perspective, this could also result in increased remittances, with potential increased revenue streams for local administrative units for local reinvestment, planning and management of local service provision, pending the successful design of the system of inter-governmental fiscal transfers.<sup>131</sup>

A further strengthening of economic sanctions will likely increase GoS's reliance on local, unsanctioned business actors and independent business networks.<sup>132</sup> These dynamics have and will continue realign and shift relationships between private actors, the GoS and other actors. Affected populations must find their role within these evolving systems to secure services, livelihoods, and reduce economic risks. In the event of reduced sanctions, policies and programming should seek to leverage and re-engage with private sector in a way that can contribute to equitable economic recovery and job creation.

## Infrastructure and Services<sup>133</sup>

Local authorities in Syria are faced with massive population changes, large-scale damage and destruction to infrastructure and buildings, severe and increasing needs. Significant population pressure in cities and neighbourhoods have increased demand for services and infrastructure. At the same time, low and rapidly dwindling financial and human capital is limiting local authorities' abilities to undertake urban planning and management in a manner that adequately responds to residents' needs. There are variations in infrastructure and service delivery between areas of cities, where informal areas generally being most affected by conflict-related

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131 For more on localization in Syria, see: Urban Recovery Framework, "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Decentralisation and Local Governance, Pursuing Area-Based Approaches That Support Accountability in the Restoration of Basic Services and Economic Recovery in Syria," 2022.

132 COAR, "Beyond Checkpoints: Local Economic Gaps and the Political Economy of Syria's Business Community."

133 A detailed overview on infrastructure and local governance and management of urban services are discussed in the URF thematic papers on "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Perspectives on Recovery of Services and Infrastructure in Syria," 2022. and "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Decentralisation and Local Governance, Pursuing Area-Based Approaches That Support Accountability in the Restoration of Basic Services and Economic Recovery in Syria". This section will thus only point to some of the main aspects of infrastructure and services in Syrian cities.

damage and destruction, housing a higher share of displaced, yet are not always the areas where rehabilitation and reconstruction is focused.

#### Unavailable and unaffordable basic urban services

A range of issues are contributing to low service functionality in Syrian cities. The conflict has resulted in large-scale damage to basic services infrastructure, including energy, water and trunk infrastructure and communications networks, and placed severe limitations on local and national authorities' abilities to respond to needs. The lack of technical staff to provide basic and social services, including health, education and water, is immense as qualified staff have migrated, been displaced, died, suffered from impairment, or for other reasons have not been able to continue their work. In the health sector alone, more than 50 per cent of health workers are estimated to have fled the country.<sup>134</sup> This has contributed to transition service provision from being a key instrument for GoS to secure political stability to a humanitarian necessity.

As a result of limited access to publicly provided services, parallel systems of service delivery have emerged. Despite decentralisation processes, power remains centralised in Syria. Clientelist systems at the local level has contributed to parallel systems

for service delivery and resource distribution. Gaps in service provision and lack of access to goods and commodities presented opportunities for rent-seeking activities connected to basic necessities such as fuel, electricity, water, internet, real estate and construction. This has contributed to shifting and cementing local power structures, with very low yet varying degrees of service availability and reliability. High prices on the black market and acute poverty levels makes this an unattainable alternative for most. Limited purchasing power among the population means that only a very small share of spending goes towards services such as education, electricity, shelter, and water, while the largest share being spent on food items.

There are large variations between areas of cities in terms of infrastructure and services. More affluent and central neighbourhoods have, in general, suffered less damage and have better access to more reliable services compared to more disadvantaged and informal areas. Increased pressure in neighbourhoods hosting displaced persons has overburdened already overstretched service infrastructure, at a time when capacities to deliver services is very low. Rehabilitation of infrastructure, including roads, health centres and schools, are reportedly relatively more important for returnees than the overall population, with returnees being twice as likely to report this as an essential need.

134 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.



Electricity provision is at 15 per cent of pre-conflict provision due to damage and destruction to electricity infrastructure and fuel shortages.<sup>135</sup> Subsidised diesel, available for those who have smart cards,<sup>136</sup> are used for heating and to power generators to supplement electricity provided through the public grid. A black market has emerged to respond to the high demand

but low availability of fuel. Illegal connections to the electricity grid are also increasing. The importance of energy is reflected in IDPs prioritisation of electricity as top three priority needs. Water treatment and distribution networks have also suffered from the conflict, rendering almost half the population reliant on unsafe alternatives to piped water. Urban residents who can afford it, purchase water from private tanker trucks to fill up their residential water tanks. Moreover, more than 70 per cent of sewage is discharged without treatment. With more than half of sewage systems not functional, waterborne diseases are increasing.

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135 OCHA.

136 Smart cards are government issues cards to receive subsidized goods, such as fuel and bread. To apply, a number of documents including personal identification, tenure documents, family book and proof of vehicle ownership, is required.

### Box 5 Supporting equitable service functionality for resilience and reintegration

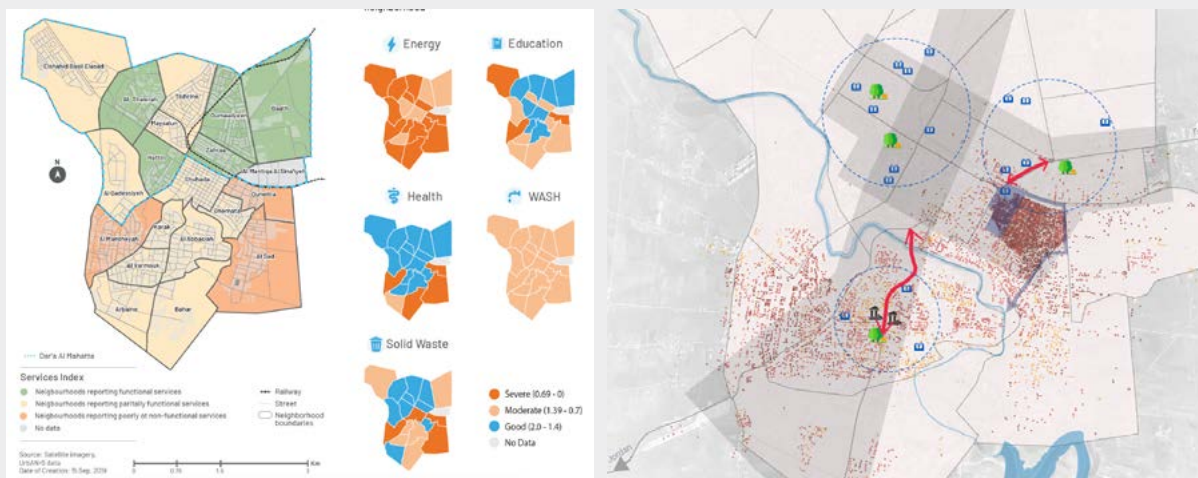
**Responding to diverging conflict-impact on service functionality in northern and southern Dar'a city**  
Dar'a was one of the first localities to be affected by the conflict and have since become one of Syria's most important cities, among others due to its strategic location on Syria's southern border with Jordan. During the conflict, the city was divided into the opposition held south and GoS controlled north. With the heavily shelling and aerial bombardment in southern part of the city, particularly of informal areas, most essential services and infrastructure were damaged and remain non-operational.<sup>137</sup> In combination with security factors, return to these areas is limited. The northern part of the city sustained minimal damage, but still suffer from low availability to services.

The geographical impact on service functionality across sectors in Dar'a can be seen in Figure 11. Apart from one neighbourhood, none of the municipal assets in the southern half of the city are functional. Energy access is limited across most of the city and residents report to resort to alternative energy sources. The southern neighbourhoods have seen little improvements in electricity grids, which has further aggravated electricity shortages. Transportation is poor across the city, and damage to street networks and safety issues are particularly present in the southern neighbourhoods. Health facilities in less damaged northern neighbourhoods are functional; however, lack of medical personnel constrains services. One in two schools are non-functional and concentrated in the southern neighbourhoods, and school registration and number of teachers remains low across the city. Around 4,500 families live in public buildings, including schools. Water access is limited with six or less hours of water availability. Four neighbourhoods are entirely reliant on water trucking. The Al-Ash'ari water project, currently underway, is intended to improve the irrigation needs in the governorate by sourcing water from wells. Solid waste management is constrained in northern neighbourhoods and non-existent in southern neighbourhoods. The south and central neighbourhoods also suffer from contamination by ERWs. Municipal services remain largely limited to food distribution, and subsidised bread and fuel allocations through neighbourhood committees.

The Dar'a Recovery Plan was developed as part of the Urban Recovery Framework. The Joint Programme on Urban and Rural Resilience has been established to implement priority activities based on the Dar'a Recovery Plan in three areas of the city (Figure 12), including improving access to services and mobility between the highly damaged and less damaged areas of the city. The programme builds on a commitment from the six programme partners – UNFPA, FAO, UN-Habitat, WFP, UNICEF, and UNDP – to collective programming towards recovery and resilience. In the process of identifying and implementing multisectoral interventions, the programme benefits from the partners' mandates, capacities, methodologies, and previous work in Dar'a and the region.

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137 Urban-S, "Dar'a Baseline Overview," 2019.



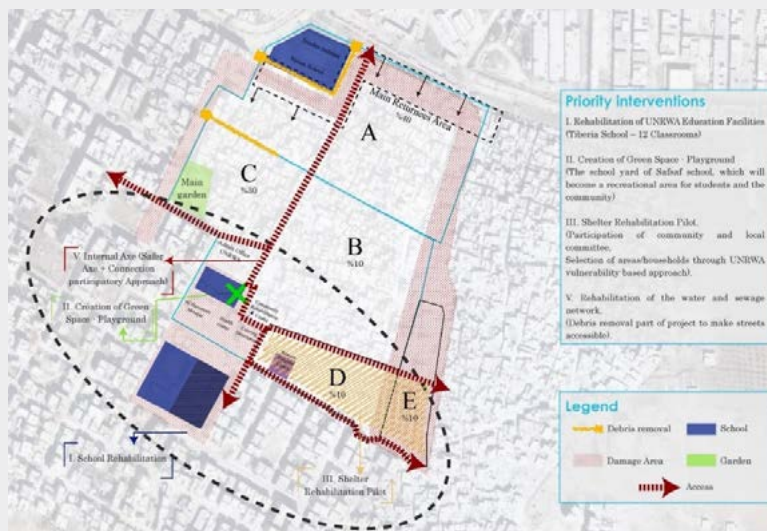
**Figure 11** Service functionality in Dar'a city. Source: Urban-S, 2019. **Figure 12** The three interlinked focus areas for JP UN implementation of recovery plan priorities

**Addressing limited access to basic and social services a continued barrier to reintegration in Yarmouk**

Yarmouk is the largest Palestinian Refugee camp in Syria, located within the administrative boundaries of Damascus city. Prior to the conflict the camp was home to around 160,000 Palestinian refugees, close to one-third of registered Palestinian refugees in the country. Many Syrians also lived in Yarmouk, bringing the total population to 1.2 million. Over the conflict period, Yarmouk was progressively depopulated, and by 2018 no residents were left. Return remains restricted. By 2020 some 2,000 families had received approval from the GoS to return, and in September 2021, only 460 families were living there.

Prior to the conflict, all buildings were connected to the main sewage and water networks. United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) provided a range of services, including schools, health services (a shared responsibility with the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees and the Syrian government) and distribution of rations through centres. Solid waste management was provided by the municipality.

Access to basic services remains a major barrier to reintegration. The basic infrastructure has been heavily damaged during the conflict, and regular access to services such as electricity and water remains challenging. An assessment from 2020 shows that only 5 per cent of buildings are not damaged. A damage assessment in 2018 found that UNRWA's 23 premises in the camp and nearby areas, including health centres, schools and community centres, had been affected by the conflict. Contamination by ERW and falling debris are further security risks. UN-Habitat and UNRWA are working jointly to put in place the conditions for reintegration in the Camp, in addition to mitigating HLP risks. A targeted set of actions has been implemented in one part of the camp. These include the rehabilitation of 200 housing units, associated services, school and a public playground linking the camp to the wider part of the city. Vocational training for youth in building rehabilitation was also delivered.



**Figure 13** Dar'a Palestine refugee camp action plan

## Policy implications

Restoring service functionality in an equitable manner remains a critical condition for reintegration, yet local authorities' capacities are limited, and interventions fragmented and focused on selected neighbourhoods. Recovery and redevelopment processes will require strong community involvement, including finding mechanisms for engagement by those who are living in displacement, in a context-sensitive manner to ensure that rebuilding and reconstruction of infrastructure and services is equitable and effective. Further, local authorities financial and human capital must be improved to support their role as a service provider and to strengthen the social contract.

Key interventions to improve service functionality in urban areas such as in the case of Dar'a, described above, may include provision of electricity to pumping stations through innovative off-grid or mini-grid solutions (e.g., solar power) in the short term and rehabilitation of energy grid in the longer term; rehabilitation of main water tanks and storage, cleaning manholes and replace damaged water and sewage lines; and restore water networks. This relies on analysis of systems and how solutions may work together to strengthen existing systems and to address key gaps in service delivery. For example, energy constitute an enabling factor for a range of factors in urban areas, such as food preservation and cooking, livelihoods, and safety. Improved energy provision has the potential to support other living conditions and prospects, including income opportunities and learning.

## Environment and Climate Change<sup>138</sup>

Environmental hazards have been a driver of migration and displacement towards Syrian cities, and a root cause to tension over scarce resources. This includes the three-year drought prior to the conflict that forced many to abandon their rural livelihoods in search of new opportunities in the cities. Such events have been exacerbated by unsustainable management and increased competition over water and land. Environmental risks and climate change,

with environmental hazards on the rise, continue to threaten displaced people's prospect of return to their homes. For example, in 2021 water flows in the Euphrates River from Turkey to Syria was significantly lower than usual, which led to reduced access to water for drinking, domestic and agricultural use, loss of hydroelectricity, and increased incidents of water-borne diseases. Moreover, wildfires in 2020 led to devastation of at least 25-30 per cent of total forest area in Syria, with dramatic implications for energy provision and soil erosion. Combined with torrential rain, deforestation is also contributing to flooding, causing unsafe and unsanitary conditions. This is reflected in the reliability and efficiency of water systems, where for the first time since 2016 this has sharply declined, and 2 million fewer people now are using water networks as their main source compared to mid-2020.<sup>139</sup>

## Policy implications

Environmental protection and climate change adaptation are integral to enhance resilience to withstand future shocks, reduce risks of displacement in the future, and allow for return to climate-affected areas. Urban recovery should consider aspects such as scarce natural resources, especially water and land, food security, pressure on urban service systems, urban-rural linkages for resource management, and building back better to promote sustainable solutions. Integration and reintegration depend on restoring or establishing safety-nets for urban poor and securing the livelihoods of agricultural workers. This in turn relies on resources that are now under threat, such as water and productive land. Current environmental and climate change strategies, plans and regulations are limited, but could be built upon in combination with other initiatives and projects. For example, water management systems from source to point of use and models of water reuse, renewable energy policies from energy generation on the regional level and its distribution at local levels, and solid waste management from neighbourhood units to the transferring and recycling stations are critical for both the environment and to support conditions for reintegration.

For further reading on how the URF can help support efforts to address these issues, see relevant thematic papers in the Urban Recovery Framework policy paper series.<sup>140</sup>

138 A detailed overview of the environment in urban areas is available in the URF thematic paper "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Pursuing Environmental Sustainability through Urban Recovery in Syria." This section will thus only point to some of the main aspects contributing to displacement and with implications for integration, return and reintegration.

139 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

140 The Urban Recovery Framework thematic papers, published in 2021 and 2022, look at urban heritage, environment, governance, infrastructure, housing and monitoring.

## Urban heritage<sup>141</sup>

The historic cores of Syrian cities have been epicentres of clashes during the crisis. This has led to large-scale damage to cultural heritage buildings and forced people to flee their homes and abandon their neighbourhoods. The arrival of IDPs have further transformed neighbourhoods and added pressure on housing and land, including cultural heritage buildings and sites. Lack of housing and secure tenure has in turn contributed to land speculation targeting destroyed heritage sites, the transformation of heritage sites into informal waste dumping areas, led to encroachment on and abandonment of heritage buildings and sites, and the adaption of heritage buildings to accommodate more residents. Further, damage and destruction of old market areas and traditional artisanal production buildings, displacement, and reduction in demand for goods and services has led to a loss of commercial exchange and livelihoods in, or connected to, traditional markets. This is threatening traditional craftsmanship based on local identities and know-how.

### Policy implications

Preservation and strengthening of urban heritage are central to (re)building urban identity and support reconciliation in a context where social tension, discrimination and competition over resources and livelihoods are high, particularly in neighbourhoods with many returnees and IDPs. Urban heritage, with local identities, craftsmanship and heritage buildings and sites, are important for reconciliation, and may be used as a vehicle to strengthen HLP rights and livelihood options for affected populations in historic neighbourhoods. This is premised on participatory processes and adequate legislations and policies for reconstruction and rehabilitation of heritage buildings and neighbourhoods.

For further reading on how the URF can help support efforts to address these issues, see relevant thematic papers in the Urban Recovery Framework policy paper series.<sup>142</sup>

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141 A detailed overview of urban heritage in Syria is available in the URF thematic paper Urban Recovery Framework, "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Restoration of Cultural Heritage and Urban Identity in Syria," 2021. This section will thus only point to some of the main aspects contributing to displacement and with implications for integration, return and reintegration.

142 The Urban Recovery Framework thematic papers, published in 2021 and 2022, look at urban heritage, environment, governance, infrastructure, housing and monitoring.



Yarmouk, 2022. @ UN-Habitat

## Policy and Operational Environment

There are a number of national and international policies, regulatory frameworks, stakeholders and initiatives pertaining to integration and reintegration of IDPs and returnees in Syrian cities. While a comprehensive discussion of regulatory frameworks related to return falls outside the scope of this paper, this section aims to situate the paper within current discourse and actions in displacement and return and how this relates to the urban contexts and area-based approaches in areas experiencing relatively higher numbers of returns.

### Return related policies and initiatives in Syria

#### GoS policies and initiatives

The GoS has identified supporting enabling conditions for voluntary, safe and dignified return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their areas of residence and socio-economic reintegration throughout their lifecycle, as a key priority. This applies to most of the country which is under GoS control, including the major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs and Hama, as well as close to all governorates' capitals.<sup>143</sup> Under Decree 46 of 2018 the GoS has formed a coordinating body for the return of displaced Syrians.<sup>144</sup> This entity is tasked by GoS with coordinating stakeholders in Syria, to ensure optimal conditions for simplifying and facilitating the return of displaced persons to Syria, and to support provision of decent livelihoods. Box 6 GoS national entities working within in areas relevant for returns. Furthermore, the GoS has undertaken legal reforms to protect some rights of IDPs, e.g., the right to vote, as well as the 2021 amendments to the Civil Status Law.

A GoS conference on return of refugees in Damascus

in 2020, with two follow up meetings in 2021 and one in 2022, highlighted the need for rebuilding and reconstruction of infrastructure and demining. According to the Minister of Local Administration and Environment, it is supporting efforts to rehabilitate infrastructure, issuing legislation and create logistic structures in government-controlled areas, to secure return of displaced to their homes.<sup>145</sup> The GoS reported that it had taken the following decisions to facilitate and simplify procedures for return of refugees, including:<sup>146</sup>

- Granting returnees who have not done their military or reserve service six months to settle their situation;
- Allowing border posts to issue documentation for persons who have lost their own travel documents;
- Facilitating the return of children born abroad who are accompanied by their parents, with a birth certificate issued by the country in which they had been residing;
- Allowing holders of expired Syrian passports to enter the country, once checks have been carried out.

The "National Development Programme for Syria after War" report approved by the Presidency of the Government and adopted by the Planning and International Coordination Commission (PICC) devised a road map for recovery and reconstruction into four main stages: Relief phase (2019), recovery phase (2020-2022), recuperation phase (2023-2026), sustainability phase (2027-2030). The plan puts emphasis on the housing sector as one critical area of intervention: "Adequate housing that provides decent living conditions, taking into account the conditions of the different segments of the population." Furthermore, that the extensive damage to housing,

143 EASO, "Country Guidance: Syria Common Analysis and Guidance Note," November 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2847/031774>.

144 United Nations Human Rights Council, "A/HRC/WG.6/40/SYR/1," 2021.

145 Syrian Arab News Agency, "Syrian-Russian Coordination Committees' Meeting... Makhlof: We Encourage Refugees to Return Home," November 16, 2021, <http://sana.sy/en/?p=254665>.

146 United Nations Human Rights Council, "A/HRC/WG.6/40/SYR/1."

and requirements for the return of displaced persons including refugees, determines the status and priorities of the programme, and based on solving problems that existed prior to the war. These include: housing areas randomness, population concentration and dispersion between Syrian governorates and regions, land uses, preservation of agricultural lands, sustainability of resources, urban organisation and plans, and the distribution of roles between actors in the sector. The strategy emphasises procedural,

tactical and strategic objectives, through the following tools: a) Access to digital statistical mechanisms and a multi-source database that is automatically updated; b) Access to a housing map that is updated periodically and automatically and includes all relevant data; c) Access to an integrated financing system that ensures effective participation of the private sector and effective tracking mechanisms for the private and cooperative sectors.

### Box 6 GoS national entities working within in areas relevant for returns

1. Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), responsible for consular services and processing of documentation. Preparing the frameworks and agreements for political and security.
2. Ministry of Interior (Moi), issued guidelines to facilitate the return of people who left the country illegally, and regularise their status within 72 hours.
3. Planning and International Cooperation Commission, responsible for strategic plans issuance including the return and coordination with the sectoral line ministries and international bodies and Agencies.
4. Ministry of Local Administration and Environment (MoLAE), responsible for coordination and supervision of the national plan for return through the governorate level (mainly directorates of education, health, electricity and police/traffic) and support the local administration units and humanitarian assistance (through the High Relief Committee and Reconstruction Committee), management the needs and services providing, especially the cadastral services and tenure security (GDCA). In addition to urban renewal plans execution (detailed urban master plans) and dealing with environment impacts to mitigate risks.
5. Ministry of Public Works and Housing (MoPWH), responsible for National Housing Strategy management, Social Housing provision, endorsement of master plans, supervision of syndicate of Syrian Engineers, and public works implementation.
6. Ministry of Water Resources (MoWR), responsible for strategic management of water resources and rehabilitation of water and sewerage related facilities in urban areas, irrigation and treatment plants installation.
7. Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MoSAL), responsible for labour and employment, occupational health and safety, public sector employment, family empowerment, poverty reduction and livelihood support, development of the social protection system and the social security system, and the provision of protection and social care for the most vulnerable or vulnerable social groups. Supervision on civil societies representations, volunteer programs and NGOs activities.
8. Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums (DGAM) and Ministry of Culture, responsible for the management and monitoring of the Strategic Plans for urban Culture heritage, advocating the culture heritage values and preservation of archaeological sites.

Despite the introduction of Local Administration Law 107 in 2011, governance remain strongly centralised in Syria and there is limited financial autonomy and decision-making on the part of local authorities.<sup>147</sup> Lack of human and financial resources and inadequate legislations and policies has contributed to weakening institutions. This has led to a loss of institutional and administrative capacities to deliver services, and the capacity to rebuild and protect infrastructure, buildings, and the environment. Local authorities have seen their revenues dwindling, government transfers diminished, and local resources dried up at a time of unprecedented needs. This is placing severe limitations on service delivery and urban governance.

<sup>147</sup> For a detailed overview of urban governance in Syria, see Urban Recovery Framework, "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Local Governance and Its Role in Local Recovery Planning and Local Economic Development," 2022.



## UN and international response efforts

While needs are becoming greater, donor fatigue and competing priorities is reflected in reduced humanitarian funding. An estimated 14.6 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance in start of 2022,<sup>148</sup> a 1.2 million increase since 2021.<sup>149</sup> Of a funding requirement of \$4.44 billion, less than 10 per cent has been funded.<sup>150</sup> The situation requires prioritisation and efficiency in projects that targets IDPs and returnees, of which an estimated 82 per cent live in urban areas, to ensure the greatest possible impact and value for money.

Limited access and lack of protocols for humanitarian actors working in both government and non-government areas is a continued barrier to effective support to host populations, IDPs and returnees.<sup>151</sup> This pertains both to the challenge of obtaining data and analysis about the situation to inform actions on the part of humanitarian actors, and to access information on the part of IDPs and returnees. Among those who have not received assistance, two primary reasons (affecting around one in every three persons) are not being aware of any assistance distributed or provided and not being eligible according to aid distribution criteria.<sup>152</sup> For returnees who have been back for more than a year, less than half report to know about assistance, and about one third of host community members self-report to not be eligible for assistance. IDP returnees who have been displaced less than one year, have less information on distribution time and place. Further, assessment-saturation is reported in some communities, where the number of assessments is not corresponding to the actual assistance received.<sup>153</sup> Some host community members have expressed a perceived exclusion from humanitarian programmes, and some assistance has also been seen to create or increase socio-ethnic divisions.

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148 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

149 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," March 2021.

150 OCHA, "Syrian Arab Republic 2022 Financial Tracking Service," 2022, <https://fts.unocha.org/countries/218/summary/2022>.

151 OCHA, "Humanitarian Needs Overview Syrian Arab Republic," 2022.

152 OCHA, "Multi-Sector Needs Assessment Data." It should be noted that the host community represented the largest sample in the survey which impacts the average.

153 Samuel Hall, "Syria's Spontaneous Return."

There are several initiatives to coordinate, share information, and for collaboration on displacement sensitive response among international actors in Syria and the wider region. The below provides an overview of these initiatives and the overarching frameworks in which they are anchored.

### United Nations Strategic Framework for Cooperation for Syria

The UN Strategic Framework for Cooperation 2022-2024 (as of March 2022) between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the United Nations elaborate the engagement of the United Nations in Syria. Pillar 3 of the draft UN Strategic Framework for Syria, "Enabling environment for a resilient return", focuses on improved living conditions of displaced people, returnees and affected communities.<sup>154</sup> All pillars of the Strategic Framework, including Pillar 3, consider the application of an inclusive area-based approach, working with sub-national administrative units, municipalities, local communities, and national and accredited international NGOs.

### Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy: Protection Thresholds and Parameters for Refugee Return to Syria.

As UNHCR's policy and operational response framework for actual and future refugee returns, the strategy guides response efforts in two defined phases. In the current phase, phase 1, the necessary conditions are not in place for safe and dignified return, while in phase 2, conditions have substantially changed, and large-scale voluntary repatriation can be facilitated. Four criteria govern a shift to phase 2: Legal framework(s), guaranteeing rights of returnees and unhindered access to them and return areas, is in place; there is clear evidence of Protection Thresholds being met in the place(s) of return; there is an improvement in conditions in return areas; refugees actively request support from UNHCR to return, in large numbers.

### Area-Based Return Support

Since 2020, the Technical Working Group (TWG) of the Syria Return and Reintegration Working Group (RRWG) has been developing a concept for inter-agency, area-based programming in locations of anticipated voluntary return. The aim is to guide joint work of UN agencies and partners in Syria in

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154 United Nations and Government of Syria, "UN Strategic Framework 2022 – 2024."

areas and communities experiencing comparatively higher numbers of returns. The mechanism is aimed at strengthening and systematizing existing, mainly single-agency area-based approaches, noting that by working together in a more coordinated and concentrated way, UN agencies and NGOs can take on more challenging deficits in community infrastructure and resources and achieve greater results and impact than any of them can alone. It foresees a holistic, multi-stakeholder and multi-sector approach to address the critical needs and concerns of returnees and their communities through the design and implementation of “packages” of prioritized and sequenced, complementary interventions. The aim is to deliver a response that is principled and relevant to the needs, preferences and concerns of beneficiaries (including those with vulnerabilities or specific needs), building on existing capacities and assets, service delivery mechanisms and governance structures, to promote the sustainability of returns and reintegration, and make a positive contribution to social cohesion. The concept is “people-driven”, in that is it “follows” returnees, when they make the decision to return. The envisaged approach is not a new “project” or “initiative” but can be conceived as an “organizing framework” to help direct resources and maximize the impact of interventions planned through existing humanitarian and resilience programming tools. It can also help make interventions more visible and enable an assessment of their collective impact.

### **Return and Reintegration Working Group (RRWG)**

Within Syria, the Syria Return and Reintegration Working Group (RRWG), led by the Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator, is the main coordination forum for return and reintegration of refugees and IDPs inside Syria, attended by UN agencies and INGOs. UNHCR and UNDP co-chair its Technical Working Group (TWG) while UNHCR acts as Secretariat for both the RRWG and the TWG.

### **Technical Working Group on Housing, Land and Property (TWG HLP)**

The HLP TWG consists of actors working in Syria who have a direct interest in HLP issues. As per its TORs, the mission statement of the HLP TWG is to: “facilitate and provide technical support on HLP issues and concerns of relevance to the realisation of programming in Syria, enabling a more informed, predictable, accountable and efficient humanitarian and resilience-building response to HLP issues in Syria.” As such, the HLP TWG is not a formal coordination body, but rather a working group to

provide advisory services to inform the design and delivery of humanitarian, resilience/recovery, and development programming in Syria.

### **Durable Solutions Working Group**

The inter-agency Durable Solutions Working Group (DSWG) in host countries in the region to convene return-related discussions and planning at a national level. The Regional Durable Solutions Working Group (RDSWG) integrate the efforts from DSWGs into the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) structure led by UNHCR and UNDP.

### **Durable Solutions Platform (DSP)**

The Durable Solutions Platform (DSP) is a joint initiative by Action Against Hunger (AAH), Danish Refugee Council (DRC), the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Oxfam and Save the Children to generate knowledge and promote dialogue and strategic programming approaches to the long-term future of Syrian refugees and IDPs based on international best practice and principles for preparing and supporting durable solutions for people in displacement.

## **UN and UN-Habitat area-based support and recovery planning**

Several initiatives under the Urban Recovery Framework and related programming are potential inroads for displacement sensitive urban recovery and could be further developed and complimented in order to account for integration, repatriation, and reintegration prospects for displaced persons.

### **UN Joint Programme on Urban and Rural Resilience**

The UN Joint Programme (JP) on Urban and Rural Resilience focuses on collective agency programming toward resilience. Using an area-based and conflict sensitive approach, and aligned to the URF, targeted efforts towards conflict affected/traditionally marginalized groups are being implemented with extensive community participation.

The programme builds on a commitment from the six programme partners – UNFPA, FAO, UN-Habitat, UNICEF, and UNDP – to collective programming towards recovery and resilience. Through the JP, recovery plans Dar’a and Deir-Ez-Zor cities and for

targeted neighbourhoods have been developed. The collaboration has allowed JP partner agencies to deepen participatory planning processes, with the aim to strengthen social cohesion and prioritising interventions that target service restoration, mobility and access, economic recovery and returns preparedness.

For example, in Dar'a, the plan was supported by community consultations that resulted in the prioritisation of a first set of interventions which aimed to support overall functionality across an East-West axis in the city including: rehabilitation of four public spaces; market streets and roads; introduction of solar lighting. For the project's second phase, assessments are currently under way to inform further support to: north-south axes routes; further restoration of public spaces along the same axis; ground water decontamination, solid waste management and its environmental impact. Inter-agency delivery of complementary projects has taken place, for example, between UN-Habitat, UNDP, UNICEF and UNFPA.

### **UN-Habitat-UNRWA collaboration on area-based returns preparedness**

Dar'a Palestine refugee camp suffered severe destruction during the conflict, forcing the camp population to flee. With a pre-conflict population at 10,500 Palestine refugees, only an estimated 600 Palestine refugee families (3,000 individuals) had returned by December 2021. In line with the Dar'a Recovery Plan, as well as a specifically developed urban profile that included HLP considerations<sup>155</sup>, UN-Habitat supported UNRWA to carry out an integrated recovery pilot in Dar'a Palestine Refugee Camp. The package of interventions included self-repair of 192 housing units (including vocational training), rehabilitation of associated service infrastructure (sewage lines, solar street lightning) and the rehabilitation of an UNRWA School and community playground. Following the completion of the work in May 2022, partners witnessed a return of displaced populations to the camp.

## **Recovery planning**

### **Aleppo Recovery Plan**

The Aleppo Recovery Plan was developed during 2018-2020, using a participatory process involving

local community representatives, neighbourhood committees, and service directorates. Based on this city recovery plan, recovery plans with prioritised actions were developed for each of the city's eleven service directorates. The process was supported by systematic risk management to safeguards for environmental and social risks in design and implementation.

In line with prioritised identified in the Recovery Plan, UN-Habitat has implemented a package of projects that aim to restore service functionality, enhance mobility and access, stimulate economic recovery and social cohesion, and support returns preparedness. Packages include:

- Rehabilitating the main transportation axis linking western and eastern Aleppo along with secondary access routes and enhancing safer access for pedestrians and children.
- Improving air quality and solid waste management processes.
- Rehabilitating public spaces and markets linked to urban cultural heritage sites.
- Secure access to housing by supporting cadastral services.

Residents living in vulnerable neighbourhoods were employed to implement measures; this contributes to improve their economic situation, implementation of more activities, and anchoring of initiatives within local communities.

During a second phase of support, a further set of project packages will be introduced that link to phase one interventions with intended wider multiplier effects for recovery. The successful implementation of action plans in Aleppo has generated important lessons and is being replicated in other Syria cities.

### **Homs City**

Building on the experience from Aleppo and other projects - and based on urban profiling data and a basic urban recovery plan for Homs - an integrated recovery plan for Homs City was finalised in March 2022, with support from UN-Habitat<sup>156</sup>. The process included extensive community consultations and a participatory damage assessment, as well as wide-ranging analysis on infrastructure and service functionality, environment, the economy, housing, urban heritage, local governance, social cohesion, etc. Efforts were made to include female

155 UN-Habitat and UNRWA, "Dara'a Urban Profile," 2022.

156 DG NEAR-financed URF project.

representatives as part of all consultations, as well as displaced communities not currently resident in the city. Reintegration considerations were informing the plan and proposed priorities. For planning of public space and safe access, a virtual planning tool was developed to support participatory design of interventions focusing on public space rehabilitation. UN agencies have been invited to participate in the process.

The Homs recovery plan helps make difficult prioritizations based on needs and potential impact, identifying interventions that support basic service restoration, mobility and access, economic recovery, social cohesion and reintegration. It is anticipated that it will provide a strong platform for joint programming and that it will likely generate future support.

From the Homs recovery plan, consultative workshops covering 21 neighbourhoods were carried out to develop local recovery plans. In workshops, neighbourhood committees and local community representatives were trained to conduct damage assessments at the building and neighbourhood level. Following the damage assessment, communities were engaged in a process with local authorities, to identify priorities at the neighbourhood level. This resulted in eight detailed urban recovery plans covering 21 neighbourhoods in different parts of Homs City.

## **Examples of priority measures that could be implemented through action plans**

### **Housing unit support**

UN-Habitat is currently developing a pilot “housing support unit” to support the process for housing rehabilitation. A housing support unit is a platform that brings together different stakeholders including municipality, cadastral department, private sector, legal experts, engineers, neighbourhood committees and inhabitants to meet requirements for rehabilitation of damaged housing permits. The housing unit, and the collaborative efforts under it, can be extended to cover other issues that are similar in nature, such as debris removal, improving security of tenure in informal settlements, urban and rural land management.

### **Integrated housing recovery programmes**

Using humanitarian pooled funding, UN-Habitat has piloted area-based interventions focusing on integrated housing recovery, with the aim to support

reintegration and strengthen the resilience of targeted vulnerable populations. This includes multi-sectorial projects targeting debris removal, rehabilitation of common spaces in residential buildings, access to HLP services and rehabilitation of housing units (Shelter), repaid and/or replacement of wastewater pipelines, rehabilitation of water supply distribution network, provision of solid waste containers, solid waste transfer to sanitary landfills (WASH) and the installation of solar energy systems to run the water submersible pumps to ensure the delivery of potable water into households’ tanks and the provision and installation of solar street lighting in vital streets inside target areas to improve movement in dark hours, and ensure safer access to schools, markets, medical facilities, etc. (Early Recovery and Livelihoods).

### **Temporary cadastral office support**

UN-Habitat has developed a proposal to support the establishment of temporary cadastral offices to improve service provision in areas without existing services, and in areas where there is not sufficient capacity to process current and anticipated demand for cadastral services. The project seeks to address the significant challenges the subnational General Directorate of Cadastral Affairs (GDCA) offices face in providing services. The temporary cadastral offices could be located in areas of current or potential high return, by establishing either prefabricated offices for this purpose, or municipal one-stop-shops that provide access to both cadastral services and civil documentation.

## **Global response, urban and displacement policy frameworks**

Governments, United Nations, humanitarian and development actors, and private sector are working to develop frameworks and approaches to guide recovery in a context of increased man-made and natural disasters in cities and growing urban displacement. This section gives an overview of selected policy frameworks developed by the United Nations and international partners with significance for displacement sensitive recovery in Syria. These build on a number of international laws and principles related to the rights of displaced, such as The Universal Declaration of Human Rights,<sup>157</sup> The

<sup>157</sup> United Nations, “Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” 1948, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9160-5\\_1049](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-9160-5_1049).

International Humanitarian Law, and the Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons.<sup>158</sup>

The Joint Declaration on Post-Crisis Assessments and Recovery Planning<sup>159</sup> developed and signed by the European Commission, the United Nations Development Group and the World Bank in 2008. The objective was to mobilise these institutions and resources to “harmonise and coordinate post-crisis response frameworks to enhance country resilience to crisis, by answering recovery needs of vulnerable populations and strengthening the capacity of national institutions for effective prevention, response and recovery”. While not urban- or displacement-specific, the declaration outlined a shared platform for engagement at global and national levels, and for development of methodologies for needs assessments and recovery planning. Since the joint declaration was released, there has been an increase in the number of natural and man-made crises, particularly in complex and high-density urban settings. Building on the declaration, the United Nations, the World Bank and the European Union released the Joint Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessments (RPBAs): A Practical Note to Assessments and Planning in 2017.<sup>160</sup> The note outlined a joint approach to identify and address recovery and peacebuilding requirements as well as longer-term strategy elaboration in countries facing conflict or transitioning out of a conflict-related crisis.

The Grand Bargain - A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need<sup>161</sup> from 2016 is a commitment among partners to improve effectiveness and efficiency of humanitarian action. In a context of unprecedented pressure on the humanitarian system and demand for cost efficient response, and learning from humanitarian situations over the past decade, Grand Bargain re-envisioned support for local and national actors. The framework recognises the shift towards urban crises and the implications of responding in cities, including the role of local authorities and the need for flexibility in funding.

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158 Economic and Social Council, “Principles on Housing and Property Restitution for Refugees and Displaced Persons,” vol. 14695, 2005.

159 United Nations Development Group, World Bank, and European Commission, “Joint Declaration on Post-Crisis Assessments and Recovery Planning,” 2008.

160 United Nations Development Group, World Bank, and European Commission, “Joint Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessments (RPBAs),” 2017.

161 IASC, “The Grand Bargain: A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need,” 2016.

Similarly, the Habitat Issue Paper 2 Migration and Refugees in Urban Areas<sup>162</sup> from 2015 sets out how actors can work together by applying inclusive planning. The paper emphasises the importance of improving rights and protection for migrants and refugees in cities, secure access to services, and create an enabling environment for migrants and refugees to be active contributors.

The UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement published the report *Shining a Light on Internal Displacement: A Vision for the Future in 2021*.<sup>163</sup> The report is developed in a context where “internal displacement has largely dropped off the international agenda over the past decade”. It recognises the interconnected realities of climate change, urbanisation, and fragility, with a call for actors to change their approaches to response, to engage earlier, more systematic and comprehensively, including involvement of private sector and civil society. This entails, among other, addressing displacement as part of urban planning at national and municipal levels, and specifically for international actors to work closer with and through local city systems.

Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas<sup>164</sup> published in 2022, is a joint contribution by UN-Habitat and UNHCR based on their respective mandates. The report seeks to find “synergies in service delivery and infrastructure projects” through partnerships between humanitarian and development actors, local and national authorities, the private sector and civil society. The guidance suggests how inclusive and sustainable urban planning can be used to protect vulnerable populations.

The URF in Syria will build on and seek to localise the global discourse on displacement sensitive urban recovery. As such, it reflects key discussions on these overarching frameworks and guidance notes, embedding parameters and principles on collaboration and partnerships, working in an area-based manner and across sectors, flexible funding, and new ways of working to improve efficiency and impact.

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162 Habitat III, “Habitat III Issue Papers 2 - Migration and Refugees in Urban Areas,” 2015, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv10kmcqb.9>.

163 United Nations Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Internal Displacement, “Shining a Light on Internal Displacement: A Vision for the Future,” 2021.

164 UNHCR and UN-Habitat, “Guidance for Responding to Displacement in Urban Areas.”



Harasta, 2022. © UN-Habitat

## The URF: A multi-scalar, temporal and area-based approach to displacement and return in Syrian cities

### Transforming policy to action

The analysis presented in this paper suggests how the conflict has added to and exacerbated pre-existing structural challenges, stressors, and inequalities in Syrian cities. New shocks, such as Covid-19, drought, and a socioeconomic crisis, are further worsening an already dire situation. This is disproportionately impacting groups of concern, including many IDPs and returnees. To support urban recovery and resilience while ensuring the protection, safety, and basic needs of people from displaced, returnee and host communities, key elements must be linked across local, city, and national levels. While any urban recovery initiative should be linked upward to the national level and downward to the neighbourhood level, the URF centres on city systems and capacities to identify strategic entry points for transformation and resilience building. This requires an emergency and development perspective, and political as well as technical solutions.

Urban response planning and implementation processes under the URF build on a strong evidence-base and data-driven criteria from analysis and assessments, such as context-sensitive analysis, damage assessments, and participatory needs assessments. This informs the identification of needs, vulnerabilities, and opportunities, and prioritisation of interventions, as the basis for devising locally anchored recovery plans. Through the consolidation of capacities of local, national, and international actors, representatives from host communities, displaced persons, returnees, civil society, and other relevant stakeholders are engaged in iterative processes to develop the recovery plans. The resulting integrated, strategic urban recovery

plans at the city and neighbourhood level represent a proven mechanism in Syria that bring together relevant partners and existing projects. The following section outlines key principles and potential activities to be embedded in a return adaptive URF.

### URF displacement sensitive recovery ladder: a phased approach

The URF is based on a phased recovery model. A displacement sensitive 'recovery ladder' supports the identification and prioritising of interventions with the objective of supporting integration, repatriation, and reintegration prospects for displaced persons in urban settings and as part of urban recovery efforts, by structuring interventions based on their expected contribution towards addressing immediate needs or medium or longer-term recovery and resilience. The URF recovery ladder encompasses the following phases and corresponding measures:

- **Absorptive;** responding to immediate needs
- **Adaptive;** medium-term response and recovery
- **Transformative;** longer-term response

The displacement sensitive recovery ladder is founded on an understanding of return and displacement as multiple temporalities to be planned for and responded to in parallel in urban recovery efforts. It gives due attention to the likely long-term presence of displaced in urban areas, where restriction on development interventions to improve services likely does not deter people from staying but rather undermines the self-reliance of people who will locate to urban areas regardless. The below recommendations are structured according to the

displacement sensitive recovery ladder, covering immediate, medium- and longer-term response across local, city, and national levels. These suggested strategic entry points target both immediate needs and structural challenges. By considering geographic and temporal scales, opportunities for synergies and transformative actions may emerge, which in

turn will help guide prioritisation of investments and allocation of resources. This underpins the URF as an area-based approach that goes further than sectoral planning within target areas. The recommendations are intended as a starting point for discussion, to be further developed through cross-sectoral, multi-stakeholder, and iterative processes.

## Policy principles guiding displacement sensitive urban recovery

Reflecting the forgoing analysis and based on a flexible and iterative process cycle, the following seven principles should be integrated in all urban recovery interventions high displacement and potential high-return areas in Syria.

- a. **Do No Harm:** Recovery efforts should reduce protection risks to affected populations, operational and reputational risks by utilizing conflict sensitivity and protection risk analysis, with social and environmental safeguards including for HLP risk. Local tensions or social cleavages should be addressed to support reintegration and reduce protection risks across groups, with a focus on systemic economic social and spatial causes of inequality.
- b. **Building Back Better:** Urban recovery and reconstruction interventions shall consider potential improvement to reconstruct what has been lost, with due attention to balanced reconstruction and restitutions processes that ensures that land readjustment, redevelopment and reconstruction is not used to marginalise displaced or returnees.
- c. **Geographic and social equity in programming:** Urban recovery, supported by urban spatial analysis, must ensure geographic and social equity in programming, considering the unequal conflict-impact between and within cities and between affected populations, including the disproportionate damage and large-scale displacement and arrivals in many informal areas. It should also, where possible, extend support to surrounding areas.
- d. **Community empowerment**  
Empowering local communities in areas experiencing return at the level of city and neighbourhoods, supporting the development of plans and implementing the activities that recognise and respond to both displaced and host communities, and encouraging municipalities and local authorities to include and commit to such efforts.
- e. **Prioritize vulnerable groups:** Urban recovery interventions must prioritize groups of concern based on need rather than status. Special attention must be given those who fall within several vulnerable categories and may include displaced and returnee women, youth, elderly, and disabled. Recovery efforts must aim for equity in assistance, among others by acknowledging that vulnerabilities are often shared between host populations, displaced, and returnees, but that these might manifest with different intensities and expressions.
- f. **Human rights and protection:** Urban recovery programming shall conduct due diligence that considers human rights, protection, safety, and social cohesion implications in advance of programming.
- g. **Cities as systems:** Urban recovery planning shall consider cities as systems, review interventions against sectoral interdependencies and weigh potential multiplier effects of city level interventions, with due consideration to linkages between neighbourhoods and rural-urban linkages and their long-term transformative potential.



## Recommendations for a displacement sensitive recovery ladder

The following recommendations are intended as a starting point for discussion and as input into ongoing programming and implementation in high displacement and return areas. The policy objectives and corresponding measures can inform recovery action planning and other area-based approaches through participatory processes involving relevant stakeholders.

The recommendations cover geographical scales and multiple temporalities, as set out above, to target interlinked issues, utilising cross-sector opportunities and promoting multiplier effects for recovery. At the local and city level, this relies on a well-adjusted prioritisation and implementation of interventions, working with local communities, local authorities, civil society, international organisations, private sector, and other relevant actors. On the national level, this relies on an enabling policy and regulatory environment and a geographic balanced approach, working with the GoS, international organisations and other relevant actors.

Overall policy goal for displacement sensitive urban recovery:

***Enabling<sup>165</sup> and Built components of Syrian cities are improved in a way that support integration and reintegration, to move towards inclusive, equitable and sustainable urban recovery and resilience.***

### Recommendations at the household and neighbourhood level

#### Policy goals at the household and neighbourhood level

9. Discrimination, social tension, and distrust are reduced among returnees, displaced and host community members.
10. Sense of belonging and futures is strengthened among those who return, particularly disenfranchised young women and men.
11. Housing rehabilitation and reconstruction by owners and rightsholders is supported.
12. Tenure rights are clarified at the community level with involvement of rightsholders, including displaced persons.
13. Access to clean energy solutions improved, including electricity, addressing urgent needs and enhancing local capacities.
14. Livelihood opportunities are improved, particularly among vulnerable groups including returnees, female-headed households and households with disabilities.
15. Public spaces accessibility and safety is improved, contributing to social cohesion, protection and mobility.
16. Local communities' roles, capacities, responsibilities, and ownership in programming are enhanced.

#### Absorptive measures:

- a. Engage communities through neighbourhood committees and local community representatives, including returnees, IDPs, host community, women, men, youth, and other vulnerable groups, in neighbourhood action planning processes to identify and prioritise interventions.
- b. Involve communities, including returnees and displaced, in physical damage assessments using relevant and up-to-date technology to quantify damages more accurately, improve data collection, and provide an informal due diligence mechanism in programming.
- c. Include a returns-focus in multi-sector assessments to better understand and monitor local conditions,

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<sup>165</sup> Enabling components of the city refers to systems in urban areas that are needed to support, manage and successfully implement a response for displaced people in cities, including 1) Policy, Legislation and Governance, 2) Urban Economy and Finance, and 3) Data. Built components of the city refers to systems that are physical manifestations or structural elements of the city which are essential to formulating a response to displacement, including 4) Housing, 5) Urban Basic Services, and 6) Social and Recreational Facilities.

and to inform prioritisation of actions.

- d. Explore options for tensions monitoring based on experience from Lebanon.
- e. Support protection services (child protection, GBV, Mental Health and Psychosocial Support [MHPSS] etc.) through community and social centres, mobile teams, and outreach volunteers in high return areas.
- f. Address trauma and distrust through dialogue and trust-building initiatives, engaging host communities, displaced and returnees.
- g. Assess current and potential use of social media as a channel for information-sharing on conditions in Syria, including service functionality, housing conditions and livelihoods options.
- h. Support livelihood activities based on identified needs and opportunities, such as shelter repairs, debris removal as well as health and education services.

#### **Adaptive measures:**

- i. Implement and monitor neighbourhood action plans linked to city-level initiatives and national policy and regulatory environment in a manner that connects participatory action planning to longer-term strategic planning and policy design.
- j. Clarify HLP rights at the community level and seek flexible arrangements led by the community.
- k. Support rehabilitation and reconstruction of houses by residents and rightsholders, e.g., through financing arrangements, assistance to obtain/restore tenure and ownership documents, technical support to secure a certified structural integrity report from the Syndicate of Engineers for damaged buildings, improved processes to obtain, and reduced costs of, building and rehabilitation permits, and subsidised construction material.
- l. Work with construction and engineering companies to identify needed skills and qualifications, and tailor educations and vocational training to meet the demand for skilled labour in the sector. Embed, where possible, local craftsmanship and use of local materials for the rebuilding of homes in ways that preserve heritage traditions, protect the environment, and serve as alternatives to costly building materials.
- m. Explore options to supplement energy provision using e.g., solar photovoltaics (PV) solutions, small scale hydraulic electricity generators for water supply, local energy grids using incinerator technologies to meet household needs, reduced protection issues linked to unlit public spaces and streets, and mitigate environmental and health risks from deforestation, diesel generator pollution, and building fires from unsafe cooking.
- n. Explore options to employ community contracting for project implementation, where local communities supplement other funding and implementation modules contribute employing their own labour and/or resources to implement activities.

#### **Transformative measures**

- o. Establish/support community centres that bring people together and provide services and activities in high-return neighbourhoods. These spaces can be used to support access to livelihoods, vocational training, basic social services (including protective referral mechanisms), community activities to foster social cohesion, and legal counselling to address HLP issues etc.
- p. Enhance urban regeneration and strengthen social cohesion through community engagement in local socio-economic development processes, linking areas of high displacement and potential return with areas with high economic potential.

## **Recommendations at the city level**

### **Policy goals at the city level**

- 9. Access to reliable, disaggregated, and up-to-date data on Enabling and Built components of cities high-return areas for programming and monitoring is improved.
- 10. Coordination and prioritisation of immediate and longer-term recovery actions across actors is efficient and impactful, centring on local authorities with strong community involvement.
- 11. Speculation in property and land is controlled, and people's and businesses' HLP rights protected.
- 12. Connections between current and potential high-return urban areas and access to markets improved

and economic activities supported.

13. Urban-rural linkages and regional connections for balanced recovery in return-areas strengthened.
14. In line with Law 107 provisions the role of local administrative, including responsibilities pertaining to municipal finance and service delivery planning, is strengthened and local authorities' capacities to adopt and implement recovery plans enhanced.
15. Urban economy is bolstered and access to education livelihoods is improved for all segment of the population including specific groups of concern, and key hindrances to productivity addresses.

**Absorptive measures:**

- a. Engage local authorities and other relevant actors in city action recovery planning to identify and prioritise interventions on a city level.
- b. Support efforts needed to declare neighbourhoods safe for return, including demining and rebuilding of infrastructure, housing and service buildings.
- c. Embed displacement and return data in piloted urban observatories to improve data on return dynamics, monitor of return and reintegration conditions, secure reporting lines in regional planning processes, and improve evidence-based programming across actors.
- d. Enhance municipalities' technical capacities to carry out returnee-sensitive planning, including adding a displacement and return focus in municipal information systems (MIS), containing e.g., key indicators, data collection, analysis and planning, to monitor return trends and impact on urban areas that will help guide service delivery, revenue collection, land redevelopment, SDGs, and other municipal-led activities in high displacement and return areas; and training of municipal staff to carry out integrated planning processes and supervise restoration and reconstruction.
- e. Support economic activities by investing in municipal market rehabilitation as well as Covid-19 measures.
- f. Carry out decontamination and mine risk assessments and removal of landmines and other unexploded ordinance in return areas.
- g. Award debris removal and redevelopment contracts to private companies based on transparent and fair processes.

**Adaptive measures:**

- h. Support cadastral offices to clarify land rights and improve formal land registration.
- i. Improve processes and reduce costs of access to civil documentation through civil registries.
- j. Establish a platform for city authorities to announce decisions and receive feedback from both residents and displaced persons on planning and development projects.
- k. Carry out fair, transparent, and orderly adjudication of property disputes at the community and rightsholder level before initiating urban upgrading (where feasible) and renewal (appropriate in areas with significant levels or moderate and severe damage).
- l. Strengthen local authorities own-sourced financing, e.g., through linking municipal projects to tax revenues to improve service delivery and equitable support to growing populations in high-return areas and across city neighbourhoods.
- m. Plan and realise restoration of service functionality in an equitable manner, factoring in current and likely return to neighbourhoods.
- n. Strengthen local economic development in high return areas by 1) working with small and medium sized business owners and institutions such as Chamber of Commerce and Industry to identify finance options (e.g., "soft loans"), inform policy makers (e.g., on legal and tax registration and permits), explore market opportunities linked with employment opportunities, and train returnees to secure employment or establishing businesses, 2) ensuring that land readjustment in urban industrial areas does not displace businesses to more remote areas before the necessary infrastructure is in place, and 3) exploring options for clean and reliable energy provision to support economic activities, including for industrial sites. Consider the life cycle of such solutions, including the afterlife and potential for realizing a circular economy for solar PV materials.

**Transformative measures:**

- o. Strengthen value-chains by linking urban and rural areas and capitalise on the movement between

high-return urban areas and corresponding places of origin.

- p. Support local economic development activities linking local to city scales, sensitive to local power dynamics and potential negative effects, to contribute to job creation, economic equity and a sense of opportunities and futures, particularly among young people.

## Recommendations at the national level

### Policy goals at the national level

- 16. Legal environment and implementation of the law pertaining to tenure security and HLP rights strengthened.
- 17. Priority areas for reintegration-focused efforts identified across Syria in a balanced manner. Prioritise interventions in high-displacement and high-return areas, such as the *recovery corridor* and the *Homs recovery region* as identified in this paper.
- 18. National processes anchored in and informed by local actions with increased accountability and trust.

### Absorptive measures:

- a. Provide evidence to guide prioritization and coordination of urban recovery across cities and intervention phases, considering factors such as level of damage to neighbourhoods, displacement and return trends, actors' access, and current programming.
- b. Compile a catalogue of good practice case studies for high return areas across Syria, reflecting the range of issues and context-specific solutions needed to create enabling conditions for the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of IDPs and refugees, looking both at area-based approaches and more conventional humanitarian implementation.
- c. Improve data collection on refugees and IDPs conditions relevant for return and reintegration policies.
- d. Balance informal upgrading and urban renewal policies, with adequate safeguards for residents and rightsholders, including informal tenure rights, to guarantee the option to return for informal tenure holders.
- e. Advocate for revoking or reworking vague or problematic legislations, such as Law 10, to ensure that displaced and returnees' rights are protected in land redevelopment processes.
- f. Update Syrian informal housing policies and legislations and make housing in informal areas "adequate" by legalising tenure status.

### Adaptive measures:

- g. Support dialogue between central and local authorities to streamline municipal approval processes of urban redevelopment and to establish equitable dispute resolution mechanisms for determining property ownership.
- h. Balance incentives for return of businesses across the return corridor through reconstruction of selected industrial and business infrastructure and strengthening of legal protection, sensitive to factors such as local power dynamics, economic sanctions, market distortions and changes to these.
- i. Regulate private-sector partners to ensure, transparency, accountability, and do-no-harm in urban redevelopment processes, including through PPPs.
- j. Agree on and embed displacement and reintegration considerations in masterplans and site management plans to be coordinated by the Ministry of Local Administration and Environment (MoLAE) at the national level in coordination with relevant directorates, local administration units, and GDCA at the regional and local authorities at the local levels.
- k. Ensure that the legal, regulatory, and financial environment for private sector urban redevelopment, if and when sanctions are lifted, provide clarification and protection of rights, and a positive contribution from development projects to affordable housing supply.
- l. Promote policies for environmental protection and heritage preservation.

### Transformative measures:

- m. Connect areas experiencing displacement and return, potential high-return areas and surrounding areas based on economic systems and movement patterns, in line with nationally formulated principles and sensitive to changes on-ground.

## Financing options for responding to displacement in Urban Recovery Approaches

To move towards recovery and resilience, a diversification of funding options that goes beyond humanitarian funding is needed. For urban recovery programming to respond aptly, efficiently and with the greatest possible impact, a greater share of funding must be multiyear, predictable, and flexible. Large packages of concessional finance and multi-donor accounts can contribute to this.

Local authorities in Syria have limited financial and human resources,<sup>166</sup> however recovery efforts can contribute to increase local authorities' capacities and contribution by supporting effective and equitable use of existing resources, and by increasing own source revenues (ORS). Strategies to strengthen OSR may include weighing the types of OSRs that are applied, considering the particular importance of choosing OSRs that clearly link tax contributions with services provided to facilitate voluntary compliance. It may also involve identifying revenue potential of all major revenue streams and administration costs per stream. Further, consideration of life-cycle costs, return on investment of specific maintenance activities, and market demand can improve the management of government-owned assets.

Community contracting for implementation of projects can, in combination with other approaches, be a useful financing mechanism. Through community contracts, local inhabitants contribute with their own labour and/or resources to implement prioritised activities. Beyond increasing the resources to carry out activities, this can have several additional positive effects including to anchor planning and implementation in the local community, foster ownership of such investments, provide local employment opportunities and skills development,

improve accountability, and support identification and integration of local capacities by implementing actors.

Recovery interventions have the potential to be 'self-generating' in the sense it can be used to unlock private finance, and to set up public-private-partnerships (PPPs). Depending on economic sanctions and other limiting factors, increased private sector engagement could be sought over time. It should be noted that the U.S. Treasury Department amended Syria sanctions regulations in November, representing a move towards more space for early recovery programming in Syria.<sup>167</sup>

Blended funding options may be explored for interlinked interventions e.g., energy and housing development. Such instrument can be used to transfer risk, create market incentives, provide technical assistance, or to remove commercial barriers. It may for example involve financing options for individuals to rebuild or expand their houses. Tapping non-humanitarian funding, e.g., climate change related funds such as Adaptation Fund, Green Climate Fund and Green Environment Facility could also be explored. Such funding may for example be used to explore piloting opportunities for mini-grid solar energy solutions to service residential neighbourhoods, and/or critical services, and/or value chains and industrial areas.

<sup>167</sup> COAR, "Washington Tweaks Syria Sanctions as Early Recovery Push Continues," December 6, 2021, <https://coar-global.org/2021/12/06/washington-tweaks-syria-sanctions-as-early-recovery-push-continues/>.

<sup>166</sup> Urban Recovery Programme, "Urban Recovery Framework Thematic Paper: Local Governance and Its Role in Local Recovery Planning and Local Economic Development."

## Monitoring

Monitoring of urban recovery efforts and how these contribute to improved Enabling and Built components in cities in a way that support integration and reintegration requires a flexible monitoring tool that can capture progress against indicators across neighbourhood, city, and national levels. Measuring and quantifying such components can support an acceleration towards urban recovery in manner that is inclusive of returnees, IDPs and host populations. The monitoring data can also be used to develop predictive models for areas that are currently or likely to receive returnees based on factors impacting population movements.

Risk analysis and monitoring of situation and needs with due diligence or safeguard measures are critical for displacement and reintegration sensitive urban recovery programming. This entails, among others, measuring do-no-harm considerations in urban development and infrastructure projects where due diligence and rights-based mechanisms should include a careful analysis of HLP risk factors. For this purpose, UN-Habitat has developed a risk analysis matrix which includes the following 13 risk categories, with a number of sub-categories for each: Politics of exclusion; damage to property; housing shortage/population pressure; issues related to natural resources; capture of state instruments; competition over use rights; nation state fragmentation; poverty

and lack of access to livelihoods; occupation of land and property; political competition between power blocks and plural legal systems; weak land administration; demographic change; and safety and security barriers for return.

Progress can be monitored on the following three administrative levels:

- Neighbourhood level: Monitoring through mukhtars, neighbourhood committees, and mechanisms set up as part of community contracting through Project Development Committees (foreseen in Law 107): this level should capture interventions in residential areas, e.g., rehabilitation of housing, the set-up of protection services and counselling, initiatives to promote social cohesion, and basic and social services. Monitoring at the neighbourhood levels should be reported to municipalities.
- City-level: Through municipalities, this level should at least address project-level monitoring, in particular related to performance of urban recovery projects with a direct or indirect importance for reintegration, and transparent mechanisms for HLP dispute resolution. A minimum reintegration-focused indicator package could become part of each city-level recovery plan.
- National level: Through RRWG and UN Hubs in

### Box 7 SDG11+

The SDG11+ has been developed to provide a tool that can support the monitoring of urban recovery frameworks (see the URF policy paper SDG 11+: Sustainable Development Goals as a monitoring tool for area-based interventions in Syria). As the name suggests, the tool draws on the indicators of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDGs) 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities, and further embeds indicators from other relevant goals, with relevant urban indicators at national and city levels. Relevant SDG indicators for urban recovery can be supplemented with specific indicators related to returns.

the first instance, this level has a focus on the consolidation of indicators above to feed into reporting towards national and international normative frameworks on return and protection in the context of urban recovery. Monitoring will further inform evidence-based urban recovery in areas of high displacement and/or potential future return.

Development and selection of indicators related to reintegration within an overall urban recovery monitoring tool, should have a special focus on:

- Measuring the impact of interventions aimed to support reintegration by ensuring access for all to adequate, safe, and affordable housing and

basic services.

- Measuring recovery of urban economic recovery and social cohesion in cities, as two key markers for returnees' decision to go home, and in particular inclusion of women, youth and people with disabilities in such interventions.
- Measuring housing restitution, including support structures to resolve property disputes, restore documentation, housing rehabilitation, and inclusive local planning.
- Measuring the participation of local communities in preserving tangible and intangible heritage contribution towards inclusive and socially cohesive local communities.



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## Conclusion and Way Forward

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This paper is part of a series of policy papers developed under the URF to explore conditions and recovery options for Syria. The analysis provided in this paper considers needs, vulnerabilities and structural issues linked to displacement and return in Syrian cities, to inform recommendations on embedding displacement and reintegration considerations in urban recovery and area-based programming. The scale of damage, destruction and displacement in Syria means that recovery efforts must be at scale, flexible, and context-sensitive to address vastly differing and rapidly changing situations on the ground. Many of the identified issues are both root causes to the conflict and act as barriers to return, integration, and equitable recovery. Recovery thus requires addressing immediate needs in a manner that also facilitates early recovery and resilience. For reintegration, this will entail a focus on strengthening HLP rights, supporting economic opportunities, promoting equitable service delivery, rebuilding housing and infrastructure, and enabling participation in planning and decision-making by current residents and displaced persons alike.

The policy recommendations presented in this paper build on the experiences from the applying the URF approach in Syria, where an iterative process has been applied to develop analysis, recovery plans, implement and monitor priority activities. Each URF

cycle has provided valuable learning and opportunities for existing and new actors to collaborate across geographies, sectors, and scales. This policy paper suggests how the URF as well as other area-based initiatives in Syria can incorporate preparedness at different geographical scales covering national, city, and local levels, and with potential short, medium, and long-term effects. This further aligns with the UN Strategic Framework 2022-2024 focus on integrated and area-based programming and pillar three Enabling Environment for a resilient return.

The URF has progressively involved local actors, community members and former residents displaced by the conflict, in assessments, planning and implementation of initiatives. This is a critical condition for preparedness and the success of displacement sensitive recovery activities. Representative participation as well as involvement of relevant institutions and actors, is key to respond to IDPs and residents needs in a holistic, future-oriented, and conflict-sensitive manner. As such, the URF provides a tested approach for local, national and international partners to work collectively in an area-based manner. The experience from implementation of recovery plans under the UN Joint Programme, for example, provides valuable learning for future programming.



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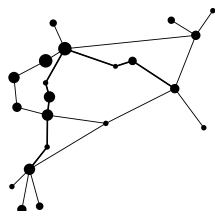
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