



UNITED NATIONS

الاستقرار  
ESCWA

**The National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) Programme**  
Towards post-conflict Reconciliation and Rebuilding in Syria - *by Syrians, for Syrians*

## NAFS Quarterly

January - February - March 2018



**Olive oil - an ingredient for peace?**

**Page 2 - 11**

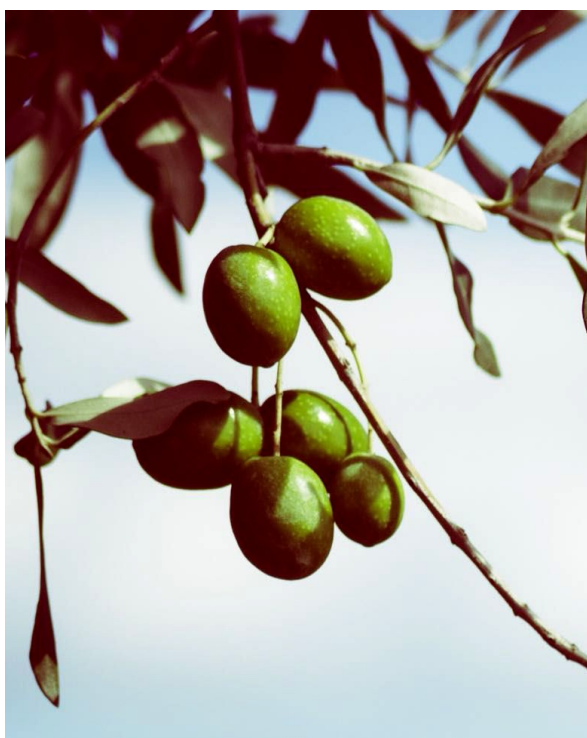
**The Way Back Home -  
A Safe, Dignified and Voluntary Return for Displaced Syrians**

**Page 8—11**

## “It’s a Syria thing”

NAFS Programme involves Syrians from all walks of life to discuss and assess challenges and opportunities for Syria in the future. Their views, visions, fears and hopes are transformed into national-level policy alternatives across 57 sectors. Behind the technical language and between the lines of our reports, are the many stories of how every aspect of life has been irreversibly changed due to the ongoing conflict, and essentially what it means to be Syria today. In this regular column of the NAFS Quarterly, we tell some of these stories by looking at a Syrian produce, artifact or dish. If you have a story to tell or a proposal for the next column, please contact us on: [escwa-nafs@un.org](mailto:escwa-nafs@un.org).

### Syrian Olive Oil, Ingredient for Peace



Part of the Mediterranean basin, Syria is thought to be the birthplace of the olive tree and home to the oldest known cultivation of olive trees extending back for more than 5000 years.

Olive oil is before all else a staple item of the Syrian table. Essential for frying vegetables and widely used to prepare native vegetarian dishes, it is also indispensable for preserving strained yoghurt, *makdous* and other “*mouneh*” or supplies goodies. Whether dripped on salads or sprinkled on hummus and *labneh*, olive oil is sincerely the unsung hero of the Syrian cuisine.

Olive and olive oil production are considered important sources of national wealth, providing both direct and indirect income for more than **500,000 rural families**. Considered a crucial pillar of Syrian food security, olive oil was also a key export contributing to 10 per cent of the Syrian agricultural domestic product before the outbreak of the conflict. According to the International Olive Council, the sub-sector employed 25,420 individuals, active in olive development, of

which 26 per cent are females.

Though the Syrian conflict has severely impacted many economic sectors, including agriculture, the olive and olive oil industries have shown impressive resilience. A native to the region, the evergreen olive tree is also known to grow in valleys and dry semi-arid regions.

As the spring sun makes the olive trees bud, time is as good as any to contemplate the fate of the Syrian olive. This brief explores the importance of the olive oil industry to the Syrian economy and society at large and discusses the potential role for the industry as an indigenous driver of growth as well as a tool for social cohesion at the sectoral level.

<sup>1</sup> Technically, *hummus* in Arabic denotes but the chickpeas, while the dish consisting of crushed chickpeas with, lemon, garlic, *tahini* (sesame paste) and olive oil is called *hummus bi-l-tahini*.

<sup>2</sup> See the first “Food for thought” article on *makdous*. [LINK?](#)

<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Shawqi, “Waqi’ ‘Intaj wa-‘intaj wa-tasdir zayt al-zaytun fi Suriya khilal saba’ sanawat (dirasat)” (The reality of the olive oil production and exportation in Syria during seven years (study)), *Al-Hall*, 16 August 2017,

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

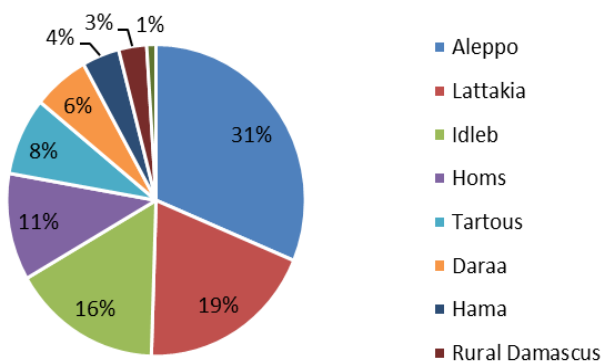
<sup>5</sup> Paul Vossen, “Olive Oil: History, Production, and Characteristics of the World’s Classic Oils”, *Hortscience*, Vol. 42(5), August 2007, [https://static-content.springer.com/esm/art%3A10.1007%2Fs00248-013-0258-4/MediaObjects/248\\_2013\\_258\\_MOESM1\\_ESM.pdf](https://static-content.springer.com/esm/art%3A10.1007%2Fs00248-013-0258-4/MediaObjects/248_2013_258_MOESM1_ESM.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> This recent retail price stems from NAFS’s sources on the ground, however prices vary across Syria according to access, security situation, transportation cost and other factors.

## Olive Oil sub-sector pre-conflict

Occupying 650,000 hectares or 12 per cent of the whole planted area in Syria, olive trees are a regular sight across the country. The figure below shows that the northern part of Syria, namely Aleppo and Idlib, host the highest percentage of trees and production (45 per cent), followed by the coastline and center regions of Homs and Hama.

Figure 1: Share of olive oil production per governorate



**Source: Statistical abstract of Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform, 2010**

While the olive tree can largely be left to tend for itself, how much it yields depends on factors such as its age (the older the tree the higher the yield), adequate pruning and favorable weather conditions. In modern agriculture, it is of course common to supplement with fertilizers and pesticide.

The olives are harvested in late autumn, right after the first rain of early winter. Afterwards, the olives are either brought to the olive mills by the farmers or mill owners collect them at site. The activity of

the whole sector is seasonal and olive mills only open then, at the alarm beep of the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform or alerted by farmers themselves. Most olive growers are small scale farms and most of them still use primitive harvest methods. The high costs of pruning and harvest, of pumping water, as well as the cost of fertilizers (fertilizers represent 40 per cent of total production cost) are input costs which burdened farmers before the conflict and that still burden farmers today. The lack of market knowledge by farmers and poor coordination with mill owners further reduced the overall profit and competitiveness of olive growers in Syria. Mill owners on the other hand, had a more competitive edge in terms of business knowledge, machinery and technological advancement.

It is worthwhile mentioning that the Syrian olive oil sub-sector is mostly composed of privately-owned small and medium enterprises, noting that 10 -12 big industrialized companies are responsible of 80 per cent of the exports.

The Syrian mill scene is composed of four types of different mills: modern new generation mills, modern hydraulic presses, traditional presses and animal operated old mills. Modern mills grew in number between 2007 and 2012 with the majority being modernized opting for the decanting process. These mills are more productive in terms of oil-yield and developed enough to own their own hectares of olives. They are connected to both the farmer and the exporter on the other end of the value chain. On that note, the Aleppo and Idlib governorates, were not only the largest olive producers before the conflict, but also had the highest number of mills, 265 and 135 respectively,

### Syrian Olive oil sector profile

	1998		2007	
Planted area	460,000	hectares	650,000	hectares
Number of trees	62,300,000	trees	87,500,000	trees
Number of productive trees	36,700,000	trees	64,000,000	trees
Olive Oil production	144,800	metric tons	250,000	metric tons

Source: Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform Statistical Abstract of 2007



against the national total of 1086 based on the national census of year 2012.

According to a recent survey conducted in Misyaf (Hama governorate), a typical mill would serve between 5 and 25 nearby villages. So, competitive advantages of the olive mill naturally include effective field management, committing to catering to

*From the perspective of the 'water-energy-food security' nexus, olive oil production has several advantages:*

- *Olive trees are famously water efficient and tolerant to dry weather relative to other permanent crops and are still widely rain-fed in Syria, putting less stress on water resources*
- *Olive oil production provides a source of income for rural families as well as being a Syrian consumer preference*
- *Olive oil is a lucrative business with repercussions on the macro-economy in terms of boosting foreign currency reserves from exports*
- *Olive oil production is an intermediate input for other outputs such as Laurel soap; another important niche industry.*

the needs of the farmers and cash cows for the olive pressing business.

In the 1990s, the Syrian Government initiated several measures to protect and increase olive and olive oil production. They expanded land reclamation efforts (mainly in remote areas characterized by water shortage) and provided additional support to olive producers through discounted credit and subsidized seeds. Factors such as government's policy, along with extensive farmer initiatives in new young plantations, maturing of Syrian olive trees, and favorable weather conditions, all resulted in a doubling of olive oil production by the year of 2007 (table 1). As a result, Syria's pre-conflict production of olive oil ranked

Unfortunately, this peak of production did not last long to gradually witness a downturn between 2008 and 2011, mainly due to adverse seasonal conditions. It is worthwhile mentioning at this point that olive oil production in Syria is unpredictable. It varies by a factor of 10 from year to year because of unfavorable weather conditions.

The olive oil sub-sector also had its own challenges which further limited production. On the agricultural side, inadequate harvesting, poor pest management systems and fertilization of crops produced lower yields than could otherwise be achieved. Introducing certain advanced pruning and harvest methods and supplementary irrigation could also increase olive yields per tree and save up to 30 per cent of the farmer overall cost. Furthermore, storing the olives for longer periods of time between harvest and pressing further reduced the quality of the oil.

Poor management of olive mills represented another bottleneck for Syria's olive-oil sub sector. While modern mills were gradually introduced, many of them required know-how on operating the machines. Others had deplorable hygiene in the workplace and lacked appropriate storage area for the olives. Other issues mill owners were faced with pre-conflict were the mis-management of industrial waste, certain technical training needs and high cost implications associated with marketing.

## Impact of the conflict

Despite the impressive resilience of the sector since 2010, the negative impact of the protracted conflict is beyond any doubt. Before the armed battles in Idlib intensified in 2016, most of the trees and mills were still intact. However, crops were severely damaged by bombing and burning, which had a direct impact on the overall production yield. In some areas of the country, with fuel prices increasing tenfold during conflict, people have cut valuable olive trees to use the wood for heating purposes. Many orchards might still be off limit to farmers due to nearby fighting, the latter obviously stopping harvest. And while olive trees are able to endure without much water or care, without regular harvesting, pruning and disease management they will carry scanty crops for years to come.

Production of olive oil has also decreased due to the partial or complete destruction of many mills, especially in Aleppo and Idlib. Shifting frontlines, bombings and looting also ensnared oil mills leaving many completely or partially

---

I. Malevolti, August 1999, "Olive and Olive oil sub-sector", *National Agricultural Policy Centre*, [http://agriportal.gov.sy/public/dwnld-files/policy\\_studies/en/01\\_olive\\_oil\\_en.pdf](http://agriportal.gov.sy/public/dwnld-files/policy_studies/en/01_olive_oil_en.pdf)

ICARDA, "Raising and Sustaining Olives Production and incomes among smallholder farmers in Syria", project summary 2011); <https://www.icarda.org/sites/default/files/Raising%20olive%20productivity%20in%20Syria.pdf>

Information from local source in Hama

destroyed. Out of 1086 mills pre-conflict nationwide, only 500 mills are estimated to be functional today. In Idlib alone, estimates from 2016 showed a reduction in presses and mills from 135 pre-conflict to 118. This reduction of mills has put pressure on mills in other locations, not able to handle the extra workload.

Moreover, and under the given import constraints during conflict, many farmers can't afford sufficient pest controls and find it increasing difficulty to procure pesticides. Labor costs have also increased during the conflict. As an example, the hourly rate at a farm in rural Damascus has increased from 500 SYP before the conflict to 4,000 SYP today. Theft and smuggling of the crop and stock have also been common, especially since the Government banned exports with the outbreak of the conflict. While the ban on export of olive oil was lifted in 2016 mainly to mitigate theft or possible destruction of piled stock, export remains a challenge to the sector. In sum, increased cost of labor and fuel to run the mills and transport the produce, theft, physical destruction, illegal smuggling of commodity and damages to olive orchards have all contributed to a tenfold increase in the selling price of olive oil per litre.

Today, as average retail price for a litre reached 2130 Syrian lira (shelf price 2300 Syrian lira), olive oil is increasingly substituted by cheaper vegetable oils imported or distributed in food baskets by various aid agencies. Local demand for olive oil echoed supply and shrank with lower purchasing power of consumers. Consequently, consumer preference also shifted towards smaller packaging sizes, such as 1l, 0.5 l and 250ml.

## Challenges and opportunities moving forward

It could be argued that the symbolic role that olives and olive oil play in Syrian society is just as important as the economic one. The resilience of the olive tree mirrors that of the Syrian people and the relationship between, tree, farmer and consumer mark the strong bond that all Syrians have toward their land. As a source of employment and livelihood generation, as an energy and water efficient agricultural crop, and as both a final and intermedi-

ate product, the olive oil industry is ideally positioned to be an indigenous driver of economic growth.

As this brief has demonstrated, there are challenges that policy makers face, some of which pre-date the conflict and others created by it. Addressing the above-mentioned issues related to the mills, quality control for cost saving and higher yielding along the production process, harvest and transportation methods, disease management, enhanced farmer-mill and mill-mill cooperation at the sector level are urgently needed to improve local income, rehabilitate damaged infrastructure and strengthen social cohesion at the local level in particular, and national level in general. Support for small scale farmers, including access to credit, to technical know-how and other incentives, such as subsidies for pesticide, are also needed through the traditional agricultural extension worker model.

Cooperatives can play a central role in this process. The Syrian countryside has over half a century of experience with rural cooperatives as sources of access to seeds and marketing channels. What could be beneficial for the olive oil sub-sector is to foster a new breed of cooperatives linking farmers and mills, and acting as sources of empowerment and education, as hubs for collective decision-making, thus giving them a leading role in local rural development. This initiative could create models for local-level reconciliation and economic recovery. In other words, the cooperatives will further support interaction between the members of the sector and repair the damaged relations between communities by creating a productive return to cooperation post-conflict. The division of labor of the tasks to lift the entire sub sector of olive oil, is a strong testimony of social cohesion between members of the olive oil community. The members of the sector would then connect and be involved in profoundly transformed priorities such as assessing together the damage inflicted by conflict or setting up a fund to invest in infrastructural projects, and so on and so forth. Reconciliation will come with restorative activities that focus on new horizons, new hope and new ambitions. One example would be to establish new laboratories that

---

"Idlib tahwi 70% min masahat al-zaytoun...wa "al-Nusra" tusahim fi taqlis al-nisba" (Idlib occupies 70 % of the olive area and "Nusra" contributes to reducing the percentage) *Sputnik News*, 21 November 2017, <https://arabic.sputniknews.com/business/201711211027705830-%D8%A5%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8-%D8%B2%D9%8A%D8%AA%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%B5%D8%B1%D8%A9/>  
Estimates from the Office of Olive at the Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform (Chapter 6), *Statistical Abstract of 2011*, <http://moaar.gov.sy/main/archives/5681>.

Information from local olive grower in Rural Damascus.

focus on certifying the oil from different parts of the country and setting distinct Syrian standards for olive oil. Another activity could be the intelligent documentation of the sector's performance to feed into central planning. Finally, collaboration is needed to respond to issues like industrial waste management, whose solutions could foster new ventures and entrepreneurial activity at the community level.

Experiences from other countries has also shown how ex-combatants can be reincorporated into society as part of an overall decommissioning process that also provides possibilities for income generation.

### **Role of the sub-sector in peacebuilding**

Agriculture has proven to reduce violence and environmental destruction in many post-conflict scenarios. Finding long-term alternative sources of income and settling people in peacefully and initiating food-related enterprises had a positive effect on conflict mitigation or in some cases addressed a direct root cause of the conflict.

The olive oil sub-sector dynamics themselves carry the main components of a typical peacebuilding formula. (1) Indigenous resource: In the particular case of the olive oil industry, an indigenous resource like the national treasure olive tree is involved in the design of every early recovery initia-

tive at the sectoral level. (2) Wide Geographical coverage: The sector involves all regions of Syria because the olive tree grows in all parts of the country, and in that sense, it is inclusive of the people of Syria. (3) Water sensitive: The studied sector is known to put little pressure on the country's water resources. (4) Productive collaboration: It is a sector that involves multiple stakeholders from small farmers to mill owners, to industrialists and exporters.

The management and planning of the sector portfolio requires a conflict-sensitive approach, paying special attention to the different needs of the people on the ground and taking into consideration priorities articulated by affected communities. Resources would then be allocated accordingly and progressively, based on the local sectoral merit, rather than by comparing the sector's performance to others in the region.

The recovery of the Syrian olive oil sector is important for the internal market and will face challenges rebounding on the international market. However, those challenges can be overcome with policy level support and attention to quality considerations, issues that are not costly prohibitive and well worth the investment. If given the chance Syria's olive oil sector can once again be a source of pride for all Syrians.

## **A future for the 'Green Gold' of Aleppo?**

Among the many uses of Syria's olive oil is the world-famous olive oil and laurel soap of Aleppo. Like their fellow Mediterranean, Syrians have a long tradition of using olive oil as a product to improve health and enhance beauty. Olive oil is also the main ingredient of the artisanal soap, which in English takes its name from its primary city of production, Aleppo, and, in Arabic, from its secondary ingredient, laurel (*Saboun Ghar*). Today, however, the main centres of soap production in Aleppo have been left in rubbles, and soap has become one of the many goods which have become scarce and expensive.

The benefits of *Ghar* soap are well-known. The soap has multiple hygiene uses, contains anti-oxidants and has a mild anti-inflammatory effect. The hypoallergenic soap also makes for an ideal soap and clothing detergent for people with sensitive skin. As one bar can last for months, a more cost-effective, all-purpose soap is hard to find.

With a dry climate ideal for drying soap, surrounded by large olive groves, with laurel growing from evergreen trees and shrub, and with proximity to the coast, Aleppo was just about the perfect place to make soap. With centuries-old reputation for mastering the craft, Aleppo's soap making families handed their recipes down one generation after another. However, the industry had also gone through significant modernization over the past few decades. From an entirely human-powered enterprise using wood fire and rudimentary tools, soap factories have adopted steam boilers to melt, motors to stir and mechanical pumps to pour the mixture into the floor.

While initially suffering after the introduction of industrial soap in the 1950s, the soap's many qualities were rediscovered and a boom in production ensued. Producers utilized its organic qualities to full effect and clever marketing allowed the export market to increase from traditional outlets such as Turkey and Iraq to Asia and Europe.

However, Aleppo's location as one of the epicenters of the conflict meant the *Saboun Ghar* industry

also suffered its share of disruption. Many of the soap families, factory workers and olive farmers have been forced to leave flee to find safety in other parts of the country or abroad - as have many soap masters, taking with them the know-how of the craft and finding themselves unable to pass it on to the next generation. As discussed in the brief, olive oil production dipped and became harder to come by.

Future soap production in Syria, like the production of most goods in the country, depends on a value chain which is currently interrupted by conflict, frontlines and war economy. While small-scale production has re-started in Aleppo and other parts of the country, getting hold of large quantities of olive and laurel oil, as well as fuel, will remain difficult and expensive as long as Syria remains de-facto divided. Similarly, transportation and wholesale of soaps to the local market as well as foreign markets, remains difficult for the same reasons. To kick-start and sustain soap production also requires a stable market and a reliable security situation. The machineries and facilities needed are huge and production cannot easily be moved. Investing in production and the large quantities of pricy oils is also deemed risky by most, considering that each batch of soap takes about a year before they reach the counter. The old craft of making soap is at risk of disappearing as the masters of the craft as well as their workers are forced to flee.

However, the fact that Syrians bring with them, buy and have even started producing laurel soap, even outside the country, remains a testament to the lasting importance of the soap in their daily life. Because, while other soaps might do the job, few can compete with the *ghar* soap in terms of history, cultural position, versatility or its ability to kindle the nostalgia of most Syrians – its smell a reminder of home and the old city of Aleppo.

### A year in the life of a soap master

Involved in the production from the start, the soap master would monitor each step of the production from the olive mills to the storefront. In October and November during olive harvest season, the soap master would go to the olive mills most of them located around Afrin. After pressing the olives to get oil for cooking, the oil left in the olive pomace is extracted using a solvent. The oil is then transported from the mill to the soap factory (*Masbana*). Here the soap master oversees the slow boiling and mixing of olive and laurel oil and the soda.\* The soap master would employ his sense of smell, taste and years of experience to determine when the mix would be ready, somewhere between 48 hours and five days, before the mixture is poured onto a flat surface, normally covering the factory floor with five cm of teal green. As the soap stiffens, the workers of the factory would strap planks onto their feet and walk across the teal green surface to flatten it. Once cool and a starting to dry, normally after a few days, it's time for cutting and branding. Factory workers, under close supervision of the soap master, then "plough" through the field of soap, cutting it into large cube bars, and then brand each bar with the family's name and the quantity of laurel. The branded bars would then carefully be piled in large towers to let the air pass. For the coming 6 to 12 months, the soap master observes how the towers of soap change color from green to shades of yellow. The perfect Aleppo soap has a dry cream-colored crust of about 1 cm which coats a softer core of teal green and, once clacked against another produces a hollow sound. At this stage, the soap master will stop the drying process by packing the soaps in jute bags – 50 kilo a bag. As the soap master parts with the bags of soap, headed for markets and bathrooms across the country, barrels of oils are once again loaded into the factory to make next year's batch of Aleppo's green gold.

*\* Aleppo soap is hot-processed, however it is also possible to make cold-processed soap using oil and Alkaline. This kind of soap production, which is found in Kassab in the Latakia region, produces a soap which is less dry and more dissolvent than hot-processes soaps.*



# The Way Back Home - A Safe, Dignified and Voluntary Return for Displaced Syrians

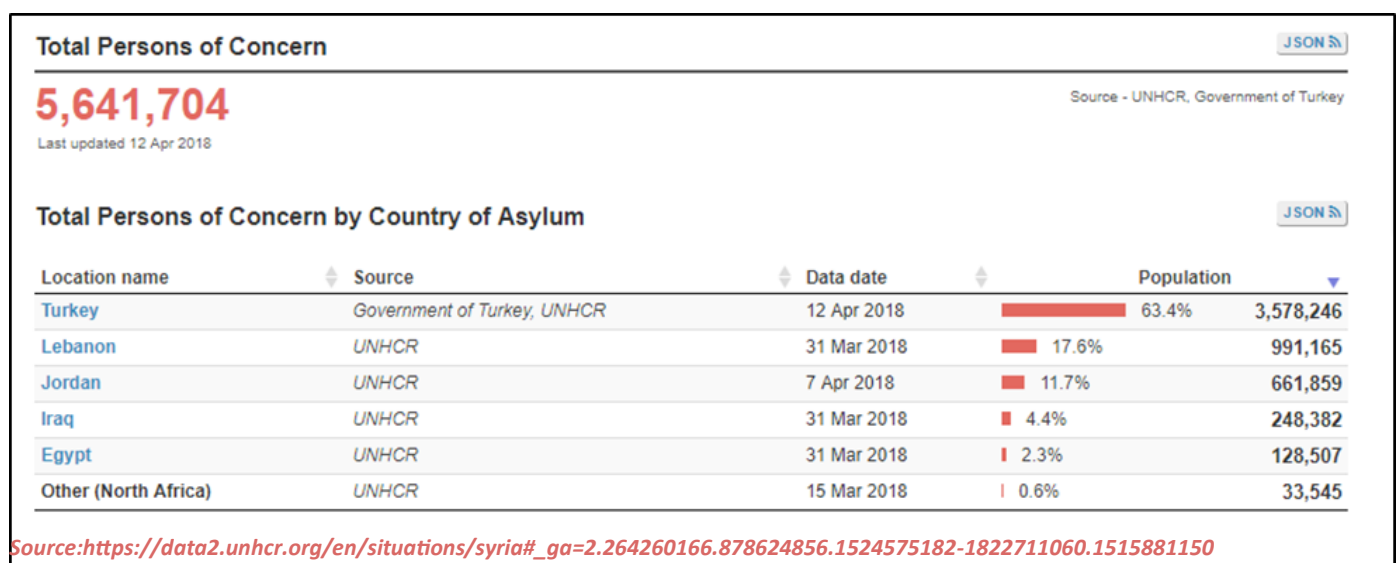
Syria's conflict is proving to be one of the worst and most costly tragedies in recent history in terms of human lives and human development. The violence has claimed hundreds of thousands of lives, destroyed approximately one third of the country's capital assets, reduced its GDP and compromised its social cohesion, its national economy and infrastructure. Aside from Syria itself, the resulting transformations are felt most acutely in neighboring countries and reverberated through geopolitical upheaval regionally and globally. These spill-over effects have serious repercussions on the stability of the whole region.

The urgency of the situation in Syria has mobilized political initiatives at all levels as well as humanitarian assistance to tackle immediate concerns for displaced, refugees and affected civilians. However many observers note the long-term damage to developmental progress in the country and question the extent to which Syria will be able to reel back from the colossal developmental setbacks suffered throughout the conflict.

Displaced Syrians have lost or are gradually losing their means of livelihoods, and minimum basic needs are becoming more difficult if not impossible to attain. Combined with violence, fear, political polarization, the proxy war, the power of weapons, and the interest of local war lords, the lack of access to basic needs and services is now solidifying a war economy that has resulted in new types of social relations driven by affiliations with local elite leaders that can fulfill those needs, creating even greater social division and vested interests in sustaining the conflict.

The figures today show that almost half of the Syrian population is now displaced in one way or another. The United Nations Refugees Agency UNHCR website's most recent statistics on the number of displaced Syrians (December, 2017) show that 6.6 million persons are internally displaced and 2.98 million are in hard-to-reach and besieged areas. The total number of registered Syrian refugees as of 19 April 2018, is 5,641,704. (please see the figure below)

The complex military and political situation and uncertainty in the political process makes it almost impossible to think of a near return of Syrians to their country. As the recently published Carnegie report stated "despite an overwhelming desire to go home, refugees are unlikely to return voluntarily in the near future, even if there is an announced cessation of hostilities". The report lists the preconditions of return as Syrian refugees see them and these include "guarantees of safety and security, the potential for a sustainable political transition, a return to their areas of origin, the establishment of judicial mechanisms to hold perpetrators accountable for their war crimes, and economic opportunities".



(Source: <http://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html>).

Maha Yahya, Jean Kassir, Khalil el-Hariri, "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Return Home", Carnegie Middle East Center, Beirut, 16 April 2018. <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/04/16/refugee-attitudes-toward-return-to-syria-pub-76061>



## Safe, Dignified and Voluntary Return at the Forefront of the National Agenda for the Future of Syria Programme

As far back as 2013 through the Way Back Home Programme and subsequently the Strategic Policy Alternatives Framework (SPAF) document, the National Agenda for the Future of Syria Programme (NAFS) has adopted a proactive approach towards the right of return for all Syrians. We have centered the rights of the displaced by drawing policy options to link return to long-term planning and development, and by continuously promoting a safe, dignified and voluntary return of all Syrians as an integral part of any formal and informal political and policy dialogue on peacebuilding and reconstruction.

In its principles of a vision for Syria 2030, the SPAF document sees Syria as a "country where political will is carried out solely through peaceful means and regulated by inclusive and empowered democratic institutions. Ensuring the safety and security of the people is a major priority. Both peace and human security find in national reconciliation the foundation for nationally-owned peacebuilding and State-building processes. Priority should be given to rebuilding the culture of peace and eliminating structural violence". It is within this vision and context that the Programme sees the return of all Syrians to their country.

All those who were displaced due to the conflict, including those who are not officially registered, have the right to a safe, dignified and voluntary return within reasonable timeframes to their homes that they left or to another place that they willingly choose without losing their right to go back to their original homes, within the framework of an inclusive political agreement. For this return to be sustainable, it must not stop at the physical act of relocation from one place to another, but also involve the rehabilitation of social capital, which includes millions of lives and their reintegration, participation and empowerment to secure livelihoods and contribute to peacebuilding and State-building thereafter.

### Challenges of Return and the Push Factors:

Experiences from other countries that have underwent conflict and mass displacement, indicate that voluntary return schemes do not work as planned even if they come in the aftermath of a comprehensive political settlement. Voluntary return can be a chaotic and prolonged process that may change in pattern and may produce unexpected outcomes. Many Syrian refugees are reluctant to return before they have certainty they will be safe and secure, find homes and jobs to provide for their families. Still, the number of persons returning will be likely increase even without a political process, due to harsh living conditions such as overcrowded camps, lack of access to resources, bad health conditions and the erratic refugee policies of the host countries, and more.

At the same time, the reality in Syria does not meet the needed preconditions for refugees to return. Challenges persist and the factors pushing people away from home are still far greater than the pull factors. Refugees and displaced are stuck in a limbo of uncertainty between a desire to go back to a home that is not yet welcoming, and a temporary and very hard situation in host communities.

- One of the major challenges facing the issue of return today regardless of the place of asylum is the lack of a viable political peace process and a timeframe for a possible return. Due to the absence of a political resolution, no preparation for local or international coordination mechanisms or institutions or agreements are put in place yet to oversee and implement a planned voluntary return scheme if any.
- This is coupled with an international fatigue caused by the burden of hosting Syrian refugees and the delicate political situation in the region and in Europe in particular. The countries that have gen-

erously received huge influxes of refugees over the years find their policy makers today divided, for various political, economic and social reasons, over whether to invest in integrating those refugees or to push away the liability and responsibility regardless of the situation inside Syria. While an international pledging conference is taking place in Brussels at the time of writing, the international community is still unable to first close the funding gap of responding to the needs of Syrian refugees, and second, reach a consensus on how to advocate and move towards a peaceful political resolution of the Syrian conflict.

- In Syria, the forced demographic changes caused by military operations are further complicating the scene. The numbers of internally displaced people continues to rise, with no clear plan of where these people end up. Drastic demographic shifts could have major repercussions on local economies and resources and will greatly compromise social cohesion and the future makeup of Syria.
- Another major challenge facing the returnees face is the premature changes made to the legal framework that governs issues such as safety and security, civil registration, housing, and land and property rights. Some of these laws are likely to affect the poorest and most vulnerable displaced populations, as many of them come from informal or suburban areas with ambiguous and insecure property rights. Any radical change in laws and regulations that may negatively affect the rights of refugees would further exacerbate their situation and relations with host communities, and delay or completely obstruct their return.
- Lessons learned from different conflicts around the world show that there are prerequisites, the absence of which frustrates all return attempts. Some essential return preconditions are recurrent, and these are political stability, personal safety, housing, services and work. To date, these preconditions are, to varying extents, still absent in the case of Syria.
- During the conflict, women, like men, have been killed, injured, arbitrary detained, tortured and seen their human rights violated. There are additional conflict-related burdens specific to women. For many, the loss or detention of their spouses or sons has made them heads of households with no access to resources or opportunities or training. Displacement has meant that hundreds of thousands face their plight in exile and isolation. Many have been and continue to be subject to harassment, sexual abuse, rape, trafficking, child marriage, and/or other forms of gender and sexually-based violence both inside the country and in neighboring countries.
- The length of the conflict significantly affects the possibility of return. The longer the conflict lingers, the less likely it is that refugees will move back. After being displaced for years, a great percentage of people have already found some sort of stability in another safer country, integrated into the host community, learned the language, found a job and will most likely reject the idea of return all together.

## Opportunities for Return and the Pull Factors:

The sustainable return of refugees greatly depends on the social, economic and governance ability of the country to provide for basic needs and other prerequisites that people perceive as necessary to return. It is essential to safeguard the rights of all refugees and displaced in a safe, dignified and voluntary return. That being said, there are opportunities, though very limited still, in which policy makers could invest in order to promote the right of return for Syrians.

- The opportunity that lies in the nature and particularities of the political agreement, where there is still room today to work with decision-makers from all sides to include refugees in political discussions, take their rights into account in any future agreement and advocate for a political resolution that carefully considers the returnees and their priorities. The international community should see the political agreement as a great opportunity to bring about the safety, security and protection that Syrians require to safely return and restore their lives. In preparation for any future return, it is beneficial to map out early recovery and development initiatives. There are currently many initiatives and targeted programmes, in Syria and the neighboring countries, which seeks to improve the livelihoods of Syrians. Whether targeting health, education, employment, capacity building, these are efforts which complement the humanitarian support provided to Syrians and could form a possible bridge to future development at the local and national level.

- There is an opportunity as well to lay the groundwork in terms of temporary or permanent laws, institutions, and coordination mechanisms that might be needed to institutionalize the support extended to the return of Syrians.
- Work with local communities to build on their flexibility and experience in responding to urgent basic needs and services. The local communities and the corresponding local authorities will eventually carry the responsibility of the reception and reintegration of returnees.
- Work with host countries to enable refugees they host with means, tools, skills, vocations and capabilities needed to support their return and reintegration in Syria. It could be an opportunity for both the host communities and the refugees, the communities could benefit from Syrians as skilled workers and reduce their dependency on aid, and Syrians themselves could use their capabilities in Syria upon their return.
- Syrian women stand at the forefront of the struggles for justice, peace and reconciliation. Through their changing roles as heads of households, to organizers of civil society organizations, as well as entrepreneurs and political activists, lies an opportunity to invest in the Syrian women who have a strong and visible presence within Syria and in the diaspora.
- placed and refugees, and must address challenges related to their return and meaningful participation in the future of the country. Examples of this are safety and security, housing and property rights, job creation, equal access to basic services, and political participation.
- The skills and resources of Syrian refugees and displaced are needed to rebuild the country, and preparation should start today to ensure they have the required skills and capacities to participate in a meaningful way.
- It is essential for all concerned parties to the conflict, including the international community, to examine the possibilities of addressing the effects and the resolution of the conflict from a regional perspective. There are opportunities and mutual interests in a regionally-integrated approach to the conflict in general, and to the issue of return in particular.
- Host countries and humanitarian actors are encouraged to provide displaced Syrians with opportunities for work, to build their skill sets and capacities to contribute to rebuilding Syria post-conflict once conditions allow for safe, dignified and voluntary return.
- A sustainable return is directly linked to the overall peacebuilding and State-building plan and to the inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding and State building processes that address the root causes of the conflict and address its impact is the way to a sustainable and peaceful return of all Syrians.

### Policy Considerations Related to Return:

- The conflict in Syria cannot be resolved by military means, and a lasting peace agreement that enables the return of Syrians back home can only be achieved through a political process involving all parties and addressing the root causes of the conflict. A political process must involve all citizens, including refugees and internally displaced.
- A political agreement is a precondition for safe, dignified and voluntary return of internally displaced and refugees, and must address challenges related to their return and meaningful participation in the future of the country. Examples of this are safety and security, housing and property rights, job creation, equal access to basic services, and political participation.
- The skills and resources of Syrian refugees and displaced are needed to rebuild the country, and preparation should start today to ensure they have the required skills and capacities to participate in a meaningful way.
- It is imperative to look at the standards and provisions of aid effectiveness and coordination, and the roles of various players (governing entities, local authorities, civil society organizations, UN agencies, non-governmental agencies and individuals both men and women) in using return as a window of opportunity for reconciliation and development.



UNITED NATIONS

الأمم المتحدة  
ESCWA

NAFS Quarterly aims to give insight to the research and initiatives of the National Agenda for the Future of Syria (NAFS) Programme.

For more information about NAFS, please visit our webpages, [www.unescwa.org/NAFS](http://www.unescwa.org/NAFS) or contact us on [salem4@un.org](mailto:salem4@un.org)

The views expressed in this document, which has been reproduced without formal editing, are those of the experts of the NAFS Programme and do not necessarily reflect the views of ESCWA.