

**Where is Home for the Permanently Displaced?  
Citizens of Daraya**



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## Introduction

In light of an ever growing pressure to send Syrian refugees back and in order to understand the realistic prospects of them returning, this study explores the concerns, expectations, and conditions for return for former male and female citizens of the city of Daraya.

The importance in terms of pre-war size, large-scale physical destruction of the city and its confessional and social fabric make Daraya an interesting place to study when it comes to prospects of refugees return particularly that it has been completely evacuated. After years of starvation and military attack, Daraya was the first Syrian city to be entirely depopulated through a forced evacuation of the remaining citizens in August 2016. While many cities had to submit to the regime's forced displacement deals, the case of the city of Daraya stands out among the rest mainly because it has been under complete regime control for nearly two years now, yet so far none of its residents, whether civilians or rebels, have been allowed to return back.<sup>1</sup>

In order to understand the realistic prospects of refugees returning, it is necessary to take into consideration the reasons that forced them to leave their homes in the first place, which remain largely unaddressed.

Governmentally-driven forced mass-displacement is a defining feature of the Syrian conflict. The Syrian regime – aided by its allies Russia and Iran – has systematically used local evacuation deals – following years of military pressure through a strategy of siege, starvation, destruction of civilian housing and targeting of hospitals and schools, to deport hundreds of thousands of civilians who opposed it from rural and urban centres across the country. Likewise, its collective punishment policy through the use of large-scale indiscriminate attacks against civilians has also resulted in displacing millions.<sup>2</sup>

Today there are almost 6.6 million people internally displaced as well as 5.6 more million refugees living abroad<sup>3</sup> and there is no sign of an end to the conflict that would offer a political solution to the Syrian people. Nonetheless, governments and politicians across the world are already beginning to consider – or have already started – the repatriation of Syrian refugees.<sup>4</sup> These tendencies were accelerated following the recent military gains achieved by the Syrian regime, which allowed it to restore its control over most of the urban areas in the country and further secure territories under its control. The Russian brokered de-escalation deals- most of which no longer exist- have also provided a deceptive impression that a political deal is within reach.

Moreover, the UN reports about 'a notable trend in of spontaneous returns to and within Syria the first half of 2017,'<sup>5</sup> were presented as an evidence-based indication to support their argument that Syria has become safe for refugees to return.<sup>6</sup> But such reports on returnees to Syria have failed to indicate the reasons – military and political – that kept Syrians from returning, as well as the conditions under which people are forced to go back. As for the latter, Human Rights Watch indicated that the cases of refoulement from Jordan peaked in early 2017, with up to 400 Syrians deported every month.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Lebanon has engaged in forcing thousands of Syrian refugees to go back through means of aggressive security operations and anti-refugee legal restrictions –outside any international framework

and regulations.<sup>8</sup> Turkey also announced the return of 200,000 Syrian refugees to their areas without transparency about how that process is happening.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, the notion of “voluntary return” of those who returned to Syria is highly questionable and its presentation as “voluntary” is even misleading, as many are simply being forced back.

For the former, the existing risks facing those who had to return are also largely ignored.<sup>10</sup> Direct military action is not the single reason deterring refugees and IDPs from returning to their homes, but political and security concerns and conditions that make going back nearly impossible. The act of “return” from outside Syria therefore, cannot be considered equal to going back home. It is also important to highlight that upon returning many Syrian refugees become IDPs as they do not return to the location from which they had originally fled from. For example some of the refugees who returned from Lebanon ended up in Idlib instead of going back to their areas of origin in rural Damascus.<sup>11</sup> Statistics on return from outside Syria thus are misleading.

To contribute to preventing the premature, or even forced, return of Syrian refugees to their country, this paper aims to explain to a non-Syrian audience the complexity of questions of return for the many whose homes were not only physically eliminated but whose very rights to exist in their home territory are in fact being denied. Towards that end, the paper conducts an in-depth case study on the city of Daraya to provide an overview of the course of the conflict from the start of peaceful protests in 2011 through to the destruction and depopulation of the whole city. The study also presents the personal stories of the city’s former residents as well as their concerns, conditions and priorities for return. Furthermore, it presents the current regime policies and practices that are preventing locals from returning.

The paper proceeds as follows: the first section gives background information on the city, its strategic importance and its unique history of non-violent activism. The second section tells the story of Daraya’s uprising and relays how the Assad regime employed various tactics in order to depopulate it through personal stories about people’s multiple displacements and the reasons behind them. The third section addresses the threats that prevent Daraya’s residents from going back and the pre-conditions needed for their return.

## Methodology

Central to the research for this paper is a set of 15 semi-structured interviews with locals who have been internally displaced (3 in rebel-held areas and 3 in regime-controlled areas) or who have sought refuge in Syria’s neighbouring countries (3 in Lebanon, 2 in Turkey and 1 in Egypt) or Europe (1 in Germany, 1 in France and 1 in Sweden).

The interviewees were selected based on their sex, age, political position and geographical location. The interviews were conducted by the author online, principally via Skype and WhatsApp, between February and June 2018. Several interviewees were interviewed more than once. The names of interviewees have been changed to remain anonymous due to safety concerns. Occasionally the paper relies on secondary sources, including official

statements, human rights reports, research papers and news coverage, as well as social media commentary confirmed by credible activists.

It is not clear how representative the views expressed here are, but the high level of agreement among interviewees on the subjects discussed suggests that such views can give useful insights about how Syrian refugees in general feel about the issue of returning. The paper also indicates that the matters highlighted merit additional attention from the hosting countries, as well as humanitarian and human rights organisations.

## A glimpse into Daraya's history

Located some 8 kilometres east of Damascus, Daraya – meaning “home” in Syriac – was Syria's 19th biggest city with an estimated population between 150,000 and 200,000 in 2011.<sup>12,13</sup> Its population was composed mainly of Sunni Arabs (nearly 99 per cent) and a small number of Christians who lived together peacefully.<sup>14</sup>

The majority of the Daraya's residents worked in agriculture and produced a variety of crops including olives and wheat. However, the city is most notably known for its grapes which have long become associated with its name. Daraya is equally recognised for its furniture manufacturing and trade. The city's pre-war size, its geographical proximity to Damascus, and its location amid key regime military facilities (namely Mezzeh Military Airbase and the base of the elite 4th Armored Division) added to its strategic and commercial importance.<sup>15</sup>

### “I want a broom, too” – Daraya's civil movements

While Daraya on the outset may sound like any other rural city in Syria, a closer look into its recent history shows a unique legacy of social and non-violent activism, which is unusual for a police state like Syria that ruthlessly suppresses any independent movements. Long before the 2011 peaceful demonstrations started in the country, a group of young women and men of Daraya were actively mobilising their community to advocate for social change and religious reform. The young group (also known as the Youth Group of Daraya) established in 1998 was influenced and guided by the teachings of the religious scholar Abdul-Akram al-Saqqa, who promoted social and political freedom and encouraged free thinking amongst his students.<sup>16</sup> A member of the group stated,

*“Al-Saqqa called for women to choose their own husbands and argued that women's education was more important than whether or not they wore the veil. He introduced us to the work of Jawdat Said [an Islamic scholar who promoted non-violent thought and practice through the Quranic traditions], and the ideas of Gandhi and Martin Luther King.”<sup>17</sup>*

Under his mentorship, the Youth Group of Daraya organized risky and unusual social campaigns. While the campaigns varied in their topic, they were all held under one slogan: “until you change what is in yourselves”- a Quranic verse that makes the individual responsible for his or her own actions and views them as the first and most important step in reforming their community.<sup>18</sup> One of the campaigns called “Give me a broom, too!” and

focused on cleaning the streets of Daraya.<sup>19</sup> Besides cleaning the streets, the group members encouraged by-passers to join them and become actively involved in their community. The group also organized an-anti corruption campaign called “despite the deceiving names you give it, it is still a bribe”. The campaign published and distributed awareness-raising posters, flyers and calendars illustrating different types of bribes in order to discourage people from paying off government employees.<sup>20</sup>

The group’s most political activity was organising a silent demonstration in the centre of Daraya in protest against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>21</sup> Although the Syrian government opposed the US invasion too, the demonstration was perceived as a threat as it was organised by locals without acquiring an official permission. All the group’s public activities happened over a short period of time, which raised the group’s profile and amplified the threat it posed in the regime’s eyes.<sup>22</sup> One of the group’s members stated,

*“The message the regime wanted to send to everyone was clear. No one is allowed to think independently or express his own opinion even if the content is in accordance with the regime’s policies. The regime is the only one in charge of such functions and the only entity allowed to take initiatives.”<sup>23</sup>*

Consequently, the female members of the group were questioned, threatened and forced to sign a personal statement vowing not to be involved in similar activities in the future. The male members of the group received even harsher treatment. An estimate of 24 males, who were actively involved in the demonstration, were arrested. Some were released after a few months while others were subjected to arbitrary trials and sentenced to prison between three and four years.<sup>24</sup> A person who was imprisoned for two years stated,

*“During the interrogations, it was clear that the mukhbarat [intelligence] was closely monitoring our activities. They did not believe us when we told them that we had no ulterior motives. In a police state like Syria, anyone involved in any civic volunteerism, despite its goals, is considered an existential threat. Thus, those who dare to care are ruthlessly punished, so that others do not dare to do the same.”<sup>25</sup>*

The Syrian regime’s brutality in dealing with the group succeeded in terminating any further civic volunteerism in Daraya. But the limited and brief-lived movement turned the city into an icon for nonviolent activism.

## The story of Daraya’s uprising

Daraya’s exceptional history in civil activism made its prompt participation in the uprising inevitable. The city’s short-lived youth movement in 2003 was considered a rare source of inspiration for many of the city’s younger generations, who were aware of its goals and activities. Subsequently, Daraya’s young residents were among the first to join the protests that took place on 25 March 2011, a week after the first demonstration took place in the southern city of Daraa.<sup>26</sup> A local activist who participated in Daraya’s first demonstration stated,

*“Daraya’s youth group made me dream of having agency and freedom to shape my future and choose my political representatives. Thus, when the demonstrations started I was so happy, and hopeful, that I will finally have the chance to make that dream come true.”<sup>27</sup>*

But like many other areas in Syria, Daraya’s demonstrations started small with only a limited number of participants and would take place intermittently. The majority of Daraya’s residents reportedly had a positive position towards the uprising; nonetheless, they still decided not to take part in the protests. The reasons behind that varied from fear of the regime’s brutality to not having a clear idea about what was happening.<sup>28</sup> A local female who was reluctant to participate in the demonstrations relates,

*“My husband was working in Daraa when the demonstrations started there. He told me about the brutal attacks the regime was carrying out against the peaceful protesters. To be honest, I did not believe that the regime can be that brutal. But all my doubts disappeared when I personally witnessed the way the regime was attacking the protestors in Daraya. After that, I started to support the peaceful demonstrations but I was still too scared to participate.”<sup>29</sup>*

The older generation of Daraya which had witnessed, or remembered the vicious punishment the regime had used against its opponents in the eighties were scared of facing the same fate. A senior woman from Daraya stated,

*“Although I was supporting the revolution, I was still scared of participating in the demonstrations. I was old enough to still remember the massacre that happened in Hama in the 1980s. Thus, I knew that the regime will do whatever it takes to stay in power. The thought of facing the same brutality terrified me.”<sup>30</sup>*

### **Female participation**

Additionally, the demonstrations in Daraya were, for the first few weeks at least, exclusively limited to male participants. Local women were not welcomed, or allowed to participate. A woman from Daraya who could not participate during that period said,

*“As a woman, I was not allowed to participate in the protests that took place in the first few weeks of the revolution. Men were either concerned for our safety or opposed our participation because of our sex. Therefore, we were just watching the demonstrations from afar.”<sup>31</sup>*

The regime’s increased brutality to quickly subdue the uprising had a snowball effect on the scale and intensity of the demonstrations. While more individuals were encouraged to join the demonstrations, which then became more frequent, the number of protesters was still however, relatively small. It was only after the regime shot directly at protestors on 22 April 2011- killing three and injuring many others- that a bigger percentage of Daraya’s residents then took the streets to protest against it. It also pushed people for the first time to destroy the regime’s statues inside the city and to call for its toppling.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the women in Daraya were able to mobilise themselves after that event in order to participate in the funeral of those who were killed in the demonstration. A women protester who was there on that day stated,

*“Up until Good Friday [also known in Syria as the Great Friday] on 22 April 2011, our role was limited to watching the demonstrations and providing the protesters with occasional and indirect support. But when the funeral took place, I saw many women standing in the streets. We did not exchange a word but it was clear that they were there to participate. Thus, we marched with the men. That allowed us to push against the social restrictions imposed on us, as women, and organise our own demonstrations and nonviolent activities.”<sup>33</sup>*

The widespread protests in Daraya allowed its civil society groups and institutions to flourish and become a national icon for nonviolent activism. Daraya’s activists went beyond the general demands to reform, or topple, the regime. They were raising awareness about coexistence, citizenship, gender equality and human rights.<sup>34</sup> The protestors were also known for giving flowers and water bottles to the members of the security forces who were there to attack them. The steadfast commitment to non-violence earned one of its 26 old activists, Ghiath Matar, the nickname “Little Gandhi.”<sup>35</sup> According to one of Daraya’s local activists,

*“We started this revolution to get rid of the system of violence, not merely to oust Assad. We also knew that change comes through actions and not words, especially the one that is desired through nonviolent means. Therefore, we were distributing water and flowers to show the soldiers who were sent to attack us that we are not their enemies. We also distributed notes to introduce them to the ideas we are calling for, which is a just, free and inclusive country for all Syrians.”<sup>36</sup>*

Likewise, women of Daraya, also known as Daraya’s Free Women, became famous throughout the country for their non-violent activism and creativity. They worked on various grassroots initiatives, from emergency and humanitarian assistance to founding Daraya’s local newspaper Enab Beladi [the Grapes of My Country]. They were also building the capacity of their fellow citizens on issues related to civic education, community mobilisation, and non-violent tactics. A founding member of Daraya’s Free Women mentioned,

*“We were quickly able to organise ourselves and make the change we long wished for. We knew that there was room to do more than the demonstrations and nonviolent activities that we were involved in. Thus, we started building the capacity of locals, especially women, to become active and take control of their own fate. Personally, I was writing investigative reports for Enab Baladi, which I helped found. I was also providing civic training for Daraya’s women.”<sup>37</sup>*



## In the crosshairs because of non-violence

Daraya's reputation as a peaceful hub for non-violent activities made it a main target for the regime. The city's nonviolent approach challenged the Syrian regime's narrative, which portrayed the uprising as a military one and discredited the peaceful demonstrations as being terrorist movements. Therefore, from the beginning, the city was targeted harshly by the regime that repeatedly detained and killed peaceful activists. During September 2011, Ghiath Matar was arrested and four days later his corpse was returned mutilated to his parents and pregnant wife.<sup>38</sup> A female activist from Darya stated,

*"It was clear from the beginning that the Syrian regime was viewing peaceful activists as an existential threat. That became even clearer to me during my detention. We, peaceful activists, were tortured more than any other prisoners, including those who were supporting armed groups. We were also detained for longer periods. On top of that, Daraya's activists were treated worse than the rest. Whenever I was transferred to a new security branch, I was automatically beaten up for hours as soon as they found out that I was from Daraya."*<sup>39</sup>

In a matter of a few months, the threats confronting protestors changed significantly from the likelihood of being detained to the possibility of being killed. As a result, many of them became either on the run inside the city, or had to flee to other areas where they can continue their work in a safer environment.<sup>40</sup> A peaceful activist who was shocked after his release by how violent the regime had become said,

*"I did not believe it at first. During my detention, which only lasted for a few months, the regime moved from beating the protesters up to shelling them using tanks and mortars. I might sound ridiculous, but being in prison was in a way safer than participating in the demonstrations."*<sup>41</sup>

With time, the regime's brutality expanded from mainly targeting peaceful activities to collectively punishing the areas that were allowing them to operate using different tactics such as besiegement and indiscriminate airstrikes. The regime's large scale and frequent attacks against Daraya resulted in various waves of displacement which eventually left the city devoid of life in August 2016.<sup>42</sup>

## Forced displacement

As the risks that faced peaceful demonstrators in Daraya continued to increase, rapidly and dramatically, the wider population was directly impacted. Initially, the regime's violence inside the city- such as arbitrary and indiscriminate arrests- limited people's ability to move during and after the demonstrations. The regime's checkpoints, which were installed at a later stage around Daraya, also made it difficult for locals to travel to other areas. A female university student who was frequently commuting to Damascus stated,

*"It was not easy for me to go to my university in Damascus because of the multiple checkpoints that I had to pass through. The soldiers were harassing me and many others"*

*from Daraya too, because of the city's revolutionary reputation. Being a girl from Daraya made me even more vulnerable. After a few months, I stopped going to my university because I could not take it anymore.*"<sup>43</sup>

But the life of Daraya's inhabitants was severely impacted when pro-regime forces decided to attack the city on August 20<sup>th</sup>, 2012. Following a few days of intense shelling on Daraya, the city's power and communication were cut off in preparation for the onslaught. The regime forces stormed the city on August 21 using tanks and heavy military equipment. After only very brief clashes with local FSA groups, the regime was able to impose complete control over the city. To eliminate its opponents, the regime carried out door to door raids in specific areas, which resulted in the killing of hundreds of civilians indiscriminately.<sup>44</sup> A local resident who witnessed the aftermath of the attack stated,

*"We did not know exactly what was happening as we were scared of leaving the house when the attack was still ongoing. But the level of brutality became clearer when the regime left the city, a few days later. At least 500 people were summarily executed by gunshots from close range. It seemed that the soldiers were on a mission to kill as many people as possible. They were arresting and killing everyone in the areas that they entered. Entire families, including children, were forced out of their houses and executed immediately. It was horrific."*<sup>45</sup>

The regime prompt withdrawals from Daraya a few days after the attack-for no obvious reasons-made people think that it was a one-off assault.<sup>46</sup> As such, many people stayed in the city, and for the following three months, it was completely free from any regime presence. Locals who were left alone, quickly established a local governance structure to run the city.<sup>47</sup> A local resident who witnessed that period stated,

*"That was the best three months of my life. For the first time, we were able to decide who will govern us and how. We had people policing us without being scared of them. We had local officials who were doing their job without requesting bribes. Everyone was working together to make the city a better place for everyone."*<sup>48</sup>

But Daraya did not enjoy that peace for long. The regime decided to attack the city once again on November 13, but the attack was different this time. Preceding the offensive, the regime increased the number of checkpoints around the city in a clear attempt to besiege it. However, forces at the checkpoints were allowing people to pass through to leave the areas. Moreover, the regime used for the first time its fighting jets to fly over the city in an attempt to scare civilians and further push them to leave. A local resident who witnessed the attack stated,

*"The regime attacked the city in a way that scared people to leave. But that was not said in words. The regime's fighting jets broke the sound barrier few times that day without bombarding the city, which meant to frighten people. Those guarding the checkpoints were not allowing anyone to enter the city but were on the other hand allowing people to leave. The city was besieged for a few days before it was attacked driving as many people as possible to run for their lives. It was all clearly planned in advance."*<sup>49</sup>

The fear of witnessing another massacre in Daraya pushed the vast majority of locals to leave the city. Some people decided to visit their relatives in Damascus, while others moved to nearby farms and towns. Since those who fled thought that they will return in a few days, the majority of them left their belongings behind. A local resident who left the city with the masses stated,

*“We only took our official documents and a few pieces of clothing thinking that we will return home in a few days. We did not have time to collect our favourite things or visit our special places. Everything happened so quickly as if our worst nightmares did suddenly come true.”<sup>50</sup>*

Those who were outside the city during that period did not have a chance to go back and collect their essential belongings either. A local resident from Daraya who was away when the city was besieged stated,

*“I took my kids to visit my family in Mazzeh [a neighbourhood in Damascus city] for a few days on November 10<sup>th</sup>. The idea was to leave them with my parents while I go to different security branches to look for my husband and son who had been detained. When we heard that the city will be attacked, I tried to go back and collect a few things from the house. But the soldiers at the city’s entrance told me that no one is allowed to enter.”<sup>51</sup>*

Following the complete besiegement of Daraya, the regime started to intensify its shelling of it. Fighting jets were being used for the first time to bombard it. The offensive allowed the regime to capture part of the city, while the rest of it remained under the control of local FSA groups. The standoff situation made it clear to those who had left the city that their displacement was going to last more than they had expected. Some people were able to move to safe areas, while others kept moving from one area to another whenever clashes caught up with them. Despite their various temporary destinations, the majority of Dayara’s residents were determined to stay close to their city, for as long as possible, so that they could go back home as soon as the security situation allows.<sup>52</sup>

But staying in regime-controlled areas came with a heavy price. Some people were targeted due to their participation in the uprising. A displaced female activist who was wanted by the regime stated,

*“I was arbitrarily detained in December 2012 on a checkpoint close to Mouadamyeh. I was politically active but they did not know that when they first arrested me. My husband was also arrested at the same checkpoint when he went to ask for me. A few days later, the same checkpoint arrested my mother and my children. I was released 7 months later in a prisoners swap deal, but I did not see my husband again. I found out a few months later that he was killed in jail. Despite all of that, I arranged for my kids to return from Lebanon to Damascus. But we had to flee to Lebanon a few months later when I found out that the regime was trying to arrest me again.”<sup>53</sup>*

Even those who were not politically active against the regime were still being targeted by it just because they are from Daraya. A local resident who remained in Syria until February 2014 stated,

*“We moved to a dozen places in rural Damascus as the fighting was following us everywhere we went. During our displacements, my husband, my brother and my brother-in-law, who were accompanying us, were arbitrarily detained at different checkpoints even though they had not participated in any of the demonstrations. Despite all our attempts,, we still do not know anything about them. Then when we moved to Madaya, my father who was 75 years old was also arrested at a check point close to the house just because we are from Daraya. He was later released only when we agreed to leave the area. That’s when we decided to flee to Lebanon as we could not afford to lose any more people.”<sup>54</sup>*

The risks the few thousand people who had decided to stay in the Daraya faced were much higher. The regime’s besiegement of the city lasted for nearly four years, during which it carried out countless attacks on its people in order to overtake it. The humanitarian situation in Daraya became particularly dire in 2015 when the regime took over the farmlands between it and the neighbouring town of al-Moadamyia. The move did not only cut all existing smuggling routes to the city, but it also prevented its residents from planting its farmlands, which were within the regime’s fire range.<sup>55</sup> That made living conditions in Daraya very difficult. A woman who lived inside the city during that period remembered,

*“We were fine for the first few months, but the situation got really bad towards the end of 2015. We had to live for months on soups made of boiled water and species. There was no medicine. The regime’s attacks also intensified dramatically. We were only concerned for our kids who had no food to eat or a place to hide.”<sup>56</sup>*

The regime was able to take advantage of the deteriorating humanitarian situation inside Daraya to advance inside the city. Towards that end, pro-regime forces spared no weapon at their disposal in their efforts to capture the city.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, the first eight months of 2018 in Daraya - minus a brief intermission in February - were exceptionally brutal. A local civilian who lived inside the city during the attacks stated,

*“It was a miracle that we survived the last eight month of the regime’s attack on Daraya. There was constant shelling on the city as if it was a long rainy winter of missiles. The buildings were shaking nonstop. We could not sleep. We also did not have anything to eat. More importantly, we had no safe place to go to.”<sup>58</sup>*

Ultimately regime forces penetrated the rebels’ last lines of defense, and rebels—exhausted, short of ammunition, and fearful for their family members who were caught with them inside the siege—were left with little choice but to agree to a surrender deal offers and counter-offers for an exit from the city had gone back and forth for months between the city and the regime. In the end, Daraya’s residents had to either accept the regime’s condition to forcibly leave the city or be overrun and wiped out. The city’s submission to the regime led to the forced displacement of an estimate of 5000 people, most of which were civilians. FSA fighters along with their families were forced to be relocated to the rebel-controlled province of Idlib, while those who tolerated living under the regime’s control, were moved to the nearby town of Kiswah in rural Damascus.<sup>59</sup> A local resident who was forced to move to Idlib stated,

*“While we were waiting to be killed inside the city, the local council called for a general meeting and informed us about the displacement deal. We were asked to choose one of the set destinations. We were only allowed to take a backpack each so we had to leave everything else behind. It was a tough decision but we had no other choice but to leave.”<sup>60</sup>*

The regime’s systematic efforts to vacate Daraya were successful in transforming it into a ghost city by the end of August 2016. Despite all the challenges and the risks involved, around half of the city’s population remained inside the country, however displaced in Daraya’s neighbouring regions waiting to be allowed back. The other half of the city’s inhabitants is expected to have sought refuge in Syria’s neighbouring countries. The largest percentage of them apparently is staying in Lebanon, while the rest are distributed between Egypt, Turkey and to a lesser extent Europe.<sup>61</sup>

## Forbidden entry

Unlike other cities that had to submit to the regime’s forced displacement deals, Daraya’s case stands out among the rest mainly due to the conditions of the deal as well as to the systematic procedures that followed. The arrangements did not include any compromises from the regime’s part that other deals saw, which usually allow for some people to stay behind or for those who had left, to come back.. Daraya has been under complete regime control for nearly two years now, yet so far none of its residents, whether civilians or rebels, have been allowed to stay or to return back.<sup>62</sup> To keep people out of the city, the regime has installed a dozen checkpoints inside and around it. In some cases, locals are allowed to visit their ghost city, however only after a lengthy security and bureaucratic process of approvals that most people cannot get. A local resident who obtained a permit to visit his house stated,

*“It took me months to be able to get a permission to visit my home in Daraya. While I paid a lot of money to get it, others either do not have the money or are scared of applying for security reasons. The regime’s checkpoints are installed everywhere to prevent people from going back. It is a terrifying feeling to see your city in ruins and completely empty.”<sup>63</sup>*

The regime has been presenting Daraya’s destructions as the main reason for not allowing people to go back. Contrarily, Daraya’s residents believe that the city’s destruction is being used as an excuse to keep them away. Multiple sources mentioned that while part of the city – that which was under rebel’s control V suffered a high level of destruction, the neighbourhoods that were held by the regime are in better condition and thus can be repaired quickly. Nonetheless, instead of rebuilding those areas or allowing the owners to do so- which can allow for thousands of people to go back- the regime seems to be intentionally slowing the reconstruction process- if any- in order to keep people displaced.<sup>64</sup> Adding to their argument, locals highlighted that the level of destruction in other areas that were recaptured from the rebels such as that in eastern Aleppo-which was captured a few months after Daraya and witnessed a similar level of destruction-did not stop the regime from allowing locals to go back even without any efforts to rebuild their areas.<sup>65</sup> A local resident from Daraya stated,

*“The regime is playing it smart. Instead of saying that people of Daraya will never be allowed to return, it states that they will be allowed to go back while on the other hand creates obstacles to keep them out. The regime is a master of saying something and doing the opposite. As such, figuring out the regime’s real policies should be based on its actions on the ground rather than its official statements.”<sup>66</sup>*

Nonetheless, Daraya’s residents seem to be struggling to understand the reasons driving the regime to keep their city empty. The latter does not seem to have any obvious interests in the city prior to 2011 that can explain its recent policies there. A local resident stated,

*“We, the people of Daraya, are still wondering about the reasons why the regime is preventing all of us from going back. In some cases, the regime allowed other people who opposed it to return to their areas, so why is Daraya still a ghost city? People came up with different theories to answer that question but no one seems to have a clear answer.”<sup>67</sup>*

The majority of Daraya’s residents think that the regime wants to punish them because of the city’s reputation as a revolutionary icon. In this context, leaving the city empty, and destroyed, will continue to be a clear physical symbol of the regime’s victory against the Syrian uprising.<sup>68</sup> Advocates of this argument refer to Assad’s decision to have the Muslim holiday prayer of Eid al-Adha in Daraya two weeks after it was emptied- which was widely viewed as a triumphant victory lap- as a supporting evidence.<sup>69</sup>

Other than for the purpose of punishment, some believe that the regime is planning to re-engineer the demographic composition of the city. Advocates of this speculation think that the regime and its ally Iran are working on replacing the local Sunni residents of Daraya with Shia loyalists. Their assumption is based on the sectarian rhetoric that was being used to mobilise Iranian backed Shia militias to besiege and recapture Daraya. Likewise, the public prayer of a Shia delegation from Iraq inside the city- after it was captured- was widely perceived by locals as a show of Shia triumphalism.<sup>70</sup> Unlike the regime, Iran’s interest in Daraya goes back over two decades ago. For Shia Muslims, Daraya is home to a shrine containing the remains of Sayyida Sakina (also known as Ruqayya), the infant daughter of Imam Hussein, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad. As such, Iran has been for decades investing in expanding Sakina’s shrine, which was drawing Shia pilgrims from all over the region.<sup>71</sup> Iran’s increased interests in Daraya has long caused tension with local Sunnis who believed that it aimed at creating a Shia foothold in the city and bolster Iran’s influence. A local resident stated,

*“What Iran claims to be a shrine of Sayyida Sakina was originally an abandoned grave of a local blessed woman from the Latifeh family. In the late eighties, a sign with the name of Sayyida Sakina was installed next to it. A few years later, convoys of Shia pilgrims started to visit it. That’s when Iran turned the grave to a shrine and started to expand it. Iran also tried to distribute Shia religious books among locals and provide monthly allowances to every family that converts to Shia Islam. Locals were able to stop Iran’s efforts in the nineties. But it seems that Iran might be winning that battle now especially if it is able to successfully transfer a large number of its militias into the city.”<sup>72</sup>*

While there is no solid evidence that Shia militias or even civilians are moving to the city- as it is still completely empty- the above alarming sectarian signs and narrative used by both the regime and the foreign militias fighting along its side- is giving such sectarian-based theories primacy among Daraya's residents.

Other residents argue that the regime is implementing a political, rather than sectarian, demographic engineering in Daraya. The regime's systematic use of local deals across Syria to force its opponents out of their areas is used to highlight a clear demographic engineering pattern. The regime's aim of such a political project is to push those who oppose it to remote areas away from Damascus- and other important urban centres- so it is only surrounded by those who support it or at least do not have the willingness to oppose it. That's why its forced displacement deals do not only target those who have been actively part of the resistance movement against it but the population that is opposing its rule regardless of whether they are politically active against it or not.<sup>73</sup> A local resident from Daraya stated,

*"I am convinced that emptying Daraya is part of the regime efforts to engineer the demographic composition of the rebel-held areas, especially in the areas that are strategically important for the regime. Daraya's strategic location and geographical proximity to Damascus and other important military bases made it a prime target for the regime's project."*<sup>74</sup>

It remains difficult to verify the intentions behind the regime's policy to prevent people from going back, but what is clear and more important is that Daraya's residents are not allowed to return to their homes.

## Attitudes toward Retuning

Despite the regime's systematic attempts to keep Daraya's residents out of their city, all the people interviewed for this paper expressed their desire to return. Daraya's displaced people, both inside and outside the country, are facing mounting social and economic difficulties, which are increasing their aspiration to go back home. Both groups share some common problems- such as financial difficulties and lack of humanitarian aid.

Nonetheless, there are special challenges that are unique to the specific regions they live in. For example, people who were forced to move to Idlib are still suffering from regime's indiscriminate attacks against civilians. They also have neither the financial means nor the needed assistance to make their ends meet.<sup>75</sup> As such they are forced to live in bad living conditions either in makeshift camps or collective shelters that are not inhabitable. A displaced person to Idlib stated,

*"We accepted to go to Idlib to avoid dying in Daraya. But the situation here is equally dangerous. The regime and Russia use their fighting-jets to systematically target civilian facilities and camps. On top of that, we are unable to rent a place or find a job. The humanitarian aid we used to receive is also decreasing. The only thing that allows us to bear this situation is the dream of being able to go home one day."*<sup>76</sup>

Those who sought refuge in the neighbouring countries (namely Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey) are experiencing even greater restrictions on employment opportunities and are suffering from more cuts on humanitarian assistance.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, many of them are unable to obtain the needed documents to reside legally inside the country. In Lebanon, for example, refugees face evictions, raids, arrests and detentions, curfews, and restrictions on residency and freedom of movement. Eviction orders were issued for over 10,000 people living in 259 informal tented settlements in the Bekaa Valley.<sup>78</sup> Similarly, Jordan and Turkey seem to be pushing more for refugees to return.<sup>79</sup> A refugee in Lebanon related,

*“We tried for as long as possible not to leave Syria. We knew the difficulties, challenges and humiliation that come with leaving one’s home but we had no choice. Therefore, returning home will be the only way to get back the thing that we hold most dear, our dignity.”<sup>80</sup>*

Even those who made it to Europe, usually perceived as the lucky ones, are facing increased discrimination in their home of asylum and are scared of being forced to return to Syria while it is still unsafe. A local resident who sought asylum in Germany stated,

*“We thought that coming to Europe will make us feel secure and allow my kids to have a better future. But the situation here, which is way better than any other country in the region, is still unstable. We always hear that we will be sent back. People in the streets sometimes insult us. It is not easy to live in a place where you are not wanted.”<sup>81</sup>*

In addition to the difficult conditions that the displaced people of Daraya are facing, their memories of the things they left behind are also a strong driving force behind their urge to return. But unlike the challenges that most of them seem to share, what people miss most about Daraya differs greatly from one person to another. Samer – who was forced to move to Idlib in August 2016 – wants to go back to the jasmine plant and fruit trees in his parents’ backyard. That spot for him has a great sentimental value as he used to spend most of his time there with his parent and siblings, drinking tea and chatting the nights away.<sup>82</sup> As for Aisha who was displaced in 2012 she misses having her family and relatives near her. She stated,

*“In Syria, if you cut your finger you spend at least three days chatting to people visiting or calling you to show their support and offer their help. This does not exist in exile, despite how comfortable it might be. I want to go back home to have all my loved ones – who are scattered everywhere – now- in one place again.”<sup>83</sup>*

Fatimah, who lives in Egypt, wants to go back to look after the graves of her husband, her two brothers and her son who were buried in Daraya- some of which were buried before she got a chance to say goodbye. She constantly dreams of returning home to be able to look after their graves. She stated,

*“Once you have beloved ones buried in the soil of an area, it becomes extremely difficult to live in peace away from them. While being next to them does not bring them back, visiting their graves is still the one thing that can bring me some comfort.”<sup>84</sup>*

But even those who are not driven by sentimental memories have other motives to return. Mariam, who left Daraya in 2012 and lives in regime-held areas now, wants to go back to



her home so she does not have to share her accommodation with other people.<sup>85</sup> As for Sahar who lives in France, the arrest and disappearance of her son have wiped out her memories. The only thing she remembers now is that her son is not next to her. She wants to go back to Syria to be able to find him.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, Maged, who lives in Lebanon, the constant pain and suffering caused by the loss of big number of people has damaged her ability to have normal feeling or memories. Thus instead of nostalgia, her desire to return is fuelled by her determination to improve the situation in her city and country, and mitigate the suffering of her fellow citizens.<sup>87</sup>

While poor living conditions in host communities or memories have played a role in shaping attitudes toward returning, many people remain reluctant to go back home. Their fear of the repercussions of return seems to still outweigh their desire to go back.

## Ongoing threats

The longing of Daraya's residents to go back to their city is largely tempered by fears for their safety- or that of their beloved ones- and the knowledge that legal and security obstacles could make it nearly impossible for them to resume their lives. Those concerns are largely based on actual situations encountered by those who already went back to Syria.

Personal safety is considered, by large, the main risk that is preventing people from going back. The underlined security risks include general dangers caused by the armed conflict (such as armed clashes, aerial bombardment, car bombs, besiegement, criminal activities...) and more targeted threats (such as detention, assassination...)<sup>88</sup> A refugee from Daraya who lives in Lebanon stated,

*"I only left Syria in 2013 when I could not hide from the regime anymore. I was, and still am, wanted by the regime for distributing aid to those in need. Despite everything and everyone I lost in Syria, I still want to go back. But I know that I will be arrested as soon as I cross the border."*<sup>89</sup>

As moving back to Daraya is still not an option, many interviewees talked about the challenges facing their relatives who live in regime-controlled areas and which vary based on many variables such as age, gender, financial situation, and political position.<sup>90</sup> But none of the interviewees seems to think that the security situation in the country is safe enough for people to go back. A displaced male from Daraya who lives in regime-controlled area stated,

*"I have been living in Damascus for 4 years now, but I still do not feel safe. I am terrified every time I pass by a checkpoint. Darya's name automatically makes me a target. I was arrested and questioned many times just because of where I am from. I am only staying here because I have no means to go elsewhere. But I always tell my relatives not to come back because it is a nightmare here."*<sup>91</sup>

Fear of obligatory military conscription, which drove many pro- and anti-regime young Syrians to leave their country, is still preventing them from returning. Anyone who is still eligible for conscription, and did not legally postpone it, will be arrested immediately and forced to serve. On top of that, he has to pay a fine and serve for an extra time in reparation for the time he deserted.<sup>92</sup>

Additionally, the recent changes to the laws on conscription made in November 2017, deny the Syrian Army's general command the authority to provide exemptions from military service. It also obliges those who are over the age of forty-two but did not join the army to pay a fine of \$8,000 within three months of passing the age of conscription. But those who fail to pay that amount, within the first three months of being eligible to it, will be imprisoned for a year and penalized \$200 for every year after the due date of the payment, up to a maximum of \$2,000. They also risk having their assets, such as property or cash, seized until payment is completed.<sup>93</sup> While the majority of Syrians do not have that amount of money, others reject financing the army that has killed, and is still killing, their fellow citizens.<sup>94</sup>

Several refugees recounted stories of young men who had returned to Syria out of despair, only to die because of forced conscription or due to armed conflict in their areas.<sup>95</sup> Additionally, regime forces have reportedly detained a number of young men wanted for mandatory military service in some of the former rebel-held areas, in what appears to be a violation of the surrender agreement.<sup>96</sup> A female refugee who has two sons eligible for mandatory conscription stated,

*"My two sons are eligible for the military. Thus, they will be detained, like many others, as soon as they enter the country. Then they will be forced to either kill or be killed. I cannot allow them to walk toward death on their feet."<sup>97</sup>*

Many of those affected by this issue stated that even if all the other security issues have been solved, they will still not be able to go back as long as the risk of the mandatory conscription still exists.

Moreover, the new laws introduced by the Syrian regime, which can potentially see the state confiscating the lands of millions of displaced people, is putting many displaced people at risk of having nothing to return to. The most problematic among which is law number 10, issued in April 2018, which could result in confiscating the homes of thousands of displaced citizens. While the law is being presented as an urban planning measure- to allow the areas damaged by the war to be reorganised, developed and reconstructed- many feel that it is a punitive action against the regime's opponents.<sup>98</sup>

The law empowers local administrations to re-register property ownership within their areas, a move that requires landowners to be present. Thus, it forces property owners, or their relatives, just 30 days to present their deeds to local council offices in the country. Although the law was later nominally modified to give people one year to prove their ownership, the majority of the displaced people, both internally and externally, still cannot do that.<sup>99</sup> Neither those who live in rebel-held areas nor outside the country can enter Syria to do it in person due to security concerns or restrictions imposed by the host countries.

Moreover, many of them do not have the necessary documents to give a power of attorney to someone else who could. According to the Norwegian Refugee Council, 70 per cent of refugees lack the documentation needed to make a property claim and to appoint a legally recognized agent.<sup>100</sup> A displaced resident in Idlib stated,

*“None of us who live in rebel-held areas can do this process in person for obvious reasons. Even if we have the required documents, hiring a lawyer costs thousands of dollars which we do not have. We also cannot delegate our relatives, either because they are also abroad or because it puts them at risk, as this process requires a security clearance from a number of security branches. In brief, we cannot do anything to save what we own.”<sup>101</sup>*

If the owner is unable to personally make a claim, the state can liquidate their titles and seize their holdings. Once the registration window closes, the remaining plots will be sold at auction. But even those who are able to prove their ownership, still either have to form a company to develop their properties – which the majority of people cannot afford – or receive a share of the profits from re-development- the laws for which are also not clear. Moreover, all owners have to also give 20 per cent of the value of their properties to the government in exchange for developing their area.<sup>102</sup>

Although the law will, theoretically, only be applied as redevelopment zones, there is no clear criteria for which areas can be designated as such. This means that the regime has enough flexibility to apply it to any area as it pleases. Thus, Daraya’s residents widely expect their city to be among the areas that will be affected by the law.<sup>103</sup>

Daraya residents are also scared of being discriminated against because of the revolutionary reputation of their city. All interviewees shared similar concerns about future regime’s punitive actions against their city. Their fear seems to be caused by their experiences or those of their relatives who live in regime-controlled areas. A refugee who lives in Turkey stated,

*“We know that this regime holds a grudge against its opponents for decades. Many of its opponents back in the eighties, whether Islamists or communists, were imprisoned for years. They continued to be punished even after they were released through travel bans, not providing them with security clearances etc. So even when the fighting stops, the regime will continue trying to punish us for opposing it. Preventing people from returning to the city, taking away our properties are only a few examples of what the regime’s discriminatory policy against us will be like.”<sup>104</sup>*

Other people used their personal experience in the past in order to illustrate how they expect the regime to deal with its opponents. A refugee who lives in Lebanon stated,

*“My dad was not part of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood but some members of his extended family were. Thus, he had to leave Syria in the eighties because he was wanted by the regime. Although he was allowed to return to Syria over a decade later, I was not given permission to open a nursery when I applied in 2007 because of my dad’s background. My husband’s request was also rejected. In the end, we had to register the nursery under someone else’s name. Imagine that for over three decades my dad, and us, had to pay a price for something we had nothing to do with. This time it will be worse.”<sup>105</sup>*

The aforementioned risks, among others, are the main obstacles that are preventing thousands of Daraya's displaced residents from going back home despite their strong desire to do so. As such, the interviews made it clear that the question is not whether they want to go back or not but rather when is the right time for them to go back and what are the conditions that are required for that to happen.

## The Syria we want to go back to

Displaced people of Daraya made it clear that a cessation of hostilities in Syria will not automatically allow for their return. In their perspective, significant obstacles such as the lack of safety and guarantees for their physical integrity and options to sustain themselves need to be addressed before.

Physical safety and security were among the most cited preconditions necessary for people's return. For the majority of refugees, safety means an end to the fighting and arbitrary detentions, compulsory conscription, indiscriminate killing, forced displacement as well as reigning in criminal acts such as kidnapping, among others.<sup>106</sup> Thus, as this was achieved, many would feel they could return. A female refugee based in Egypt stated,

*"I am not waiting for Syria to become heaven in order for me to go back. I simply want to make sure that my family and I will not be persecuted or harmed because of our political position or where we are from. We just want to feel safe. I do not know when or how that can happen but we cannot go back until then."*<sup>107</sup>

The ability to return to their area of origin, Daraya, was also mentioned as an equally important pre-condition.

The significance of going back to Daraya is not limited to allowing people to recover their properties, but to also ensure that they will not be displaced again. The hardship caused by people's multiple forced displacement makes many people choose stability over anything else. A Syrian refugee who settled in Egypt after a long displacement route stated,  
*"We had to move to over two dozen areas inside and outside of Syria. We are just tired of being forced to be constantly on the move. Therefore, we will only decide to return when we are allowed to go back to Daraya and keep our properties, without any consequences. That will be the only way to make sure that we do not have to move ever again."*<sup>108</sup>

Restoring basic services and receiving support to rebuild their lives were presented by some as primary demands for returning. The high level of destruction in the city of Daraya, due to the intense and indiscriminate shelling, makes it difficult for individuals to independently repair their houses and the city's infrastructures such as schools, hospitals, water, electricity etc.<sup>109</sup> A refugee household based in Germany stated,

*"I would go back today if it were possible. But I also have to rationalise the pros and cons of such a decision. My children, who stayed out of school for years, have finally resumed their*

*studies. I will destroy their future if I decide to take them to a place where there are no schools. One of my children also has a kidney failure, which means that he will die without proper health care. Therefore, the Daraya I can go back to should be able to provide such services.”<sup>110</sup>*

Others, living in less favourable circumstances, however, believe that services and reconstruction are secondary demands. As such, their decision to go back will not be based on whether such services are crippled or non-existent. The majority of the interviewees indicated that their houses were fully or significantly destroyed. Still, they did not demand financial support as a precondition to going back. A refugee living in a camp in Lebanon stated,

*“Our living conditions in Lebanon are not any better than the expected ones in Daraya’s current situation. Most of our kids do not have access to schools. All health facilities are far and expensive. We are not allowed to legally work in the country. On top of all of that we have to pay rent to live in a tent in a place where people hate us. So living in Daraya’s ruins, even without services will still be cheaper and more dignified.”<sup>111</sup>*

Having the order and stability needed to improve the economic circumstances so they can sustain themselves was frequently mentioned. Although, the majority of Syrian refugees did not leave the country for economic purposes, the current lack of job opportunities in Syria seems to be a concern for some.<sup>112</sup> Syria’s conflict has significantly damaged the country’s economy. Many businesses, as a result, have been shut down or relocated to other countries which negatively impacted the job market.<sup>113</sup> But the end of the fighting can only allow the country’s economy to recover if it is followed by secure and stable political order that attracts financial investments. A refugee who lives in Sweden stated,

*“I lost everything I had in Syria. For years, I was trying to survive on whatever help or support I can find. But now I have a job and a fixed income to provide for my family. I will still be willing to go back to Syria and start from scratch, however, I need to know the political and security situation will allow me to find a job there.”<sup>114</sup>*

While most of the interviewees’ preconditions have focused on the specific requirements they need to go back, they made it clear that such circumstance cannot be achieved under the current regime. Furthermore, the study’s participants who were politically active against the regime explicitly expressed their distrust towards any protection guarantees provided by the regime, if at all. A female refugee in Egypt stated,  
*“We have always been thinking about returning to Syria. But there is no way we can feel safe in Syria if the regime stays in power. I know many people who were detained upon their return. We do not want to end up like them.”<sup>115</sup>*

Thus, the majority of the displaced people believe that the conditions they require to return can only be made possible through a transitional government, established by a UN-backed process, that can prevent the Syrian regime or its warlords from punishing them or creating other conflicts.

## Conclusion

Recent efforts of Russia to convince the international community to start paying for reconstruction in Syria have focused on the connection between reconstruction and refugee return – for Western states, however, the connection is between political transition and return, i.e. substantial political change, not only technical rebuilding of Syria. Indeed, the often-catastrophic physical damage inflicted on the infrastructure of depopulated areas, the short supply of jobs, food, water, shelter, healthcare and education are mentioned by the interviewees as a factor discouraging return, yet this is not the most relevant aspect in their view.<sup>116</sup>

Rather, it is the insecurity generated through the political situation, the absence of rule of law, the impossibility to return to their place of origin as well as a lack of guarantees that they will not be displaced again.

While continuing to displace citizens, the Assad regime has little interest in the return of the refugees particularly if they would come to areas under its control. In the coastal areas as well as in Damascus, the socio-economic situation and the strain of the war because of the large-scale conscription and high death toll among particularly young men, leads to tensions the regime does not want to enhance by letting more IDPs enter. The more territory it recaptures the more pressure there is on the regime's attempts to govern and secure them.<sup>117</sup> Thus, any additional returnees – are largely viewed by the regime as opposition supporters – which means further discontent among the local population. Therefore, the Syrian regime has created physical and administrative barriers to prevent locals returning to a number of areas under its control, namely in rural Damascus.<sup>118</sup>

The displaced people of Daraya who participated in this study showed a strong desire to go back to Syria. This robust longing to return does not come as a surprise. According to various surveys done by different humanitarian agencies (such as Oxfam, UNHCR, among others), Syrian refugees have been consistently expressing their aspiration to go back home.<sup>119</sup> There is a strong sense of belonging and identification with their home country. Furthermore, the dire situation in which many of them are living now enhances to return to what they left behind. The lack of livelihood opportunities and protection measures, and people's inability to sustainably integrate into host communities in places of displacement are amplifying people's will to go home.

But going back to Syria does not necessarily mean refugees will be going back to their homes or their hometowns. The regime has through the policy of forced displacement but also legal changes such as the recently issued property law made clear that for a number of places – among them Daraya, the regime is still preventing people from entering the city, which has been completely empty for nearly two years.

Consequently, all Daraya's residents who have returned to Syria – out of desire or despair – have automatically become internally displaced in regime-controlled areas. Many of which have been experiencing discrimination, arbitrary arrest, forced conscription, torture and death.

The situation is equally bad for those who returned, or have been displaced, to rebel-held areas. They are still suffering from regime indiscriminate attacks against civilians. They also have neither the financial means nor the needed assistance to make their ends meet.

Refugees, humanitarian actors and human rights organisations have repeatedly and explicitly stated that the situation in Syria is not safe for people to return since the insecurity does not only stem from armed conflict but from the legal and political context.<sup>120</sup>

Nonetheless, the restrictions and pressure facing Syrian refugees in their host communities are increasing rapidly and radically. In Lebanon, Syrian refugees face evictions, raids, arrests and detentions, curfews, and restrictions on residency and freedom of movement. Similarly, they face a different type of pressure in Jordan- and to lesser extent Turkey to go back.<sup>121</sup>

Forcing people to prematurely go back does not only put them in higher danger, it also subjects them to a repeat of the displacement's cycle they've experienced again. For every Syrian that returned home in 2017, at least three were newly displaced, demonstrating that many areas in Syria are still unsafe, or even becoming more dangerous. In comparison to 1.8 million newly displaced Syrians inside their country in the first nine months of 2017, nearly 1 million Syrians were newly displaced in the first few months of 2018. Likewise, in contrast to the 66,000 refugees returned to Syrian in 2017, half a million Syrians fled to the country for the same period.<sup>122</sup>

Thus, displaced people of Daraya, both inside and outside the country, made it clear that the cessation of hostilities in Syria will not necessarily mean an automatic return to their homes. The conditions Syrian refugees require to return can only be achieved through a transitional government, established by a UN-backed process, that can prevent the Syrian regime or its warlords from punishing them or creating other conflicts.

In the absence of suitable and safe conditions for Syrians to return to, the international community should boost its effort to ensure that the host communities respect both the right of refugees to a voluntary return and the non-refoulement principle. It should also increase its support to both Syrian refugees and host communities in Syria's neighbouring countries to boost their local economy strengthen their resilience and protect their rights and dignity. Likewise, it should increase its efforts to protect those displaced inside Syria from becoming targets or being forced to be displaced again. It should also increase the humanitarian aid to improve their living conditions.

Additionally, the international community- and individual influential states- should ensure that the existing as well future political negotiations to reach a settlement to the conflict in Syria should not focus on ending the fight at any cost. The end of the war can only open the doors for a large scale return if, and when, refugees' concerns and priorities (such as good governance, reconstruction, reintegration, political representation protection and justice) are taken into account when reaching a political settlement.

The failure to reach a fair and just political solution in Syria that puts an end to the violence and address the root causes of the conflict will continue to destabilise Syria, and the wider region, and cause new waves of displacements and refugees.

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.sy-24.com/issues-24/%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88/>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/syria>
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/syria-emergency.html>
- <sup>4</sup> <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75684>
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2017/6/595612454/unhcr-seeing-significant-returns-internally-displaced-amid-syrias-continuing.html>
- <sup>6</sup> <https://www.thenation.com/article/will-lebanon-force-a-million-syrian-refugees-to-return-to-a-war-zone/>
- <sup>7</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/10/02/jordan-syrian-refugees-being-summarily-deported>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://carnegie-mec.org/sada/75684>
- <sup>9</sup> <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-turkey-election-syrians/erdogan-says-200000-syrians-returned-to-turkish-controlled-areas-idUKKCN1J126C>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://www.nrc.no/news/2018/february/hundreds-of-thousands-of-syrians-risk-being-pushed-to-return-in-2018-despite-ongoing-violence-warn-aid-agencies/>
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/lebanese-foreign-minister-battles-unhcr-over-refugee-policy-on-return-1.739062>
- <sup>12</sup> <http://darayacouncil.org/index.php/%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%80%D9%80%D8%A7/%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7.html>
- <sup>13</sup> Ibid
- <sup>14</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Abdullah, a former lawyer from Daraya who lives in Sweden, February 2018.
- <sup>15</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Kareem, a citizen journalist from Daraya who lives in Turkey, May 2018.
- <sup>16</sup> <https://www.mashallahnews.com/water-bottles-roses/>
- <sup>17</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Samer, a former member of Daraya's local council who was displaced to Idlib, February 2018.
- <sup>18</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Samer, a former member of Daraya's local council who was displaced to Idlib, February 2018.
- <sup>19</sup> <https://youtu.be/eF8tdkfrfjQ>
- <sup>20</sup> <https://youtu.be/AbLOS95Fz6c>
- <sup>21</sup> <https://youtu.be/zggrtBCUycE>
- <sup>22</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Rami, a former teacher from Daraya who was displaced to regime-held areas, April 2018.
- <sup>23</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Samer, a former member of Daraya's local council who was displaced to Idlib, February 2018.
- <sup>24</sup> <http://darayacouncil.org/index.php/داريا-داريا-ماقبل-الثورة.html>
- <sup>25</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Samer, a former member of Daraya's local council who was displaced to Idlib, February 2018.
- <sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Li4r2WJTIWE>
- <sup>27</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Reem, a former university student from Daraya who was displaced to Idlib, March 2018.
- <sup>28</sup> Author interview via skype with Maged, a civil society activist from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, May 2018.
- <sup>29</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Eisha, a housewife from Daraya who lives in Turkey, March 2018.
- <sup>30</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Fatimah, a former charity worker from Daraya who lives in Egypt, June 2018.
- <sup>31</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Sahar, a civil society activist from Daraya who lives in France, February 2018.



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- <sup>32</sup> Author interview via skype with Ibrahim, a former government employee from Daraya who lives in Germany, April 2018.
- <sup>33</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Sahar, a civil society activist from Daraya who lives in France, February 2018.
- <sup>34</sup> <https://www.smh.com.au/world/in-the-heart-of-syrias-brutal-war-daraya-was-a-small-bastion-of-hope-20170829-gy66um.html>
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- <sup>36</sup> Author interview via skype with Ibrahim, a former government employee from Daraya who lives in Germany, April 2018.
- <sup>37</sup> Author interview via skype with Maged, a civil society activist from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, May 2018.
- <sup>38</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/josepha-ivanka-wessels/how-assad-tortures-and-kills-syria-s-young-pacifist-young-left>
- <sup>39</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Sahar, a civil society activist from Daraya who lives in France, February 2018.
- <sup>40</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Ahmed, a former fighter from Daraya's who was displaced to rural Aleppo, March 2018.
- <sup>41</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Youhiya, a former university student from Daraya who lives Lebanon, April 2018.
- <sup>42</sup> <https://tcf.org/content/commentary/syrias-rebels-lose-symbolic-stronghold/?session=1>
- <sup>43</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Reem, a former university student from Daraya who was displaced to Idlib, March 2018
- <sup>44</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/28/syria-worst-massacre-daraya-death-toll-400>
- <sup>45</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Bissan, a housewife from Daraya who was displaced to regime-held areas, April 2018.
- <sup>46</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Mohammed, a farmer from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, June 2018.
- <sup>47</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Samer, a former member of Daraya's local council who was displaced to Idlib, February 2018.
- <sup>48</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Eisha, a housewife from Daraya who lives in Turkey, March 2018.
- <sup>49</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Rami, a former teacher from Daraya who was displaced to regime-held areas, April 2018.
- <sup>50</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Mariam, a former student from Daraya who was displaced to regime-held areas, April 2018.
- <sup>51</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Eisha, a housewife from Daraya who lives in Turkey, March 2018.
- <sup>52</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Mohammed, a farmer from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, June 2018.
- <sup>53</sup> Author interview via skype with Maged, a civil society activist from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, May 2018.
- <sup>54</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Eisha, a housewife from Daraya who lives in Turkey, March 2018.
- <sup>55</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Ahmed, a former fighter from Daraya's who was displaced to rural Aleppo, March 2018.
- <sup>56</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Reem, a former university student from Daraya who was displaced to Idlib, March 2018.
- <sup>57</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Ahmed, a former fighter from Daraya's who was displaced to rural Aleppo, March 2018
- <sup>58</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Samer, a former member of Daraya's local council who was displaced to Idlib, February 2018.
- <sup>59</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Mohammed, a farmer from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, June 2018.
- <sup>60</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Reem, a former university student from Daraya who was displaced to Idlib, March 2018.
- <sup>61</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Kareem, a citizen journalist from Daraya who lives in Turkey, May 2018.
- <sup>62</sup> <https://www.sy-24.com/issues-24/%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%B1%D8%AA-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B9-%D8%A3%D9%87%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88/>
- <sup>63</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Mariam, a former student from Daraya who was displaced to regime-held areas, April 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Rami, a former teacher from Daraya who was displaced to regime-held areas, April 2018.

<sup>65</sup> <https://tcf.org/content/report/assads-reconstruction-agenda-isnt-waiting-peace-neither/>

<sup>66</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Abdullah, a former lawyer from Daraya who lives in Sweden, February 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Kareem, a citizen journalist from Daraya who lives in Turkey, May 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Youhiya, a former university student from Daraya who lives Lebanon, April 2018.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.aljazeera.net/news/arabic/2016/9/12/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B3%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D8%B5%D9%84%D9%8A-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%8A%D8%B1-%D8%B3%D9%83%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7>

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<sup>71</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Fatimah, a former charity worker from Daraya who lives in Egypt, June 2018.

<sup>72</sup> Author interview via skype with Ibrahim, a former government employee from Daraya who lives in Germany, April 2018.

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<sup>74</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Kareem, a citizen journalist from Daraya who lives in Turkey, May 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Ahmed, a former fighter from Daraya's who was displaced to rural Aleppo, March 2018.

<sup>76</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Samer, a former member of Daraya's local council who was displaced to Idlib, February 2018.

<sup>77</sup> <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/75684>

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<sup>80</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Mohammed, a farmer from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, June 2018.

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<sup>82</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Samer, a former member of Daraya's local council who was displaced to Idlib, February 2018.

<sup>83</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Eisha, a housewife from Daraya who lives in Turkey, March 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Fatimah, a former charity worker from Daraya who lives in Egypt, June 2018.

<sup>85</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Mariam, a former student from Daraya who was displaced to regime-held areas, April 2018.

<sup>86</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Sahar, a civil society activist from Daraya who lives in France, February 2018.

<sup>87</sup> Author interview via skype with Maged, a civil society activist from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, May 2018.

<sup>88</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Mohammed, a farmer from Daraya who lives in Lebanon, June 2018.

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- <sup>104</sup> - Author interview via WhatsApp with Kareem, a citizen journalist from Daraya who lives in Turkey, May 2018.
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- <sup>109</sup> Author interview via WhatsApp with Youhiya, a former university student from Daraya who lives Lebanon, April 2018.
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