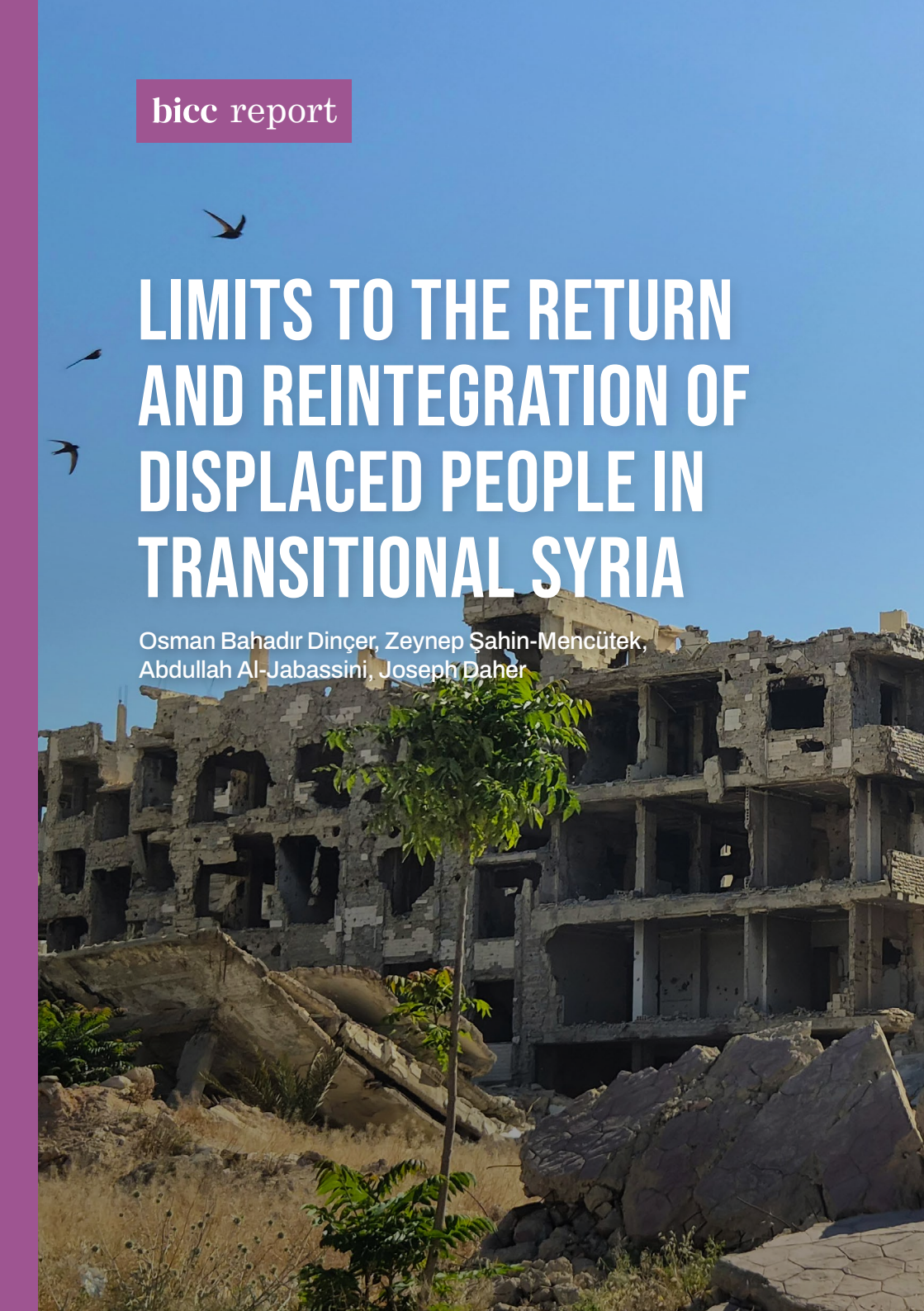


The background of the entire page is a photograph of a multi-story building that has been severely damaged, likely by conflict. The building's facade is crumbling, with many windows missing, leaving dark, hollow spaces. In the foreground, there are large, jagged piles of rubble and debris. A small, young tree with green leaves stands in the lower center of the frame. The sky is a clear, bright blue, and several birds are seen in flight, their silhouettes contrasting against the sky. The overall mood is one of desolation and the aftermath of war.

bicc report

LIMITS TO THE RETURN AND REINTEGRATION OF DISPLACED PEOPLE IN TRANSITIONAL SYRIA

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Abdullah Al-Jabassini, Joseph Daher

Millions of displaced Syrians are returning in the wake of Syria's political transition. But their experiences reveal the limits of equating return with recovery. Economic hardship, fragmented security, weak institutions and conditional trust continue to make reintegration uncertain—and return potentially reversible.

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SUMMARY

Since the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024, nearly two million internally displaced persons and more than one million refugees have returned to Syria, drawn back by the end of large-scale violence, family ties and deteriorating conditions in host countries. For most respondents, return reflects constrained and pragmatic choices rather than restored trust in Syria's future, as captured in one interviewee's description of a situation that is "politically, security-wise, economically and socially unstable, which is pushing me to leave again." That single sentence names the three conditions returnees describe navigating simultaneously, not sequentially. It also captures the *report's*

central finding that the return of displaced people cannot be equated with their reintegration.

Politically, returnees perceive Syria's emerging system of governance as fragmented and incomplete. Assessments are cautious rather than hostile: the absence of a constitution, functioning political parties and institutionalised participation is felt more as an unfinished process than active repression. This is not confined to formal politics—chambers of commerce, trade unions and professional bodies have been restructured largely through appointment rather than election, often favouring figures close to

the new authorities, so that political and economic institutions rest on the same uneven terms. Concerns over representation are not confined to minority communities; Sunni Arab respondents voice similar frustrations, suggesting the problem is structural rather than sectarian.

On security, perceptions are more positive. However, this does not amount to a consolidated order. Armed factions have been absorbed into the state on starkly different terms: some dissolved voluntarily, others retain their own commanders and effective autonomy, and negotiations with at least one major force broke down into confrontation rather than integration. The result is a landscape in which safety, protection and risk are negotiated locally rather than guaranteed nationally, compounded in parts of the south by continued Israeli military presence. Communal violence, including large-scale episodes in Latakia, Tartous and Sweida governorates in 2025, shows how quickly this fragmentation can escalate. Landmines and unexploded ordnance remain a persistent, unresolved danger tied to the same absence of consolidated authority.

Economically, dissatisfaction is the most acute. The World Bank estimates reconstruction needs at up to US \$345 billion, more than 90 per cent of Syrians live below the poverty line, and a deliberate austerity programme—steep cuts to bread and fuel subsidies, and electricity tariffs rising by up to twentyfold—has weighed directly on households already

struggling with unemployment and currency depreciation. Even substantial wage increases have not closed the gap with the poverty line, leaving many returnees dependent on remittances and describing return as a passage into poverty rather than recovery.

THE RETURN OF DISPLACED PEOPLE CANNOT BE EQUATED WITH THEIR REINTEGRATION.

Across all three domains, trust emerges as a distinct and equally consequential dimension of reintegration. Institutional trust is uneven—higher in the army than in government, lowest in the judiciary—and shaped by perceptions that access to office still depends on ideology, armed affiliation or money as much as competence. Communal trust has fractured along several reinforcing lines: sectarian violence, resentment between those who stayed and those who returned, as well as fears of exclusion among minority communities, all sustained by the near-total absence of transitional justice. Everyday access to rights and services depends heavily on informal networks and personal connections rather than predictable institutions, echoing the same patronage dynamics visible in economic and political life. While many returnees describe a genuine, strengthened emotional attachment to Syria after coming home, that attachment coexists with, rather than resolves, ongoing uncertainty. Belonging, in short, has been restored faster than trust.

INTRODUCTION

In this *bicc report*, we examine Syria's political transition through the experiences of returnees, using their accounts of political, security and economic conditions as the primary lens. Rather than treating return as an isolated outcome, we situate return movements within the broader social, political and economic transformations currently shaping the country. Drawing on extensive fieldwork conducted across Syria in 2025 and 2026, including interviews with returnees, displaced persons, local stakeholders, civil society actors, experts and government representatives, we explore how Syrians themselves perceive the opportunities and challenges emerging during this transitional period.

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked one of the most significant turning points in Syria's modern history. After more than a decade of conflict, authoritarian rule, mass displacement and territorial fragmentation, the fall of the regime generated renewed expectations for political transformation, reconstruction and the eventual return of millions of displaced Syrians. The emergence of a new political order, the gradual normalisation of relations with regional and international actors and the partial lifting of international sanctions created a sense of cautious optimism both inside and outside the country. For many Syrians, the end of Assad rule represented not only the removal of an authoritarian

regime, but also the possibility of rebuilding lives, communities and institutions after years of war.

FOR MANY SYRIANS, THE END OF ASSAD RULE REPRESENTED NOT ONLY THE REMOVAL OF AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME, BUT ALSO THE POSSIBILITY OF REBUILDING LIVES, COMMUNITIES AND INSTITUTIONS AFTER YEARS OF WAR.

At the same time, Syria's transition is unfolding under conditions of profound uncertainty. While large-scale nationwide warfare has largely subsided, the country continues to face multiple and interconnected challenges. Security remains fragmented, with overlapping authorities, semi-autonomous armed actors, unresolved disputes over territorial control and recurring episodes of localised violence. Economic recovery is constrained by widespread poverty, damaged infrastructure, weak productive sectors, rising living costs and growing social inequalities. Governance institutions remain in a process of formation, while questions of political inclusion, accountability, representation and trust continue to shape relations between citizens and the emerging state. Across many parts of the country, reconstruction remains limited, public services remain inadequate, and

significant portions of the population continue to struggle to meet their basic needs.

These developments have also fundamentally reshaped debates on displacement and return. Since late 2024, increasing numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees have returned to Syria, particularly from neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan. Host countries, international organisations and policy-makers have often interpreted return movements as indicators of improving conditions and growing stability. Yet return alone reveals little about the realities that returnees encounter upon arrival or about the broader trajectory of Syria's transition. Physical return does not automatically translate into sustainable reintegration, nor does it necessarily indicate the restoration of trust in state institutions, social cohesion or long-term confidence in the country's future.

The *report*¹ has three parts. In the first section, we examine returnees' perceptions of Syria's post-Assad transition, integrating political, security and economic evidence into a single account of what shapes an individual's decision to return and the conditions returnees encounter once they do. In the second section, we address the relational

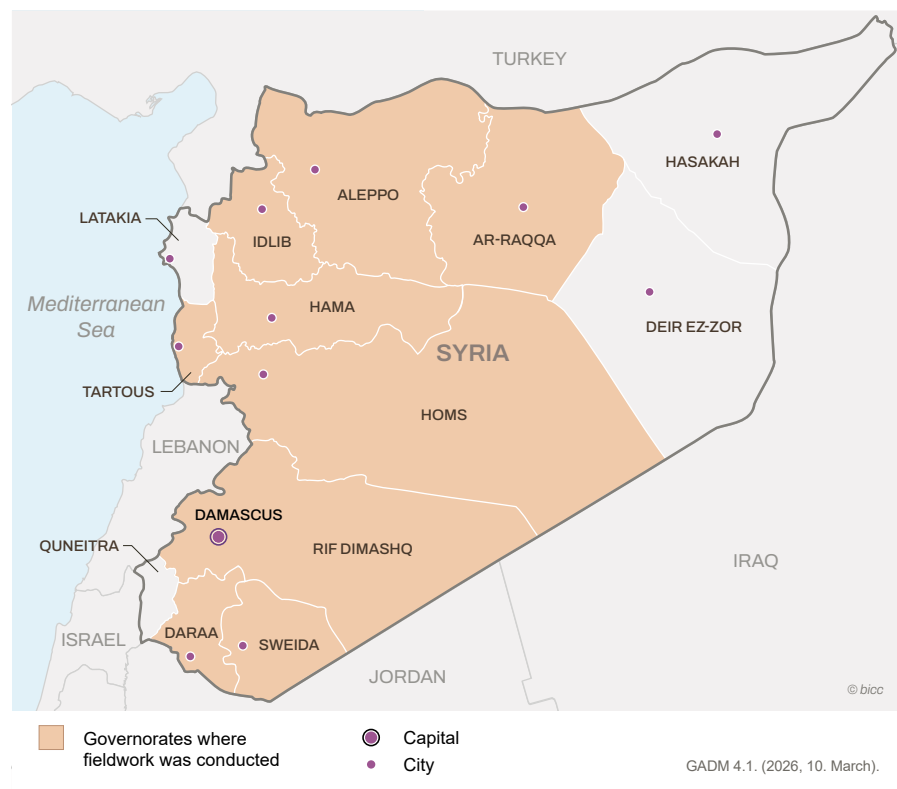
1 The *report* is based primarily on 130 semi-structured interviews conducted across Syria (Damascus, Rif Dimashq, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Ar-Raqqa, Daraa, Sweida, Tartous governorates) between 2025 and 2026 with returnees, complemented by dozens of interviews with local experts, civil society representatives, humanitarian actors, and political stakeholders.

foundations of reintegration (institutional trust, communal cohesion, informal access and emotional belonging), showing how trust operates as a consequential dimension of return, distinct from

returnees' assessments of political, security or economic conditions. We conclude by reflecting on what these findings mean for Syria's future reconstruction, governance and return policies.

RESEARCH DESIGN

MAP 1: FIELDWORK LOCATIONS IN SYRIA (2025–2026)



In this report, we draw on extensive fieldwork conducted across Syria between February 2025 and March 2026. The findings are based primarily on 130 semi-structured interviews with returnees and displaced Syrians in Damascus, Rif Dimashq, Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Ar-Raqqa, Daraa, Sweida and Tartous governorates, conducted with the support of local researchers. These interviews were complemented by discussions with local experts, community leaders, civil society representatives, humanitarian actors and political stakeholders, as well

as continuous engagement with Syrian diaspora communities, especially in Germany and Turkey.

Interviewers explored displacement experiences, return and mobility trajectories, access to livelihoods and services, perceptions of security and governance, political participation, social cohesion and future aspirations. In addition to interviews, the research team conducted repeated field visits to several parts of Syria, including Damascus, Rif Dimashq, Aleppo and Ar-Raqqa governorates, allowing

for direct observation of local conditions, governance dynamics, reconstruction efforts and everyday social interactions. To strengthen the reliability of the findings, we triangulated interview data with field observations, policy and legal documents, media reporting and existing academic and policy research. Throughout the research process, emerging findings were continuously discussed with local researchers and key informants to verify interpretations and contextualise developments.

All interviews were conducted on a voluntary basis and anonymised to protect participants' identities. Given the sensitive nature of many discussions, particular attention was paid to confidentiality, informed consent and the safety of both participants and researchers. While the research covers a diverse range of locations and perspectives, it does not aim to provide a statistically representative picture of all Syrians or all return experiences. Findings should therefore provide in-depth qualitative insights into how returnees and local actors perceive and navigate Syria's evolving political, economic and security environment during the country's post-Assad transition.

THE PROCESS OF 'RETURN'

The reduction in large-scale violence and the collapse of the Assad regime have encouraged some displaced Syrians, including refugees, to return to the country. Since late 2024, return movements to Syria have increased: around 1.99 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to their areas of origin, while over 1.14 million have arrived from abroad, bringing the number of returnees to roughly 11 per cent of the population (IOM, 2026). Cross-border returns have come largely from neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan,

with returnees concentrating in urban centres, including Damascus, Aleppo, Idlib, Homs and Rif Dimashq governorates (UNHCR, 2026).

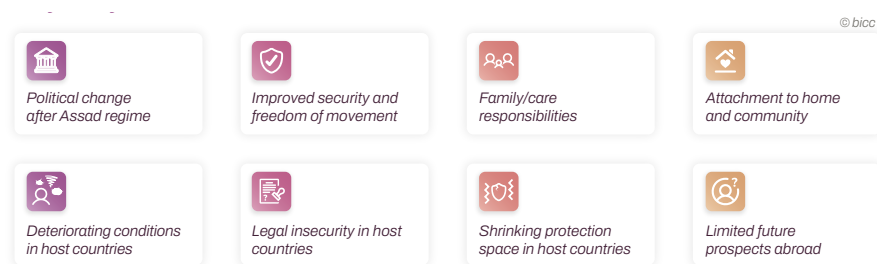
According to findings from our interviews and exchanges, return decisions are shaped by multiple and often overlapping factors. These include political developments—most notably the end of Assad-era rule and shifting territorial control, including the withdrawal of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)—improved safety, security and freedom

of movement, as well as family reunification, care responsibilities and a desire to reconnect with or rebuild local communities. Worsening conditions in host countries, including legal insecurity, shrinking protection spaces, discrimination, deteriorating living conditions, a lack of prospects for the future and limited or risky opportunities for onward migration, push many Syrians to return (bicc, n.d.).

WORSENING CONDITIONS IN HOST COUNTRIES, INCLUDING LEGAL INSECURITY, SHRINKING PROTECTION SPACES, DISCRIMINATION, DETERIORATING LIVING CONDITIONS, A LACK OF PROSPECTS FOR THE FUTURE AND LIMITED OR RISKY OPPORTUNITIES FOR ONWARD MIGRATION, PUSH MANY SYRIANS TO RETURN.

Return, however, is not a single decision but an ongoing process, through which returnees continuously assess risks, negotiate belonging and evaluate whether sustainable living conditions can realistically be rebuilt. Despite growing expectations in host countries for refugees to return, we still know relatively little about how returnees actually experience post-return conditions. Rather than marking the end of displacement, return often represents the beginning of a new period of uncertainty and negotiation with evolving political, economic and social realities (Dinçer & Şahin-Mencütek, 2026). In the following, we will turn to these experiences.

FIGURE 1: WHY DO SYRIANS RETURN?



Return decisions are shaped by multiple and often overlapping factors. The figure presents the reasons for return most frequently identified by interviewees and therefore does not represent mutually exclusive categories (interviewees could select more than one reason for return).

Source: bicc fieldwork in Syria, 2025–2026

RETURNEES' PERCEPTIONS AND REINTEGRATION CONDITIONS

Based on 130 in-depth interviews conducted in 2025 and 2026 across different regions with Syrian returnees, three core findings emerge from this research. They are best understood not as separate observations but as different dimensions of the same underlying condition: Syria has not yet built the institutional, economic and infrastructural capacity to absorb large-scale return. **First**, returnees perceive the current political order as fragmented. While some acknowledge limited openings in participation and representation following the collapse of the Assad regime, they do not view

the emerging system as consolidated, predictable or fully inclusive.

Second, returnees continue to navigate fragile security conditions. Mistrust towards governing actors continues to shape post-return life across institutional, social, and communal domains. Many returnees remain sceptical towards state institutions, security actors and local authorities, while weakened social cohesion, unresolved grievances and sectarian and communal divisions continue to undermine confidence in everyday social relations.

MISTRUST TOWARDS GOVERNING ACTORS CONTINUES TO SHAPE POST-RETURN LIFE ACROSS INSTITUTIONAL, SOCIAL AND COMMUNAL DOMAINS.

Third, economic conditions constitute the most immediate constraint on sustainable return: unemployment, low wages, rising prices and weak service provision make return highly precarious, deepening social fragmentation and reinforcing divisions between stayees and returnees (Smith & Sarzin, 2025).

These findings converge on a single point: for most respondents, return reflects constrained and pragmatic choices rather than restored trust in

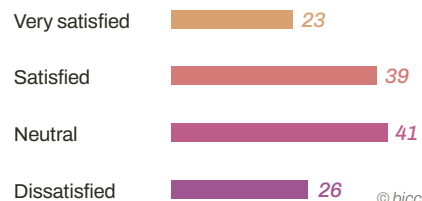
Syria's future. Many continue to perceive return as provisional and reversible, adopting "wait-and-see" attitudes while assessing whether Syria's emerging political and economic order will stabilise or reproduce new forms of exclusion and insecurity. As one interviewee in Damascus city observed: "The situation is politically, security-wise, economically and socially unstable, which is pushing me to leave again." That single sentence captures all findings at once. The central question, therefore, is not only who returns, but what they return to.

SYRIA HAS NOT YET BUILT THE INSTITUTIONAL, ECONOMIC AND INFRASTRUCTURAL CAPACITY TO ABSORB LARGE-SCALE RETURN.

POLITICAL PERCEPTIONS

Returnees' assessments of the political situation are cautious and ambivalent. In our sample of 130, most respondents expressed some satisfaction with the post-Assad environment: 39 respondents were satisfied, and 23 were very satisfied. However, a large share remains neutral (41 respondents) and a small minority expresses dissatisfaction (26 respondents). The main concern is not direct repression or immediate instability, but rather the absence of a fully consolidated political order. Many respondents described Syria as still being in a "transitional period" and emphasised that "there is no real political life yet." Three specific areas of concern emerge.

FIGURE 2: RETURNEES' ASSESSMENTS OF THE POLITICAL SITUATION



Respondents expressed mixed views of Syria's political situation, with positive assessments accompanied by a substantial share of neutral and dissatisfied responses.

Note: Figures show the number of interviews (valid responses: n=129).
Source: bicc fieldwork in Syria, 2025–2026

First, returnees describe a political order that remains structurally unfinished, and this is not simply a matter of perception. Many respondents point to the absence of a constitution, functioning political parties and institutionalised channels of political participation. This incompleteness is not confined to formal politics. Over the same period, chambers of commerce boards, trade unions and professional associations have been restructured largely through appointment rather than election, often favouring figures with ties to the new authorities (Daher, 2025). Political and economic institutions are, in effect, being built according to the same logic and at the same uneven pace. Neither has yet produced the predictable, rules-based channels that would allow returnees to distinguish a new order from a transitional one.

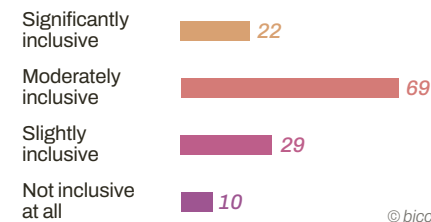
Second, returnees describe representation and inclusion as limited and uneven. Overall, 98 respondents described

the political system as only slightly or moderately inclusive, 22 as significantly inclusive, and 10 out of 130 as not inclusive at all. As one returnee in Idlib Governorate put it: “There is no real political representation for all Syrians.” Another described the transition itself as exclusionary: “There was no real national dialogue, and certain segments of society were excluded.” Even where returnees felt they had a greater voice in society following the regime’s collapse (103 out of 130) and believed the current administration represented their interests (95 out of 130), this rarely translated into confidence in political efficacy. Many respondents distinguished between the symbolic opening created by Assad’s fall and genuinely institutionalised participation.

RETURNEES DESCRIBE REPRESENTATION AND INCLUSION AS LIMITED AND UNEVEN.

Crucially, this dissatisfaction is not confined to minority communities. Many Sunni Arab respondents reported frustration with representation and accountability, suggesting the problem is structural rather than sectarian. A similar pattern is visible at the elite level, where access to economic decision-making has followed the same logic—positions are awarded through ideological alignment, armed-group affiliation or personal connection to the new authorities rather than through open or accountable processes.

FIGURE 3 RETURNEES' PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICAL INCLUSIVENESS



Most respondents perceived Syria's emerging political system as only moderately or slightly inclusive, while relatively few considered it significantly inclusive.

Note: Figures show the number of interviews.

Source: bicc fieldwork in Syria, 2025–2026

Third, returnees trace these concerns to deeper structural and historical roots, rather than simply to the conduct of the current transition. Several respondents highlighted the long-term effects of authoritarian rule—entrenched corruption, a weak political culture and limited public familiarity with democratic practice—arguing that the transition is societal as much as institutional and requires time for political actors and citizens alike to adapt.

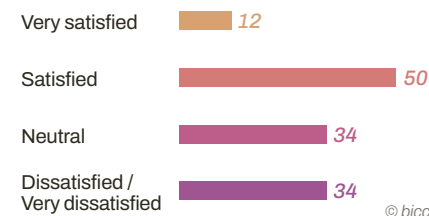
RESPONDENTS HIGHLIGHTED THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF AUTHORITARIAN RULE—ENTRENCHED CORRUPTION, A WEAK POLITICAL CULTURE AND LIMITED PUBLIC FAMILIARITY WITH DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE—ARGUING THAT THE TRANSITION IS SOCIETAL AS MUCH AS INSTITUTIONAL.

This continuity is not only a matter of cultural memory; patterns of opacity and informal influence reminiscent of the Assad era persist under new actors, from informally influential networks operating inside ministries to the concentration of major economic decisions around a small circle close to the new leadership. Fears of a potential reproduction of authoritarian patterns, in other words, are not only about political behaviour repeating itself, but about the same informal, personalised structures of power simply changing hands. Here, issues of trust and social cohesion become central to how returnees judge whether this transition is genuinely different from what came before.

SECURITY CONDITIONS

Perceptions of safety and security are more positive than perceptions of the political or economic situation. While 50 respondents reported being satisfied with current security conditions and 12 out of 130 described themselves as very satisfied, 34 people remained neutral. This reflects a real and measurable change—the end of large-scale, front-line combat—but it should not be read as evidence of consolidated and durable security improvement. For many returnees, that distinction matters more than the aggregate numbers suggest, because it is precisely the gap between the end of war and the presence of a functioning state monopoly on force that shapes their everyday experience of insecurity. That experience takes three distinct forms.

FIGURE 4: RETURNEES' ASSESSMENTS OF THE SECURITY SITUATION



While almost half of respondents expressed satisfaction with current security conditions, a substantial share remained neutral or dissatisfied, reflecting the uneven and fragile nature of security improvements.

Note: Figures show the number of interviews.

Source: bicc fieldwork in Syria, 2025–2026

First, returnees face the risk that communal and sectarian tensions can escalate into large-scale violence with little warning. Sectarian, ethnic and tribal identities—managed, manipulated or suppressed under the previous regime—became more visible and politically significant once central authority collapsed and were increasingly invoked as bases for mobilisation. The March 2025 sectarian violence following insurgent attacks by loyalists of the ousted regime in Latakia and Tartous governorates, in which more than 1,400 members of the Alawite community were killed (Michael, 2025; HRW, 2025; UNHCR, 2025), and the July 2025 offensive launched by the new authorities on the predominantly-Druze Sweida Governorate, which left over 1,700 people dead and displaced nearly 200,000 Druze and Bedouin residents (UNHRC, 2026),¹ show how quickly

identity-based networks can move from interpreting threats to mobilising for an attack or organising defensive action. For returnees, especially those from or resettling near mixed or contested areas, this means security is not only locally negotiated but potentially volatile; calm can break down along communal lines with little notice. These concerns are also reflected in returnees' own perceptions. As one respondent from Sweida described, the primary social challenge facing Syria today is "religious and sectarian tensions." When asked about the new challenges facing the country, the same respondent highlighted "divisions among Syrians, dissatisfaction with the current government, hate speech and armed chaos." This account illustrates how communal tensions can be perceived not as isolated incidents, but as part of a broader environment of political polarisation, social fragmentation and persistent insecurity.

RETURN RARELY TRANSLATES INTO RESTORED CONFIDENCE OR LONG-TERM STABILITY: MANY RETURNEES CONTINUE TO CLOSELY MONITOR POLITICAL AND SECURITY DEVELOPMENTS WHILE KEEPING OPEN THE POSSIBILITY OF LEAVING AGAIN SHOULD CONDITIONS DETERIORATE.

¹ The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria documented that government forces and allied tribal groups carried out extrajudicial killings, torture, arbitrary detentions, sexual violence, looting and the widespread and systematic destruction of civilian property in Sweida between 14 and 16 July 2025. See UNHRC, 2026.

Second, many returnees expressed uncertainty over who actually holds authority where they live. This uncertainty is not a misperception but a reflection of the extent to which armed groups have actually been folded into state security structures. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS or the Organization for the Liberation of the Levant) and the National Front for Liberation dissolved voluntarily and were absorbed into the Ministry of Defence; the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army was integrated only nominally (Waters, 2025), retaining its own commanders; and negotiations with the Syrian Democratic Forces stalled and gave way to coercive measures (Al Jazeera, 2026, 2026a).

DESPITE THE RELATIVE DECLINE IN ACTIVE FIGHTING, EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR CONTINUE TO SHAPE EVERYDAY SECURITY AND CONSTRAIN LIVELIHOODS.

The result is a landscape governed through armed authorities, parallel chains of command and local informal security arrangements operating under different rules. One respondent summarised this precisely: “There is no national army; they are just armed factions.” For a returnee, the rules they live under are often determined by whichever local actors control a particular checkpoint, neighbourhood or road, rather than by a single national security framework applied predictably and equally across the country. As a result, return rarely translates into restored confidence or long-term stability:

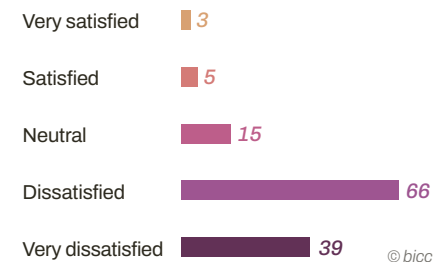
many returnees continue to closely monitor political and security developments while keeping open the possibility of leaving again should conditions deteriorate. As one returnee in Homs Governorate put it: “Given the unstable security conditions, we may return to the host country.”

Third, returnees face the everyday, embodied reality of militarisation and unresolved physical danger. As one returnee in Aleppo observed: “Weapons are everywhere. Even children have weapons today.” This same fragmentation extends to threats that require no active human decision to cause harm: landmines, unexploded ordnance and unpredictable patterns of destruction remain scattered across former front lines years after the fighting ended, in part because clearance requires exactly the kind of coordinated, cross-territorial authority that Syria’s security landscape does not yet have. Landmines are reported as a particular barrier to returning to and using agricultural land for income generation, costing lives and causing serious injuries (Berg, 2025). The persistence of this threat was also evident during fieldwork in Raqqa, where a local guide, pointing across fertile agricultural fields, remarked quietly: “Hardly a week passes without reports of new casualties. People still lose their lives because of mines.” His observation underscored that, despite the relative decline in active fighting, explosive remnants of war continue to shape everyday security and constrain livelihoods in many return areas.

ECONOMIC HARDSHIP

Despite economic reforms initiated by the Syrian government, tangible improvements remain limited. Perceptions of the economic situation are overwhelmingly negative and represent the most immediate constraint shaping post-return life: of 130 respondents, 66 described themselves as dissatisfied and 39 as very dissatisfied with current economic conditions. As one respondent put it: “The country has no economy; there is poverty and a lack of job opportunities.” Independent polling suggests that by April 2026, only 13 per cent of Syrians believed the government was doing enough to contain rising prices (Syria in Transition, 2026). This dissatisfaction reflects the following set of compounding pressures.

FIGURE 5: RETURNEES' ASSESSMENTS OF THE ECONOMIC SITUATION



While almost half of respondents expressed satisfaction with current security conditions, a substantial share remained neutral or dissatisfied, reflecting the uneven and fragile nature of security improvements.

Note: Figures show the number of interviews.

Source: bicc fieldwork in Syria, 2025–2026

require urgent humanitarian assistance (Action Against Hunger, 2025).

For some returnees, the obstacle to housing is not scarcity but dispossession. In May 2026, residents in Damascus's Mez-zeh, Kfar Souseh and Basateen al-Razi neighbourhoods took to the streets against the Marota City redevelopment project under Decree 66, demanding not compensation but the restoration of their legal right to return to homes the state had effectively reallocated out from under them (Hamidah, 2026). These realities highlight the complexities widening the gap between physical return and sustainable reintegration. Durable return requires far more than the end of large-scale violence; it depends on long-term reconstruction, institutional stabilisation, economic recovery and the restoration of basic services and infrastructure. These processes will require considerable time and resources, despite growing political pressure in many host countries to accelerate the return of Syrians.

DURABLE RETURN REQUIRES FAR MORE THAN THE END OF LARGE-SCALE VIOLENCE; IT DEPENDS ON LONG-TERM RECONSTRUCTION, INSTITUTIONAL STABILISATION, ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND THE RESTORATION OF BASIC SERVICES AND INFRASTRUCTURE.

Second, returnees face the direct cost of a deliberate programme of fiscal austerity. Since December 2024, the price of

subsidised bread has risen roughly ten-fold, from SYP 400 to SYP 4,000 per unit. Fuel subsidies were suspended, and fuel prices were denominated in US dollars, exposing consumers and businesses directly to exchange-rate swings and the depreciation of the Syrian pound. In October 2025, the government announced electricity tariff increases that took effect in January 2026, raising household bills from an average of SYP 10,000–50,000 (approximately US \$0.85–\$4 according to the black exchange rate of SYP 11,780 at the time) to between SYP 600,000 and over SYP 2 million (US \$50–\$169) per billing cycle. This ten- to twenty-fold increase placed a heavy burden on manufacturers, farmers and households alike, with some households reportedly receiving bills up to SYP 5-6 million (US \$423–\$508). Interviewees consistently pointed to unemployment, low wages, rising living costs and currency depreciation as the main challenges shaping everyday life after return; these figures help explain the consistency of those complaints: different households are experiencing the effects of the same sequence of economic policies.

Third, returnees face a widening gap between nominal wage increases and actual purchasing power. The authorities raised public-sector salaries and pensions by 200 per cent in July 2025 and a further 50 per cent in March 2026, yet the resulting minimum wage of roughly SYP 1,256,000 (about US \$114) remains far below all three poverty thresholds: the abject poverty line of SYP 3.34 million

(about US \$252) calculated for April 2026, the lower poverty line of SYP 5.26 million (US \$397) and the upper poverty line of SYP 7.26 million (US \$548) (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2026). Wages have therefore risen on paper while liquidity and purchasing power have continued to deteriorate in practice; a gap large segments of the population bridge only through remittances from relatives abroad, estimated at around US \$4 billion annually. As one returnee in Daraa Governorate put it, naming this gap directly: “There is no liquidity, and employees do not receive their full salaries.” For many returnees, return therefore often means returning into poverty rather than recovery; returnees and stayees alike continue to face difficulties accessing electricity, water, healthcare and employment.

WAGES HAVE RISEN ON PAPER WHILE LIQUIDITY AND PURCHASING POWER HAVE CONTINUED TO DETERIORATE IN PRACTICE; A GAP LARGE SEGMENTS OF THE POPULATION BRIDGE ONLY THROUGH REMITTANCES FROM RELATIVES ABROAD, ESTIMATED AT AROUND US \$4 BILLION ANNUALLY.

This gap between nominal relief and real hardship has not stayed confined to household budgets. Since the beginning of 2026, protests and strikes have proliferated across the country. When the Ministry of Economy set 2026 wheat prices below the actual cost of production, farmers in Ar-Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, and Daraa governorates took to the streets to protest

the rising cost of living (Melhem, 2026). In late January 2026, teachers across Idlib and Aleppo governorates launched the “Strike for Dignity,” with more than 1,700 schools participating in response to the authorities’ failure to fulfil commitments on salary increases and working conditions, demanding permanent employment and the reinstatement of dismissed staff (Ultra Syria, 2026). Transport workers, industrial workers, students, lawyers and bakery owners have since mobilised as well, a spread across sectors that signals that grievances are no longer confined to any single group but are rooted in the same erosion of purchasing power and public services that returnees themselves describe (The Syria Report, 2026).

ONLY A SMALL NUMBER OF RETURNEES (PRIMARILY THOSE WITH EXTERNAL INCOME, SAVINGS OR REMITTANCE SUPPORT) DESCRIBED THEIR SITUATION AS MANAGEABLE, WHILE OTHERS REMAIN HEAVILY DEPENDENT ON INFORMAL ECONOMIES, PRECARIOUS LABOUR OR HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE.

Fourth, the economic hardship is unevenly distributed, and the same disparities that divide households nationally also divide returnees from one another. Only a small number of returnees (primarily those with external income, savings or remittance support) described their situation as manageable, while others remain heavily

dependent on informal economies, precarious labour or humanitarian assistance. Economic precarity of this kind does not simply accompany mistrust; it actively shapes it. Where individuals struggle to meet basic needs, uncertainty over livelihoods directly affects perceptions of stability, belonging and future planning: many returnees described delaying long-term decisions, avoiding investment or keeping open the possibility of re-migration precisely because economic insecurity gives them no stable ground to plan from.

TRUST, BELONGING AND THE LIMITS OF REINTEGRATION

Beyond how returnees rate political, security and economic conditions individually, interviews reveal a more fundamental question underlying all three: whom do returnees trust—the state, local authorities, their neighbours or no one at all—and on what basis? Trust in transitional Syria operates not as a fixed condition but as an evolving relationship, shaped by whether the new authorities translate

political change into material and institutional improvement. Statements such as “they haven’t harmed us, but they haven’t helped us either” or “we are waiting to see action” capture this temporality. Interviews reveal that mistrust operates across multiple levels: institutional, communal, everyday and emotional. This section traces each in turn.

INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

Institutional trust remains fragmented and uneven across the state bodies returnees deal with. Regarding trust in the government, 48 of 130 respondents reported full trust, 39 moderate trust, 25 limited trust and 17 little or no trust at all. Trust in the army was comparatively higher, with half of the respondents expressing full trust and 25 respondents moderate trust, though 13 reported only limited trust and 17 no trust at all. Confidence in the judiciary is markedly more limited: 50 respondents report only “somewhat” trusting it, 36 respondents “a little,” and just 16 respondents express full trust. This makes the judiciary the least consolidated and least reliable of the core state institutions in the post-return context.

THE CONTINUED PRESENCE OF JUDGES AND OFFICIALS ASSOCIATED WITH THE PREVIOUS REGIME IS FREQUENTLY CITED AS A MAJOR OBSTACLE TO REBUILDING TRUST, PARTICULARLY AMONG THOSE WHO DIRECTLY EXPERIENCED REPRESSION.

This institutional mistrust is reinforced by perceptions of how access to office is actually gained: while 80 respondents identified competence as an important pathway to becoming a public servant or decision-maker, substantial proportions also pointed to ideology (52 out of 130), armed-group affiliation (43) and money (28) as influential factors. This suggests that formal qualifications coexist with informal networks, political loyalties and militarised influence rather than replacing them. These perceptions echo dynamics reported at the elite level of the economy, including the emergence of informally influential ‘administrative sheikhs’ and committees inside ministries, the awarding of contracts and business assets (reportedly including more than US \$1.6 billion in assets formerly linked to the Assad regime) through personal and political ties rather than transparent procedures,² and the appointment of leadership across trade unions and professional bodies without elections (Daher, 2025).

As one returnee in Idlib Governorate explained: “We did not see the right man in the right place.” Others emphasised the coercive dimension directly: “Armed groups prevent any voice by civilians.” The continued presence of judges and officials associated with the previous regime is frequently cited as a major obstacle to rebuilding trust, particularly among those who directly experienced repression, while the near-total absence of transparent trials, accountability mechanisms or reparations for victims of violence and detention, captured in statements like “we did not see transitional justice,” “there is no justice yet” and “the torturers are still free,” undermines the judiciary’s credibility in the present. For many, the failure to address past crimes also raises doubts about its ability to serve as a neutral and effective arbiter of rights. This also reinforces broader concerns identified earlier, particularly the risk that, in the absence of institutional and transitional justice, individuals may resort to informal or retaliatory forms of conflict resolution.

THE NEAR-TOTAL ABSENCE OF TRANSPARENT TRIALS, ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS OR REPARATIONS FOR VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE AND DETENTION UNDERMINES THE JUDICIARY’S CREDIBILITY IN THE PRESENT.

² An Investigation reported that Hazem al-Sharaa, the president’s brother, heads a committee responsible for restructuring business networks through the acquisition of companies formerly affiliated with the Assad regime (see Azhari & Dalatey, 2025).

SOCIAL COHESION AND EVERYDAY TRUST

Communal trust has fractured along several distinct lines of division that reinforce one another. The most visible is the sectarian violence already documented above—the March 2025 coastal clashes and the July 2025 Sweida offensive—but returnees' own accounts add something the incident data alone cannot: a sense that it is unresolved justice, not only unresolved violence, that keeps this fear alive. As one respondent in Daraa put it starkly: "Sectarianism... I don't think Syrians are able to live together anymore.

I hope I am wrong." Another, in Homs Governorate, described the fracture directly: "The societal division resulting from the armed conflict has fragmented the social fabric and produced a loss of trust among different communities." What these accounts point to is a structural vulnerability, not a series of isolated incidents. In the absence of courts and accountability mechanisms that communities actually trust, sectarian explanation becomes the default lens through which almost any act of violence is read, regardless of its actual cause.

IN THE ABSENCE OF COURTS AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS THAT COMMUNITIES ACTUALLY TRUST, SECTARIAN EXPLANATION BECOMES THE DEFAULT LENS THROUGH WHICH ALMOST ANY ACT OF VIOLENCE IS READ, REGARDLESS OF ITS ACTUAL CAUSE.

A less visible fracture runs not along sectarian lines but between those who left and those who stayed. Persistent mistrust shaped by past political alignments, displacement experiences and regional divisions continues to shape everyday interactions. As one respondent put it, "We live side by side, but we don't know who we are to each other anymore." This rift is often driven less by identity than by material resentment—poverty, unemployment and rising inequality are cited as key drivers of tension between stayees and returnees, weakening family and community structures and pushing

some toward coping strategies such as begging or illicit activity, and eroding norms of mutual support and solidarity that communities relied on during the war itself. That this fracture is material rather than identity-based does not make it any less corrosive to trust: it means Syria's communal fabric is being strained simultaneously from two different directions—sectarian violence on one axis, and the resentments of unequal hardship on another.

A third fracture runs along minority exclusion specifically. Returnees from minority communities frequently described fears of exclusion from a governing order perceived as ideologically homogeneous. As one returnee in Sweida Governorate stated, "there is discrimination and exclusion because of the new government that is of one colour," while another linked exclusion directly to political positionality: "Not belonging to the ruling group currently in power." These experiences demonstrate that belonging in transitional Syria remains highly politicised. Questions surrounding who belongs within the 'new Syria', whose suffering is recognised, and which communities are perceived as politically legitimate continue to shape returnees' perceptions of security, inclusion and future prospects. Sectarian violence, communal mobilisation, localised revenge dynamics and competing armed actors have reinforced identity-based fears and deepened mistrust across many regions. Incidents of localised violence further intensify polarisation and undermine social cohesion.

INFORMAL NETWORKS AND UNEQUAL ACCESS

According to many returnees, everyday access to rights, services and protection depended more on informal mediation than on predictable institutions. Across interviews, respondents repeatedly emphasised that money, personal networks and political connections remain central to navigating post-return life. When asked how people typically obtain what they need, a majority of 78 respondents cited legal entitlement as citizens—suggesting that formal frameworks are present and, to some extent, operational—but this was closely followed by reliance on money (half of the respondents) and personal networks (60 respondents). As one returnee in Hama Governorate summarised: “The only means of obtaining rights in this country are through money and political power.” Another added: “Those who own land and capital have an edge over others.”

As explained elsewhere (see Dinçer & Şahin-Mencütek, 2025), access to rights and services is tied not just to citizenship but to socio-economic status, producing a hybrid system in which formal rights coexist with informal practice, and resource-rich returnees are consistently better equipped to navigate it than their less privileged counterparts. The selected quotes reveal how returnees perceive the class-based inequalities they face. One returnee stated: “The only means of obtaining rights in this country are through money and political power” while another also noted that “Those who own land and capital have an edge over others”. These reflections illustrate how economic power and connections shape access to rights, deepening disparities among returnees, creating a hybrid system of access, in which formal rights coexist with informal practices. In other words, while the state is increasingly visible as a provider, it does not yet operate as the sole or fully reliable mechanism through which individuals secure resources.

DEPENDENCE ON INFORMAL NETWORKS CAN ITSELF REINFORCE FRAGMENTATION AND INEQUALITY, PERSONALISING ACCESS TO RESOURCES AND DEEPENING MISTRUST BETWEEN COMMUNITIES.

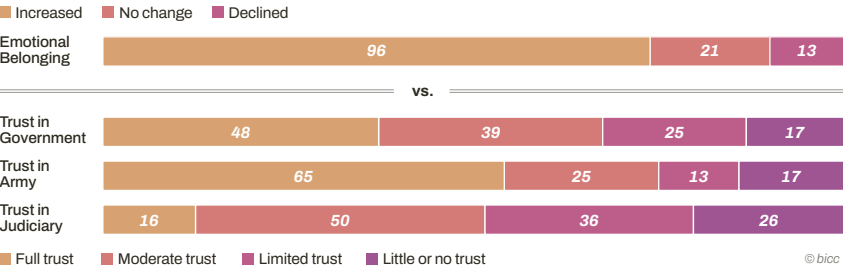
When facing hardship or rights violations, 76 of 130 respondents said they would approach public institutions, but family networks (70) and friends or colleagues (43)

were nearly as common, and a smaller but notable share reported turning to community members, religious institutions, charities or even armed groups for protection—a choice that is possible only because armed groups in parts of Syria continue to operate as de facto local power brokers. Dependence on informal networks can itself reinforce fragmentation and inequality, personalising access to resources and deepening mistrust between communities.

EMOTIONAL TRUST AND CONDITIONAL ATTACHMENT

Beyond these considerations, many returnees described a genuine emotional pull towards Syria that exists independently of—and often in tension with—their institutional and material assessments. Of 130 respondents, 96 said their sense of belonging to Syria or their local community had increased since returning, while 21 respondents reported no change and only 13 described a decline. This suggests that the collapse of the Assad regime and the experience of return brought about a real emotional and symbolic change for many Syrians, particularly through the restoration of physical presence, family ties and attachment to place.

FIGURE 6: EMOTIONAL BELONGING VERSUS INSTITUTIONAL TRUST



Return appears to have strengthened respondents' emotional sense of belonging more rapidly than their trust in state institutions. While 96 respondents reported an increased sense of belonging, institutional trust remains more uneven, particularly in relation to the judiciary. **Note:** Figures show the number of interviews. Emotional belonging: n=130. Valid responses for institutional trust vary by institution: government n=129; army n=120; judiciary n=128. The response categories for belonging and institutional trust are different and should not be interpreted as directly equivalent measures. **Source:** bicc fieldwork in Syria, 2025–2026

Yet this attachment is frequently conditional and fragile, coexisting with the same uncertainty documented throughout this *report*. As one returnee in Homs Governorate reflected: “Honestly, I still find it hard to adapt to the new situation. Without that, I feel I am a stranger here.” Another, in Damascus city, described a trajectory rather than a fixed feeling: “At first, the feelings of Assad’s fall and the restoration of the country were overwhelming, then things started to change, and I felt frustrated.” Belonging, in short, has been restored faster than trust—and it is the gap between the two that defines much of what ‘return’ now means for those who have made it back.

BELONGING HAS BEEN RESTORED FASTER THAN TRUST—AND IT IS THE GAP BETWEEN THE TWO THAT DEFINES MUCH OF WHAT ‘RETURN’ NOW MEANS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE MADE IT BACK.

CONCLUSION: FRAGILE RETURNS IN A VOLATILE TRANSITION

Findings presented across this *bicc report* point to a single, consistent pattern: support for the new authorities largely reflects hope for stability and change, not confidence in institutions that have actually proven themselves accountable, consolidated or inclusive. A returnee who trusts the army more than the judiciary, who credits the state with restoring order but not with delivering justice, or who feels that they have a greater voice in society without believing that voice carries real weight, is describing exactly this gap between optimism and evidence. Trust remains cautious rather than consolidated, embedded in patterns of exclusion, unequal access and volatile governance that, in altered form, predate the transition and persist into it.

This is why return cannot be equated with reintegration. The collapse of the Assad regime marked a genuine symbolic and political rupture, but it did not resolve the structural conditions shaping returnees' everyday lives: an economy where wages have risen on paper while purchasing power has collapsed in practice; a security order in which different armed groups such as HTS, the SNA, and the SDF were each absorbed on different terms, leaving returnees uncertain about which armed authority actually governs where they live; a political system still without a constitution or functioning parties; and a social fabric strained simultaneously by sectarian violence, stayee–returnee resentment and minority exclusion. Many returnees described stronger emotional attachment

to Syria since coming back. However, that attachment coexists with, rather than resolves, this uncertainty. A person can be physically home and still be waiting to find out whether it is safe to stay.

This has a direct implication for policy. Physical return, infrastructure reconstruction and security stabilisation, taken alone, will not produce durable reintegration. They cannot, because the economic model and the security order are not a neutral backdrop to return but structural features that actively shape it, as this *report* has shown throughout. An economic strategy still oriented towards investment and liberalisation rather than broad-based productive recovery leaves the wage–poverty gap that drives return into poverty largely untouched. A security architecture still negotiated and decentralised rather than consolidated under one accountable authority leaves the checkpoint-by-checkpoint uncertainty returnees describe largely unresolved.

Addressing return without addressing these two conditions directly treats the symptom while leaving the cause in place.

Durable return therefore depends on rebuilding social, political and economic life together, not sequentially: inclusive governance, credible accountability mechanisms—particularly transitional justice, given how directly its absence keeps communal fear alive—meaningful political participation and economic recovery broad enough to close the gap between rising nominal wages and collapsing real purchasing power. Without these, return will remain what most respondents already describe it as: provisional, conditional and reversible. Findings show that returnees do not experience politics, security, the economy and trust as separate categories; rather, they experience them simultaneously in their everyday lives. Their experiences therefore provide a unique lens through which to assess the broader trajectory of Syria's political transition.

FIGURE 7: KEY FINDINGS



Note: Returnees' experiences suggest a transition in which improved security coexists with economic hardship, fragmented authority and conditional institutional trust. Sustainable reintegration therefore depends on broader political, economic, institutional and social recovery. The key findings synthesise quantitative and qualitative evidence presented throughout the report. The overall study is based on 130 semi-structured interviews conducted with Syrian returnees.

Source: bicc fieldwork in Syria, 2025–2026

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Since the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, more than three million displaced Syrians have returned to their areas of origin. Yet return does not necessarily mean reintegration. Drawing on fieldwork across Syria, this report examines how returnees navigate a rapidly changing political, security and economic landscape. While the end of large-scale conflict and political change have opened new possibilities, fragmented authority, economic hardship and uneven institutional trust continue to make return precarious. For many, returning is therefore not a final decision but an ongoing process of assessing whether life in Syria can be rebuilt. Sustainable return will ultimately depend on whether Syria's transition can turn physical return into meaningful prospects for staying.