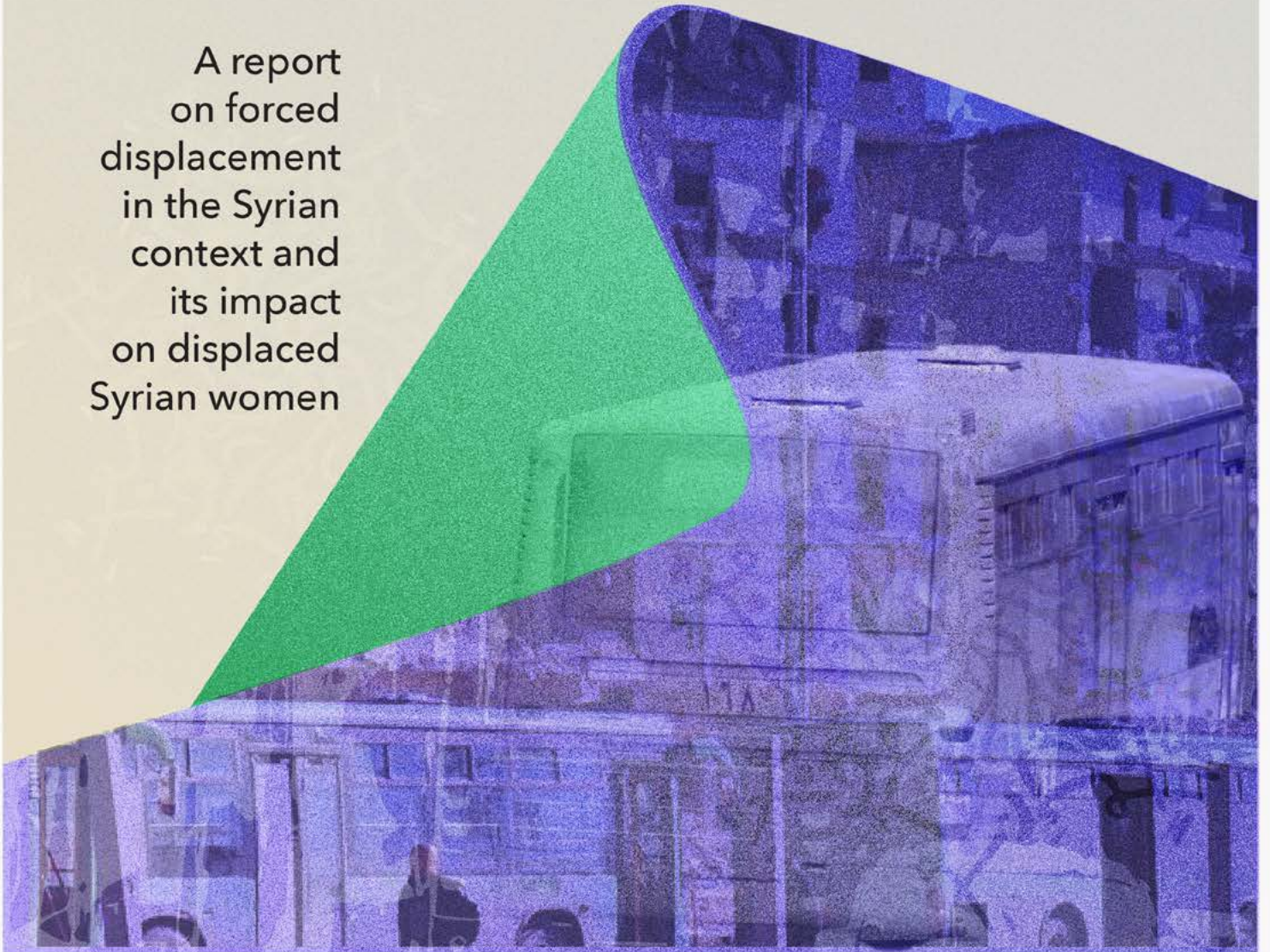


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Without Saying Goodbye...

A report
on forced
displacement
in the Syrian
context and
its impact
on displaced
Syrian women



Design by: Yara Alnajem.



EuroMed Feminist Initiative
المبادرة النسوية الأورو متوسطية
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اللوبي النسوي السوري
Syrian Feminist Lobby

Without Saying Goodbye...

This report Supported by the EuroMed Feminist Initiative.

The Syrian Feminist Lobby would like to express its utmost thanks and respect to the brave witnesses who shared their experiences in this report and to everyone who contributed to its completion, both organizations and individuals.

Special thanks to:

The Clinical Supervisor for reviewing the psychological section.

The Legal expert for reviewing the legal section.

Mrs. Izdihar Kanjo for her contribution in coordinating the interviews.

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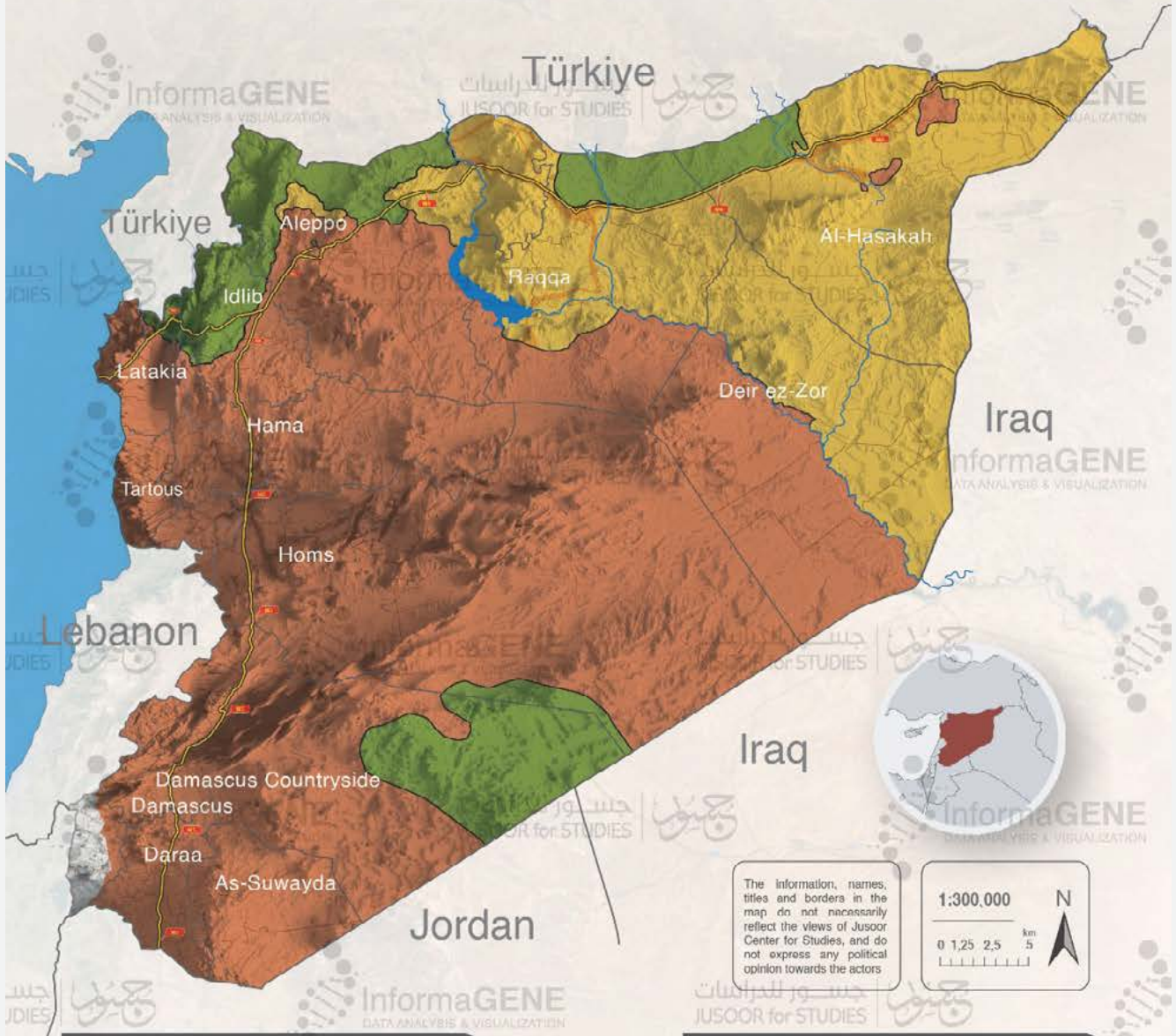
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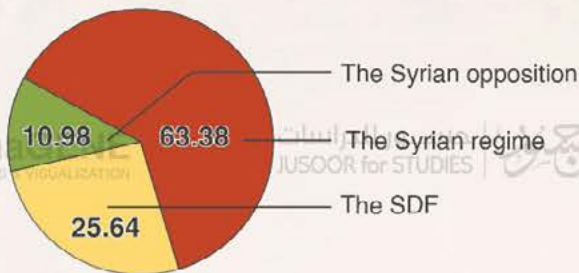




Map of military control across Syria at the end of 2022 and the beginning of 2023



Control percentages



Designed by
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Map keys

- Syrian Opposition-Held Areas
- Syrian Regime-Held Areas
- The Syrian regime forces
- SDF-Held Areas

Introduction

Forced Displacement
and International Law.

Forced Displacement
in Syria.

Forced displacement
operations



STRINGER, AFP



Forced Displacement and International Law

Forced displacement occurs when individuals and communities have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of events or situations such as armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights abuses, natural or man-made disasters, and/or development projects. It both includes situations where people have fled as well as situations where people have been forcibly removed from their homes, evicted or relocated to another place not of their choosing, whether by State or non-State actors. The defining factor is the absence of will or consent¹.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, under Article 8, stipulates that “unlawful deportation or transfer” for reasons related to conflict constitutes a war crime². Additionally, the forced deportation or forcible transfer of population amounts to a crime against humanity³ under Article 1)7)(d) when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population.

Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949⁴ prohibits the forcible transfer, either individually or collectively, of persons or the deportation of individuals from their places of residence to another territory, unless such transfer is for their benefit and safeguards them from the risks of armed conflicts.

Customary International Humanitarian Law also prohibits forced displacement in the context of non-international armed conflicts under Rule 129 of the International Committee of the Red Cross study on Customary International Humanitarian Law⁵.

¹United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

² The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 8

³ Ibid., Article 7(d)

⁴ Fourth Geneva Convention of 1949, Article 49

⁵ Customary International Humanitarian Law, International Committee of the Red Cross, Rule 129

The Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, officially endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1998, prohibit arbitrary displacement according to Principle 6⁶:

Every human being shall have the right to be protected against being arbitrarily displaced from his or her home or place of habitual residence.

The prohibition of arbitrary displacement includes displacement:

- (a) When it is based on policies of apartheid, ethnic cleansing or similar practices aimed at/or resulting in altering the ethnic, religious or racial composition of the affected population;
- (b) In situations of armed conflict, unless the security of the civilians involved or imperative military reasons so demand;
- (c) In cases of large-scale development projects, which are not justified by compelling and overriding public interests;
- (d) In cases of disasters, unless the safety and health of those affected requires their evacuation; and
- (e) When it is used as a collective punishment.

⁶ Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement



Forced Displacement in Syria

The Assad regime has systematically used the crime of forced displacement as a means to eliminate populations in rebellious cities and regions since 2011. This strategy involves intense military attacks against civilians, deploying the army, security forces, and affiliated militias. These campaigns began with the invasion of cities and towns for arrests and combat, followed by a siege and bombardment. As a result, forced displacement and fleeing to other areas became the sole option for survival. This tactic has intensified the catastrophic consequences of severe regime violations against civilians before displacement, particularly affecting vulnerable groups like women and children. Furthermore, forced displacement has led to deliberate demographic changes in targeted regions over the years.

Forced displacement operations began with the Assad regime's indiscriminate attacks and aerial bombardments on densely populated areas. The systematic escalation of forced displacement occurred through the regime's implementation of operations labeled as "evacuation agreements" or "reconciliation agreements". Most of these operations were facilitated by Russia, with the involvement of other parties such as Iran, Qatar, and Turkey, and some armed groups. Through these operations, the residents of cities and areas besieged by the regime for years were relocated to the northwest of Syria. As of 2021, Syria has become the largest country globally in terms of the number of internally displaced people, reaching around 6.9 million, according to United Nations data. Over 5.6 million people were forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries, necessitating humanitarian assistance.

The number of displaced persons and refugees in the northwest regions of Syria has reached approximately 2.9 million, including 2 million people living in camps. Figures from the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA)⁷ reveal that the population of northwest Syria is around 4.5 million, with about 4.1 million people classified as in need. Among them, 3.7 million are experiencing food insecurity, particularly after the earthquake that struck southern Turkey and northern Syria on February 6, 2023.

In early 2018, Turkey launched the military operation "Operation Olive Branch" against the Afrin region. This operation was accompanied by a siege, ground operations, serious violations, and the confiscation of properties carried out by factions affiliated with the so-called "National Army". This led to the displacement of a large number of the original inhabitants of the area.

⁷ Situation Report: North-West Syria, OCHA, 21 December 2023

Forced displacement operations



Homs

The initial “agreements” for organized forced displacement commenced in May 2014 in the Old City of Homs under the name “Homs Truce”. These arrangements, overseen by Iran and the United Nations, resulted in the evacuation of three thousand civilians along with opposition fighters and their families, relocating them to the northern countryside of Homs.

In March 2017, approximately half of the population of Al-Waer neighborhood, around 25,000 civilians, along with armed individuals, were forcibly displaced as part of a settlement with the regime brokered by Russia⁸.

Darayya and western Rif Dimashq

2016 witnessed the beginning of the forced displacement of residents in the western Rif Dimashq. On August 27, 2016, the inhabitants of the city of Darayya were forcibly displaced, and the city was entirely emptied after enduring a suffocating siege for almost a year. The armed groups and their families were relocated to the Idlib province in northern Syria, while some civilians were transferred to shelter centers in Rif Dimashq. Presently, after seven years of displacement, none of the city's residents have been permitted to return, as part of the Iranian settlement plan for demographic change. This occurred after Iranian militias took complete control of the city in collaboration and coordination with pro-regime militias and real estate traders loyal to the regime. After finishing with Darayya, a thousand residents from the towns of Qudsaya and Al-Hama were forcibly displaced to Idlib as part of a settlement imposed after a severe siege. On October 19, three thousand people were displaced from the city of Maadamiyeh. In the same month, more than five thousand residents of Khan al-Shih were forcibly displaced to Idlib. Following a 40-day siege and bombardment, the inhabitants of Wadi Barada were displaced, with more than two thousand people leaving for Idlib.



⁸ Sky News, “Forced Displacement: The End Scene in the Syrian War”, July 19, 2018.

Eastern Damascus neighborhoods

Forced displacement extended to cover neighborhoods in eastern Damascus. On May 8, 2017, civilians from the Barzeh neighborhood were forcibly displaced, followed by the displacement of residents from the Qaboun and Tishreen neighborhoods, bringing the total displaced to seven thousand civilians and military personnel.

Eastern Ghouta

Eastern Ghouta witnessed the largest organized displacement operation during the Syrian catastrophe in terms of numbers, compared to similar displacement agreements, all under Russian sponsorship. According to UN estimates, between March 9 and April 18, over 158,000 people, approximately 40% of the population, were forced to leave Ghouta. According to the Jusoor for Studies⁹, around 66,377 people headed north. The displacement operations from the Harasta area began on March 23-24, 2018, involving two waves of displaced individuals. A total of 5204 people left, heading towards Idlib province.

The displacement operations expanded to the central sector, encompassing the towns of Arbin, Zamalka, Hazeh, and Ein Tarma, all the way to the Jobar neighborhood in Damascus. This took place between March 25 and April 1, 2018, and comprised eight stages. During these stages, a total of 41,984 individuals departed, relocating to different areas in the Idlib province.

The displacement process from the city of Douma took place in ten stages from April 2 to April 14, 2018. During these stages, a total of 19,189 individuals left, relocating to the Euphrates Shield areas (Azaz, Jarablus, Al-Bab, and Al-Rai).



Photograph; Hassan Qattan

⁹ Jusoor for Studies, Organized Displacement in Eastern Ghouta: Size and Impact, April 23, 2018.

Daraa

In July 2018, an agreement was reached covering areas in the eastern countryside of Daraa. The agreement was negotiated between representatives of the factions and the Russian army. Consequently, those who opposed the settlement agreement departed with their families towards Idlib.

The Four-Towns Evacuation Deal (Kefraya, Al-Fu'ah, Al-Zabadani, Madaya)

On April 11, 2017, the “Four-Towns” deal was brokered with Qatari and Iranian sponsorship. It entailed the evacuation of the two pro-regime Shiite towns in northern Syria, Kefraya and Al-Fu'ah. Approximately 8,200 residents were displaced to government-held areas in exchange for the transfer of fighters from Madaya and Al-Zabadani to the north of the country along with their families. Additionally, civilians who wished to relocate were included in the deal. This agreement followed a severe siege and nearly three years of starvation¹⁰.

The New York Times conducted an in-depth investigation¹¹ that delved into the details of the “Four-Towns” deal, characterizing it as a crime of forced displacement against the Syrian population. This deal marked the initial phase in the depopulation of Rif Dimashq, accompanied by a demographic transformation. The investigation disclosed that the specifics of the deal were initially shrouded in mystery. However, at a certain point, the Iranians suggested a swap of towns, where Syrians—both Sunnis and Shiites—literally exchange places of residence, potentially residing in each other's homes.

The report mentioned that Qatar was not as interested in the significant implications of the deal as it was in freeing members of the royal family. A series of extensive talks took place involving various parties, including Hezbollah, the Iranians, Jabhat Al-Nusra, and Ahrar Al-Sham. Additionally, a substantial amount of money was paid to ensure the success of the deal, aiming to release nine Qatari royals from the Al-Thani family who had been kidnapped by Hezbollah in Iraq on December 16, 2015, along with 17 other fishermen.

¹⁰ Published on the Syrian Observatory website, “Why Does the World Tolerate Displacement”, June 7, 2017, Radwan Ziadeh, Al-Hayat.

¹¹New York Times, Robert F. Worth, Kidnapped Royalty Become Pawns in Iran's Deadly Plot, March 14, 2018.

Aleppo

On December 22, 2016, the final convoy of besieged residents left the eastern neighborhoods of Aleppo, resulting in the complete evacuation of these areas¹². This evacuation, stemming from an agreement with the Russians and Iranians, marked the largest organized forced displacement¹³ in Syria since 2011. After a brutal military campaign involving the Russian air force and Iranian militias, coupled with a harsh siege on Aleppo's eastern neighborhoods, an agreement was reached that facilitated the departure of 54,000 fighters and civilians from East Aleppo to the Idlib countryside.

Afrin

On January 19, 2018, Turkey declared the commencement of a military operation in Afrin¹⁴, named "Operation Olive Branch", aimed at expelling Kurdish fighters (Syrian Democratic Forces) from the region. This operation involved the relocation of fighters affiliated with opposition factions to the border area between Syria and Turkey. Following various ground and aerial military operations targeting surrounding villages and towns, armed factions successfully infiltrated the city on the morning of March 18, 2018. This infiltration was accompanied by airstrikes and artillery bombardment carried out by the Turkish army on Afrin.

Following these military operations between the warring parties, the majority of the original Kurdish population in the area was displaced, and others from different regions of Syria took their place. Subsequently, the city experienced numerous incidents of looting, attacks on properties, and the cutting of olive trees by armed factions that continued to violate the human rights of civilians, forcing them to flee the city. Afrin has become one of the cities most affected by the displacement of its original inhabitants, with Syrian residents from other areas settling in their place.

¹² Atlantic Council, Breaking Aleppo, February 2017.

¹³Jusoor for Studies, Aleppo Evacuation Agreement, How It Was Made and Implemented, December 2016.

¹⁴BBC, Eastern Ghouta for Afrin, Syrian developments in the press, March 19, 2018.

Executive Summary

This report aims to shed light on forced displacement as a war crime and crime against humanity in the Syrian context, with a specific focus on its impact on Syrian women from a feminist perspective. The report delves into the following key areas:

- The contextual framework of forced displacement in Syria.
- The role of coercion as a driving force behind displacement.
- The multifaceted effects of forced displacement on women, encompassing legal, psychological, security, social, and economic dimensions.

The report documented forced displacement operations in Syria since 2016, providing in-depth insights into the ordeals faced by women and their families, including bombardment, siege, and starvation over the past years.

The report highlights the Assad regime's use of the crime of forced displacement as a strategy to eliminate populations in several cities and regions that rebelled against it, including Homs, Aleppo, Daraa, and Damascus. This was carried out through violent campaigns against civilians by the army, security forces, and affiliated militias. The military invaded cities and towns to arrest and combat rebels, besieged and bombarded them, forcing the inhabitants to make the decision to leave under duress.

The displaced residents endured a challenging and bitter journey, marked by harassment, practices undermining their dignity, and marred by extortion and violence.

The majority of displaced women have experienced the arrest or the forced disappearance of one or more family members. A significant number of them are left in the dark about the fate and whereabouts of their relatives and loved ones. The fear of arrest and sexual violence became prevailing concerns,

adding to the motivations for accepting forced displacement. Moreover, the National Army used forced displacement, in addition to siege and armed aggression, as a means to establish dominance over Syrian border regions adjacent to Turkey, particularly those with a Kurdish majority, such as Afrin.

Throughout the forced displacement operations in Syria, women were deprived of their fundamental rights protected under international law, such as the right to physical, psychological, and moral integrity, in addition to the right to protection from hostile actions, such as aerial bombardment and military campaigns.

The ongoing conflict persists in many of the areas where they sought refuge with their families. Their homes and possessions have been violated, either through bombardment, looting, or complete confiscation. As a result, they have lost their properties, with limited access and/or lost official documents proving ownership.

Women also face challenges in accessing identification documents and obtaining legal recognition, either due to the loss of papers or the inability to acquire them because of sieges or leaving government-controlled areas. This has led them to rely on documents issued by local authorities, which are only valid within the same region. Furthermore, women or their children have been deprived of the right to education, particularly during periods of siege and bombardments, leading to the destruction or disruption of schools, making access difficult or impossible.

Families have been torn apart by ongoing displacement. Every woman we encountered in this report has been separated from members of her family and friends. Additionally, many mothers were compelled to leave their children behind during their displacement to other areas.

The inherent discrimination against women in Syrian laws, customs, and societal traditions has intensified the profound psychological impact on most women, as evidenced by prevalent indicators of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Losses and multiple traumas, whether experienced before, during, or after displacement or in their current places of settlement, have not been adequately addressed. Women faced psychological shocks repeatedly, accompanied by a sense of insecurity, lack of support, and the absence of sources of strength, rendering them more vulnerable to violence. The clear absence of psychological support programs for displaced women, their families, and especially their children, by local or international civil society organizations or the policies of the de facto authorities, hinders the availability of psychological treatment for healing and recovery.

The report underscores that the majority of displaced women endure difficult economic circumstances, navigating the absence of essential resources while grappling with accumulating responsibilities and basic living necessities. This includes the challenges of securing housing, clothing, and food costs, among others. Furthermore, these women often take on caregiving roles within their families, caring for their own children, the children of family members, grandchildren, or elderly relatives, all while facing challenges in accessing employment opportunities. Additionally, the report offers practical recommendations to support displaced women and address the consequences of forced displacement in Syria.

It is worth noting that the interviews did not encompass women displaced from Kefraya and Al-Fu'ah due to accessibility challenges. The report also excludes forced displacement in Tal Rifaat and other areas, meaning it does not include displacement operations conducted by the Syrian Democratic Forces. Moreover, airstrikes on Darat Izza and related regions during the interview period resulted in security concerns, leading to numerous interview cancellations. Given the report's sensitive nature and its exploration of women's memories, some declined participation, complicating efforts to gather a broader range of testimonies.

Methodology

Data Management, Collection,
Analysis, and Report Preparation

Geographical Framework

About the Witnesses



Data Management, Collection, Analysis, and Report Preparation

The interview questions were prepared after defining the theoretical framework, main objectives of the report, its methodology, and the targeted groups for the interviews. The questions were then selected to evaluate their effectiveness. Some questions were modified, and others were rearranged.

A total of 20 in-person interviews and 8 online interviews via the Zoom platform were conducted, resulting in 28 recorded interviews. All of this was done after obtaining informed consent from the participants. Before the interviews, the participants were briefed on the objectives, expected outcomes, and the content of the questions. They were also informed of their right and freedom to stop or withdraw from the interview at any time or to bypass any question they did not wish to answer.

Furthermore, particular attention was given to providing psychological support throughout the interview process.

The interviews were conducted between November 2023 and January 2024, and the report was drafted during the first three months of 2024.

Throughout the data analysis process, the researchers thoroughly reviewed the interview recordings, read and followed up on the transcribed information, ensuring its quality and comprehensiveness.

Geographical Framework

The targeted group comprised women who were forcibly displaced under agreements. The current distribution of women's residences is as follows: 33% in Afrin, 33% in the Atmeh camps, 11% in Al-Fu'ah, 7% in Darat Izza, and an equal 4% for each of Bab, A'zaz, Qamishli, and Tal Rifaat. Before displacement, the primary places of residence for women were in Damascus and its suburbs, accounting for 61%, 18% in Homs, 7% in Daraa, 7% in Aleppo, and 7% in Afrin.

Overview of the Areas Within the Geographical Framework of the Report

Afrin: The Afrin region encompasses around 365 villages across seven administrative districts in Aleppo Governorate, northwest Syria. Between 2012 and 2018, the political control of the region was under the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its military counterpart, the People's Protection Units (YPG). Afrin served as a destination and refuge for displaced persons during that time, with an internally displaced population reaching 125,000¹⁵. The direct military attack by Turkey in Syria in 2017 as part of Operation Euphrates Shield led to the separation of Afrin from Kobani. In 2018, the Turkish army and its Syrian armed faction allies declared full control over the entire Afrin region in Operation Olive Branch. Many families displaced and sought refuge in areas like Nubl, Al-Zahraa, and Tal Rifaat. Those who collaborated with Kurdish authorities in the region moved eastward towards Kobani and Al-Hasakah¹⁶.

Atmeh Camps: A group of humanitarian camps hosting Syrian refugees in northwestern Syria, near the Turkish border. Approximately 100,000 individuals live in these camps, facing challenging humanitarian and living conditions.

Al-Fu'ah: A predominantly Shia town in northwestern Syria, situated in the Idlib Governorate. Together with the town of Kafriya, it has been under siege by the Syrian armed opposition (Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham-HTS) since 2015. In 2018, under an agreement with the Syrian government, the remaining population of 7,000¹⁷ was evacuated and displaced as part of the Four Towns Agreement.

Darat Izza: A Syrian city in the western countryside of Aleppo, under the control of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, Darat Izza is home to many displaced individuals from Aleppo, Damascus countryside, Homs, Hama, and other areas. It also hosts the Syrian Salvation Government (SSG).

Al-Bab: Located in the eastern countryside of Aleppo, administratively affiliated with the Aleppo Governorate, Al-Bab is situated thirty kilometers south of the Turkish border. Controlled by ISIS between 2015 and 2017, it is currently under the control of the «National Army,» backed by Turkey.

A'zaz: The city of A'zaz is situated in Aleppo Governorate, about thirty kilometers northwest of Aleppo, near the Turkish border. It hosts the Bab al-Salameh border crossing, which remained closed for eight years and was reopened in March 2019¹⁸. A'zaz is considered one of the main strongholds of the Syrian opposition, housing the

¹⁵UNOCHA, "Afrin: Facts and Figures", 18 March 2018.

¹⁶Friedrich Ebert Foundation, (Reclaiming Home, Hans Baumann).

¹⁷BBC "Syria: After the Evacuation of Kafriya and Al-Fu'ah, Idlib Without Shiites," July 19, 2018.

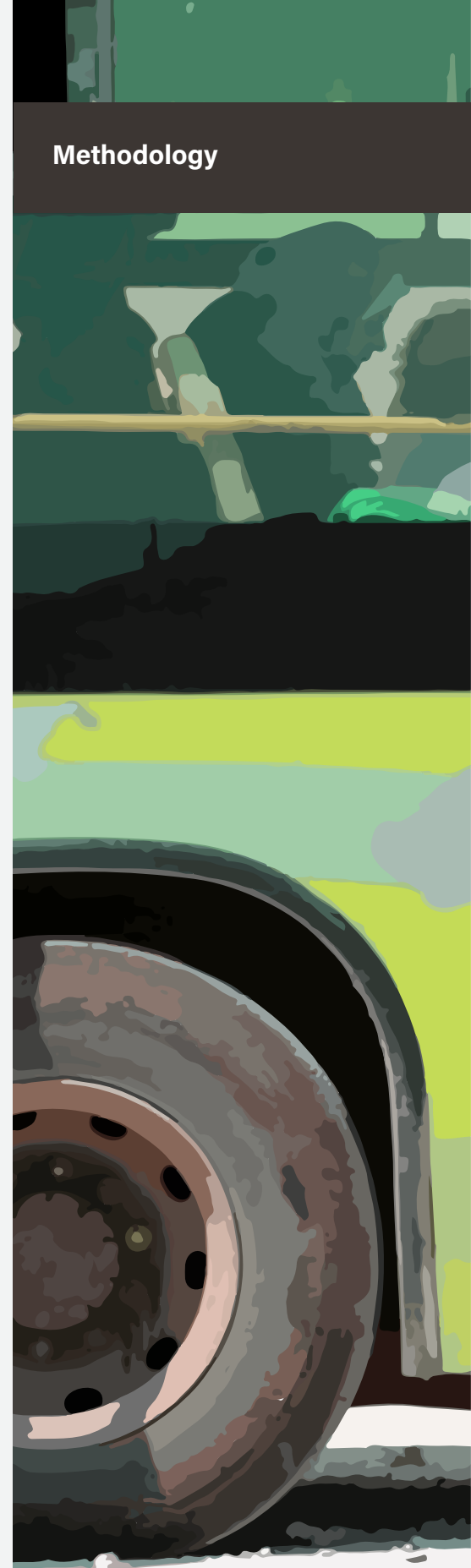
¹⁸Anadolu Ajansı, "[Turkey reopens key border crossing with Syria](#)", 5 March 2019.

headquarters of the Syrian National Coalition and the Interim Government. It is also home to Free Aleppo University. Currently, it is under the control of the «National Army,» backed by Turkey.

Qamishli: Situated in northeastern Syria near the Turkish border, Qamishli is presently under the control of the Autonomous Administration. The security situation in the area remains unstable, with ongoing Turkish airstrikes.

On January 1, 2023, 20 airstrikes targeted the city of Qamishli and its surroundings¹⁹, primarily affecting civilians. Earlier in October, these attacks disrupted vital facilities, such as the electricity substation in northern Qamishli, leading to a complete service outage²⁰. Since 2016, Turkey has carried out multiple military operations in Syria, with Turkish forces and allied Syrian factions now controlling a broad strip along the Syrian border.

Tal Rifaat: A Syrian city located 35 km north of Aleppo and south of A'zaz, has been under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces since 2016, with air support from Russia. More than 50,000 of its residents were displaced to various areas along the Syrian-Turkish border, including A'zaz and others. Due to its location, Tal Rifaat is considered a contested area involving the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), the Syrian regime, Iranian militias, and Russian forces. Additionally, it houses a major Russian military base at Qamishli Airport.



¹⁹ France 24, 8 Kurdish Civilians Killed in Turkish Raids on Northeastern Syria, December 26, 2023

²⁰ Human Rights Watch, Northeast Syria: Turkish Strikes Disrupt Water, Electricity, October 26, 2023.

About the Witnesses



Photograph; Abdulmonam Essa

The report relied individual interviews with key respondents, forming a sample of forcibly displaced women. The total number of respondents was 28. The selection focused on those subjected to forced displacement, particularly within the frameworks of displacement agreements.

The report underscored the inclusion of diversity in terms of social status, educational level, age, occupation, current place of residence, and several other essential factors to ensure a comprehensive cross-sectional perspective in the report.

In terms of educational background, there was a significant and varied range. Approximately 11% of the women were without formal education (uneducated), with one having learned to read and write alongside her children during their primary school years. Furthermore, 29%

possessed an elementary school certificate. The percentages decreased in the preparatory (middle school) and secondary (high school) stages, reaching 25% for the preparatory stage and 7% for the secondary stage. Concerning higher education, 4% attended institutes, while 21% pursued university education. It is worth noting that half of them pursued university studies after displacement, earning multiple university degrees, and 4% earned master's degrees.

In terms of their marital status, the majority of the women, 71%, are currently married, 14% are single, 7% are widowed, and 7% have missing or detained husbands. It is noteworthy that many of the married women were previously widowed, had their husbands disappear or killed during the years of conflict and then subsequently remarried.

The age group of women varied from 23 to over 50 years, with varying proportions:

14% of women have a disability or chronic illness. In terms of their family members, about 46% have one or more family members with a disability or chronic illness.



Chapter I: Forced Displacement - The Narrative of Displacement

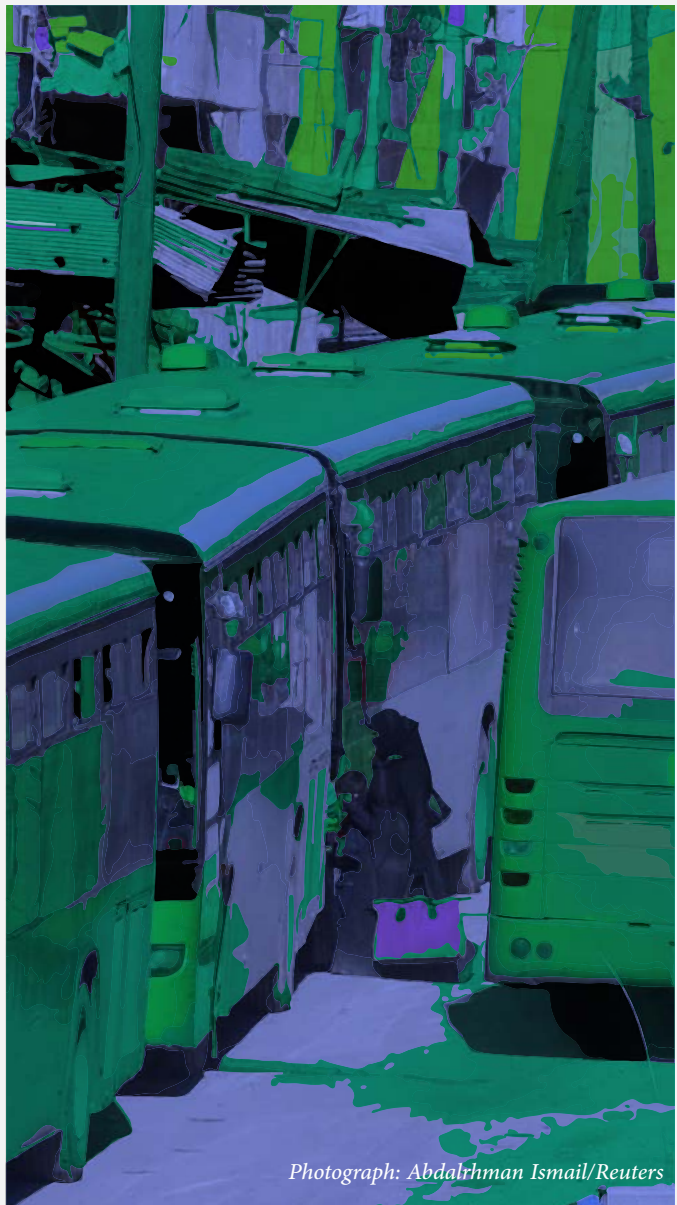
Arrest and Torture

Bombardment and Collective Punishment

Displaced Women from Afrin

Siege and Starvation

The Green Bus: A Journey of Humiliation

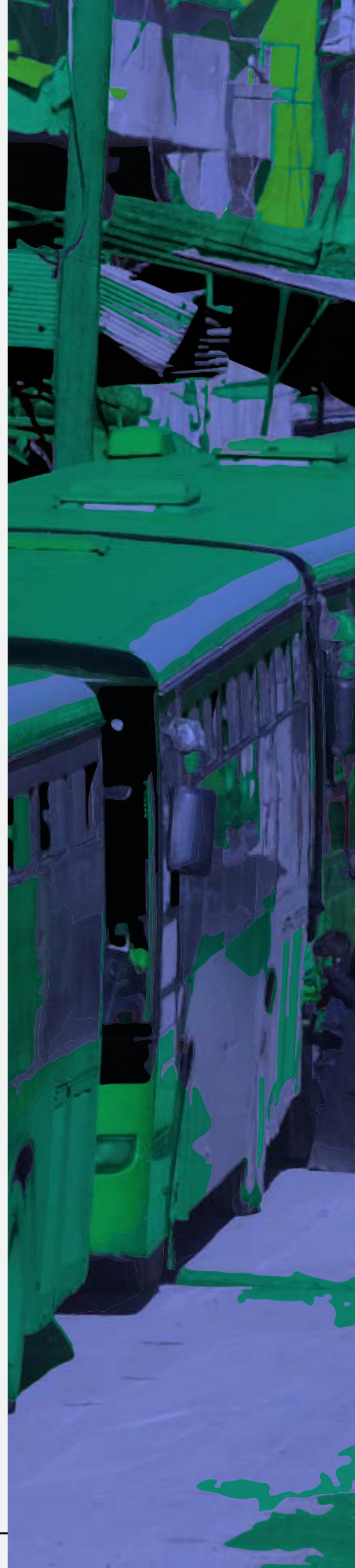


Coercion or compulsion, meaning the absence of will or consent, is the legal determinant in the crime of forced displacement. It is considered a violation of individuals' fundamental rights, including their right to life, safety, and protection from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment.

The element of coercion or compulsion in the crime of forced displacement refers to the use of force, the threat of violence, or other means to compel individuals to involuntarily leave their homes or the region where they reside. This is regarded as a violation of human rights and war crimes. In this context, coercion or compulsion may encompass the use of military force, threats of arrest, torture, and sexual violence, or the imposition of economic or social restrictions that render individuals unable to remain in their place of residence.

Our witnesses elaborate on the reasons for their displacement or (decision) to board the green buses, and their reasons are almost identical. The factors they mentioned form a common denominator for all of them. Essentially, these are the tools used by the regime to suppress rebellious areas, and they can be intensified by the fear of arrest, physical and sexual torture, forced disappearance, siege, starvation, shelling, destruction of cities and towns, and collective sanctions. Some of them experienced one or more of these tools, but the majority endured all of them.

(Y.D.), displaced from Daraya, says: "Displacement was not a choice; it was imposed on us... Can anyone be forced to leave their home and family and then live happily afterward?"



Arrest and Torture

It appears that over half (59%) of the witnesses did not directly participate in revolutionary activities. Meanwhile, 32% of them either experienced arrest and torture or faced security persecution before displacement. Concerning their families, 92% of the women witnessed the arrest or torture of one or more family members in Syrian regime prisons, and many of them still do not know the fate of their loved ones.

Some of our witnesses have experienced the ordeal of detention, with the majority of them having their loved ones arrested, and to this day, they have no news about them. (H.S.), a displaced woman from Daraa, says: “... One of the main reasons for my relocation to the north was to avoid being arrested again. Anyone who has experienced detention cannot imagine going through it a second time.”

(B.D), a displaced woman from Barzeh, recounts: “The decision to leave and be displaced was not optional; it was imposed on all of us at that time. We had no choice—either we leave, or they would arrest my husband, and I couldn’t bear to see him arrested again.”

Some of our witnesses were teenagers when the conflicts started in their areas and near their homes. (W.H.), displaced from Homs, said she didn’t initially understand what was happening. She heard her aunt’s screams, saying they killed her father. Then she heard them shouting that they invaded their house, took her mother and siblings. Later, she heard someone saying that women and children would go to the neighboring village. All of this happened before she realized what was going on.

In her village (as she described it), women were not involved in what was happening outside their homes. She said, “I was seventeen years old and at my husband’s house when I heard my aunt scream that they killed my father... I didn’t understand anything about what was happening... They gave us a quarter of an hour to take what we wanted from our homes... After that, they entered the village, raided it, looted it, and left nothing standing.” (W.H.) fled her village in the countryside of Homs to the northern countryside²¹ in 2016, and later she moved to Idlib in 2018.

The word “raid” instills fear in our witnesses. It’s not the arrest as a means

²¹ At the end of 2019, the Syrian regime, backed by its Russian ally, launched a military campaign on Maarat al-Numan. Observatories documented the city being targeted with more than 500 airstrikes and missile attacks within a span of three hours. January 2020 witnessed sustained shelling, resulting in the displacement of thousands of civilians, mostly women and children. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, “Maarat al-Numan: The regime approaches the second-largest city in Idlib,” January 27, 2020.

of restricting freedom that terrifies them; rather, it's the experiences they heard and witnessed regarding arrest and physical violence in detention. The most frightening aspect for them is sexual violence, often used as a means of revenge against the environments supporting the revolution²². (M.H.), who fled from Baba Amr in Homs, says: "During the siege of Baba Amr in the early years, the raids occurred at dawn, and mothers wouldn't sleep out of fear for the safety of their children.

We were very afraid for the girls. On one occasion, it was rumored that the army will be raiding the village, so my sister-in-law put her nine daughters in a room... and I asked her to put mine with them as well... For we decided to blow up a gas cylinder in case of a raid..."

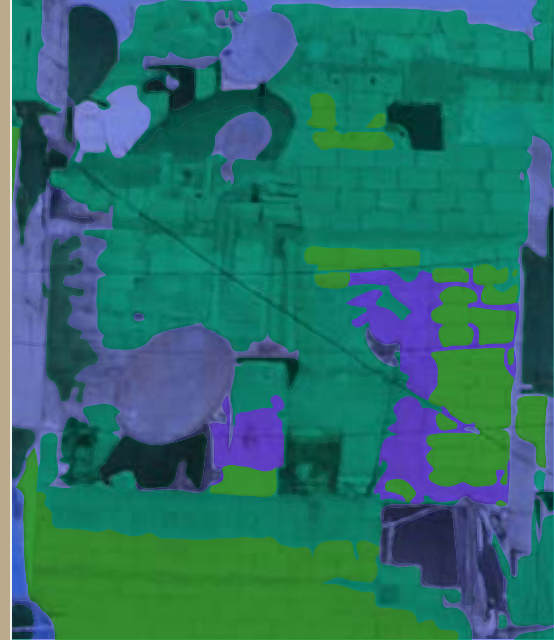
Their fears of possible sexual violence during raids are so profound that they would rather choose death before experiencing such horrors. These fears are shaped by the stories they have lived through or heard about. (M.H.) had much to share about the atrocities against civilians, especially women, in Baba Amr. She recounted the story of an 11-year-old girl who was raped by regime forces and remained in the hospital for three months: "The girl suffered a nervous breakdown, and her father had a stroke." She added, "In Al-Khalidiya as well, there was a case of a girl being raped in front of her family... So, we were very afraid for the girls."

Most of our witnesses shared that they were prepared to take their own lives in the event of a raid or arrest. Even when they boarded the green buses, this fear lingered. They would prefer death over having their "dignity violated," as they described it. (F.D.) says, "During the night, we expected the regime to invade the town at any moment, and we had prepared our rifles at home... In case the regime invaded, my cousin would kill me and then kill himself before we fell into the hands of the regime's soldiers, and they did something horrific to us. Even our neighbors and many residents of the town would do the same."

²² "Words Against Silence" Report by Joumana Seif and Wejdan Nassif



Bombardment and Collective Punishment



All our witnesses experience their cities being bombarded, besieged, and subjected to starvation. The majority are haunted by terrifying scenes of bombardment. (F.D.) recalls that the building she stayed in Daraya was referred to as the “barrel building” due to the intensity of barrel bombs that fell on it. (S.Q.), who left Barzeh, remembers that they bombarded Barzeh with missiles: “... once they bombarded Bursa with 14 missiles in just one hour... during our time there, we lived in great terror, and there was no way to escape...”

The regime used various types of weapons, including those internationally prohibited, in its bombardment of opposition-held areas. The intensity of the shelling would often escalate after the displacement deals were struck, aiming to force the residents to accept displacement. Barzeh neighborhood, which fell out of the regime’s control in 2012, was subjected to a severe siege. Initially, the battles occurred mostly in the orchards away from civilians. However, the regime intensified its military operations in the neighborhood in 2017 to compel those remaining to accept the displacement agreement, referred to as a “Settle-

ment Agreement”²³. (S.Q.) mentions that they were not allowed to leave during the heavy shelling: “The shelling began on the orchards, and all the houses became targets for evacuation.

So, we went to the mosque, and after days, we were informed that the green buses would transport us to Idlib.” (A.B.) who was displaced from Barzeh wanted to secure her family’s safety, so she left Barzeh to the city of Binnish in 2012. However, no sooner had her family settled when the regime began shelling Binnish.

Consequently, she had to return to Tishreen neighborhood in 2014 where she settled in her house despite the area being a battleground. The neighborhood was soon targeted with missiles, forcing her to leave for Idlib in 2017: “Three months before our departure on the green buses, a neighbor informed us that the regime would destroy the neighborhood. I didn’t want to leave; I had settled and found work. But they started heavily shelling the area... A missile fell on our street, destroying our house... After that, I decided to leave to protect my family.”

Displaced Women from Afrin

The military campaign conducted by Turkey and its affiliated factions resulted in the displacement of a significant number of Kurdish inhabitants from Afrin. Our witnesses described the pervasive sense of fear, the experience of living under siege, and the threat of military invasion. They provided detailed accounts of the arduous journey of displacement.

(S.S.), a 39-year-old widow and a mother of four children, is one of the displaced inhabitants of Afrin currently residing in Tal Rifaat. She says, “We didn’t have the choice or the ability to stay. The bombing was relentless; we were all scared – constant panic. We became like mad people. I left ten days before my husband, taking my two children with me – I was more scared than him. He stayed behind for the shops, goods, and livelihood. He wasn’t willing to leave everything – we had warehouses. My husband thought we would leave for a few days and come back once things calmed down, but I felt that our departure was for good.” The displaced women from Afrin had no choice in selecting their destination. Witnesses spoke about their inability to escape to Aleppo due to road closures and Syrian

regime checkpoints. Additionally, the Autonomous Administration imposed restrictions, not allowing residents to leave Afrin until the last moments before the ground incursion of the Turkish military and its affiliated factions, and all that under challenging conditions. (S.S.) adds in this context: “The Autonomous Administration didn’t allow anyone to leave. I went crazy, I just wanted to leave – I left with a family from Shahba, in the northern Aleppo countryside, who was residing in Afrin – so as to help us cross the Autonomous Administration checkpoint. I only took two bags of clothes with my children; taking belongings was not allowed. Ten days after I left, everyone else left, including my husband. The roads were blocked with traffic and with people standing at the checkpoints, for they only allowed people from Shahba to pass. I didn’t stay on the road for long because I was with this family from Shahba. However, those who left after me faced days on the road. Some people died on the way due to beatings or the inability to endure, especially the elderly. Pregnant women gave birth on the road, and some died during childbirth.” Describing Tal Rifaat, the area where



she arrived, she says: “The view of Tal Rifaat when we arrived was like a ghost town – all houses were destroyed, uninhabitable, and we have been there since then.”

(Z.Q.), a 23-year-old displaced woman from Afrin, who used to reside there with her grandmother and family and is currently living in Qamishli, narrates the story of their displacement with intricate details. She describes how they were coerced to leave due to bombings and threats to their lives, which forced them to depart and abandon everything, heading towards the unknown. She also recounts how the factions seized their home and destroyed its contents that represent their memories and family history.

She recounts, “In the final week before our departure, we existed on tranquilizers, gripped by intense fear—I detest the ravages of war. Complexity and discrimination have no place in my preferences. My psychological state hovered at zero, not indicative of weakness or cowardice, but a response to the incomprehensible reality we found ourselves immersed in. My uncles were recipients of scholarships in Romania and Russia, and we had a library replete with communist literature, and the works of Lenin and Marx. We were afraid that upon the Turkish army’s entry, we might be perceived as atheists. On March 17th, my mother gathered the cherished pictures from their time in Moscow and Romania, and burned them and tore them while crying, a poignant act of erasing the memories linked to my

departed uncle. We burned everything. After about five days from leaving our house in Afrin, the Turkish army made its ingress into the neighborhood. Some Arabs, known as ‘Hayyan Arabs’ chose to remain in Afrin, our Arab neighbors were one of them. We were close with them and kept in touch. They told us that the Turkish army had entered our house, vandalized our possessions, broke the ‘buzuq’ and set ablaze the library. The remaining books, left unburned by us, were trampled. When the army asked our Arab neighbor whether we supported the Autonomous Administration, he told them that we were a Kurdish family with no political affiliation. Our neighbor was a supporter of the Free Syrian Army but was against the occupation of Afrin.

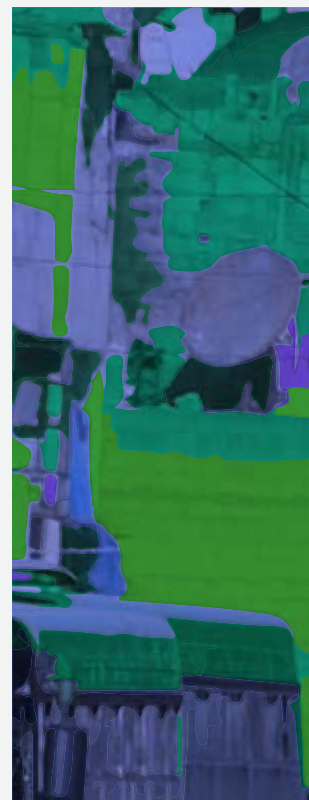
Nevertheless, he spoke the truth and defended us. Our house was an architectural beauty with Andalusian design, but an armed faction leader took it over.” The witness further details the harrowing journey of displacement and the ordeal faced by the displaced who were in a state of panic and chaos, embarking towards an unknown fate amid security and military challenges, while the relentless bombing persisted as they ventured away from their neighborhoods and communities: “Turkey and the armed factions seized control on the 18th of the month. We, unveiled women, feared that they might be fanatics, so we burned everything. We bought black veils and headscarves. On the 17th, we decided to leave. We wanted to go to Aleppo, but the road was closed. We headed towards the outskirts of Shahba around two in the morning.

It was raining and cold and we were wearing slippers. We reached a Kurdish checkpoint, and Turkey shelled them right in front of our eyes.

“All we needed was to cross that checkpoint to leave Afrin. A stranger, a woman we didn’t know plead to leave with. There was no one left from her family. I gave her my jacket, and she wept while asking to come with us. She then got off in Shaha. We finally arrived after a three-day journey navigating through chaos. The streets were filled with people fleeing. We slept on roadsides. The regime had closed the road to Aleppo. People sought refuge in fields, on agricultural lands, and on the streets. Eleven of us found shelter in a room adjacent to the municipality building. It was a nice feeling after sleeping under the rain on the street. I drank hot tea, despite my aversion to it. But a man there offered it to us. I felt a pang of tenderness there, a bond of some sort, everyone was equal, united by displacement, rich and poor alike. I was taken aback by the sight of our Aleppo neighbor, married to a Kurd. She was very wealthy, elegant, and beautiful. I vividly recall her running through the mud, dirt, and rain after her son. It became evident that things were never going to be the same. There were available houses in Shahba. We rented one, cleaned it as much as we can, and made it our own. We stayed in Shahba for two years.”

The Syrian regime continued its efforts to forcibly retain residents in their places of displacement, employing persistent extortion and exploitation. In Tal Rifaat, displaced individuals are still prohibited from traveling to Aleppo, leading to a continued dispersion of families and an inability to reunite, given the ongoing conflicts. Challenges are with the presence of varied de facto forces between regions and the persistent political and military disputes amongst, invariably imposing a heavy toll on civilians.

(Z.Q.) says: “After spending two years in Shahba – Tal Rifaat, we used smugglers to take us to Aleppo, because the regime insisted that Kurds remain where they were. Subsequently, we journeyed towards Manbij, encountering a checkpoint associated with the Fourth Division, where the predominant language spoken was that of money. All regime checkpoints required payment to pass through to Qamishli.”



Siege and Starvation



Our witnesses recount a multitude of stories, with the narratives of displaced women from Ghouta echoing those from Darayya, Barzeh, Homs, Aleppo, and beyond. Typically, it is the women who bear the responsibility of feeding their families, tasked with ensuring sustenance for the little ones.

In her testimony, (S.Q.) states, “...We endured a prolonged siege in Barzeh... and when they allowed the entry of food supplies, they were sold to us at exorbitant prices...”

Over a span of four years, the Syrian regime’s attempts to militarily regain control of the al-Waer neighborhood in Homs ended in failure. The area was subjected to a strict siege and constant bombardments. In March 2017, an agreement was reached with representatives of the residents, leading to the evacuation of opposition fighters and the shared control of the neighborhood by Russian forces and the Syrian regime. According to (W.H), “...We endured a six-year-long siege in Homs. They would intermittently open the road for a month, only to close it again for a year or two. During that month period, we would strategically store some food supplies for the ensuing period... Towards the end, we found ourselves with nothing to eat...” (W.B) from Barzeh did not actively engage in the revolution, but all her children were arrested and tortured, then subsequently released. Additionally, she lost her brother, who disappeared with no information about

his fate to this day. When asked about her decision to accept displacement to Idlib, she expressed her inability to coexist with the regime, stating, “This regime left no household untouched by sorrow... It sowed seeds of sadness and oppression in every home.”

Several witnesses, including (W.B), conveyed that even if there’s a chance they might avoid reprisals, returning to live under the regime is inconceivable, as if nothing happened. (Z.G), a displaced from Ghouta, remarked, “Those who decided to board the buses carry profound tragedies. How can someone who has lost all their children stay and reconcile?”

When our witnesses are prompted to talk about the moment when they were told, “It’s over, the agreement mandates your deportation”, they describe their feelings as a mixture of sadness, anger, and fear of the uncertain future that awaits both them and their families. They delve into the moment of boarding the green buses and the journeys they undertook alongside their children and relatives. These narratives are seldom explored, as if they mark the epilogue of a well-known tale. Consequently, they might not captivate every reader, yet for these women, they represent tragic tales meticulously etched into their memories. The journey, ranging from 12 to 48 hours, was a terrifying ordeal for some, an involuntary expedition hurling them with their families into the unknown.



The Green Bus: A Journey of Humiliation

In stark contrast to the global perception of buses as safe, comfortable, and affordable modes of transportation, the **Green Buses** linger in the Syrian psyche as symbols of violence, oppression, and forced displacement. These state-owned buses were initially used to transport security forces and armed thugs to confront peaceful protesters in the early days of the revolution in the streets of Damascus.

Later, these buses became synonymous with forced displacement following the deal involving the four cities. They transformed into emblems of oppression, coercion, and the forced uprooting of communities.

Upon hearing the phrase “Green Buses”, any Syrian, irrespective of their cultural or political background, instinctively links it to the notion of forced displacement and the distressing scenes of mass migration, whether experienced personally or witnessed through the media.

The women interviewed in this report provide poignant descriptions of the ordeal they went through with their families. The meticulous depiction of their experience captures the deep-seated pain it inflicted, transforming a historical moment into a pivotal chapter in their lives—a transition from one phase to another, marked by an uncertain and unknown future.

We didn't bid anyone farewell. We faced bombardment before our departure, and eight members of my family were martyred in a shelling on Hosh Al-Arab. The aftermath left three streets reduced to rubble from the impact of vacuum bombs. On that fateful day, 36 lives were claimed, with eight of them belonging to my family – my sister and her children. Recollections of those who joined us on the buses remain blurry in our minds; none of us was fully aware of each other. We closed the door of our house and left the key with our neighbor to check on it. Meanwhile, soldiers and regime forces confiscated all belongings from our house using trucks, leaving it completely empty.”

In this account, (T.H.) depicts the moment of her departure on the bus and the factors that compelled her to flee. She entrusted the key to her home with the neighbors – a symbolic gesture of hope, a determination to survive, with the aspiration to return one day to this very house.

As for (R.A.), she vividly recounts her experience at the moment of displacement and the journey on the Green Buses in 2017: “We travelled from the Tishreen neighborhood to Barzeh through tunnels. We were to board the green buses from there. It felt like Judgment Day; everyone was frantically searching for their loved ones. The regime's forces loomed on rooftops, monitoring our every move. I gathered

only a few clothes for my children, as taking electronics was strictly prohibited. Non-essential items were ruthlessly discarded. They forbade us from stopping at rest areas. My mother ran behind the bus, tears streaming down her face. We were being forcibly displaced, people were crying. Even those who remained peeked from their balconies. Our journey encountered no halts at checkpoints, neither for the regime nor the opposition. However, along the way, pro-government thugs spat on us and hurled shoes. Finally, we arrived at Idlib Square and were escorted to Darat Izza.”

That moment of humiliation, experienced by the displaced individuals through the insults and degradation by the pro-government thugs, left a profound psychological pain and deepened the social rift among Syrians.

“That day felt like Judgment Day; we all awaited the buses. I departed with my husband's family, while my own family and siblings remained in Damascus. We were transported by the green buses. We set out early in the morning without any interruption. However, as we reached areas controlled by thugs, they began brandishing their shoes, waving them in our faces, throwing them at the buses, or making demeaning gestures with their hands – we brought this upon ourselves. When we arrived at the opposition-held areas, we were warmly received.

They provided food for everyone, diapers for the children, milk, and promptly worked to secure accommodation for people in the Idlib region.”

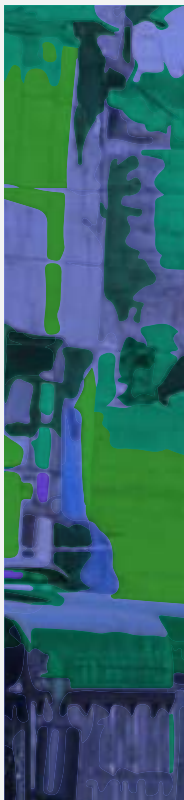
With the same profound pain, (B.D.) narrates the humiliation and injustice she endured during the journey. Coupled with the absence of choice to stay or leave, not solely due to war but also because she is a woman. According to prevailing societal norms, she must adhere to her husband’s decisions. She says, “People were coerced into leaving; there was no other choice. I had to accompany my husband wherever he went. Such is the fate of a woman—she goes where her husband goes. We brought nothing with us except some clothes.”

These moments stand as pivotal and poignant in the lives of the women we encountered, marked by the intensity of pain and the vivid recollection of the events during the bus journey. These traumatic moments serve as a defining symbol in the journey of displacement.

“We witnessed massacres, one of which claimed the lives of 48 people, an entire family. I didn’t see my husband cry then, but he wept upon the arrival of the displacement buses. The displacement buses...we had no choice; it was either the green bus of

humiliation or the yellow bulldozer tasked with clearing the bodies after the massacres.” This is how (J.D.) describes those moments, juxtaposing the yellow bulldozer clearing bodies after massacres with the degrading green buses of displacement. (G.D.) recounts, “It felt surreal, as if I were a feather drifting in the air, uncertain of my destination. The Russian army was organizing our ascent on the buses, and subsequently, they took us to Al-Waffddien Camp. From there, we boarded the green buses to the north. I didn’t bid farewell to anyone. I didn’t see anyone. As we emerged onto the Harasta highway, it seemed as though I had transformed into a different person.

Anyone who phoned asking about my whereabouts, I would answer with a single word: ‘I left’, and breakdown in tears. We reached Qalaat al-Madiq the next day and it felt like the apocalypse. There was a person from Idlib, from Saraqib, holding a sign inviting everyone who needed a house to come to him. So, we approached him, and in that moment, all my wounds reopened. The sorrow of leaving everyone behind weighed heavily. My daughter lay beneath the soil, and the whereabouts of my husband remained unknown. My family was scattered in another place.”



Chapter II: Legal Implications

Right to physical, mental, and moral integrity

Right to proper accommodation

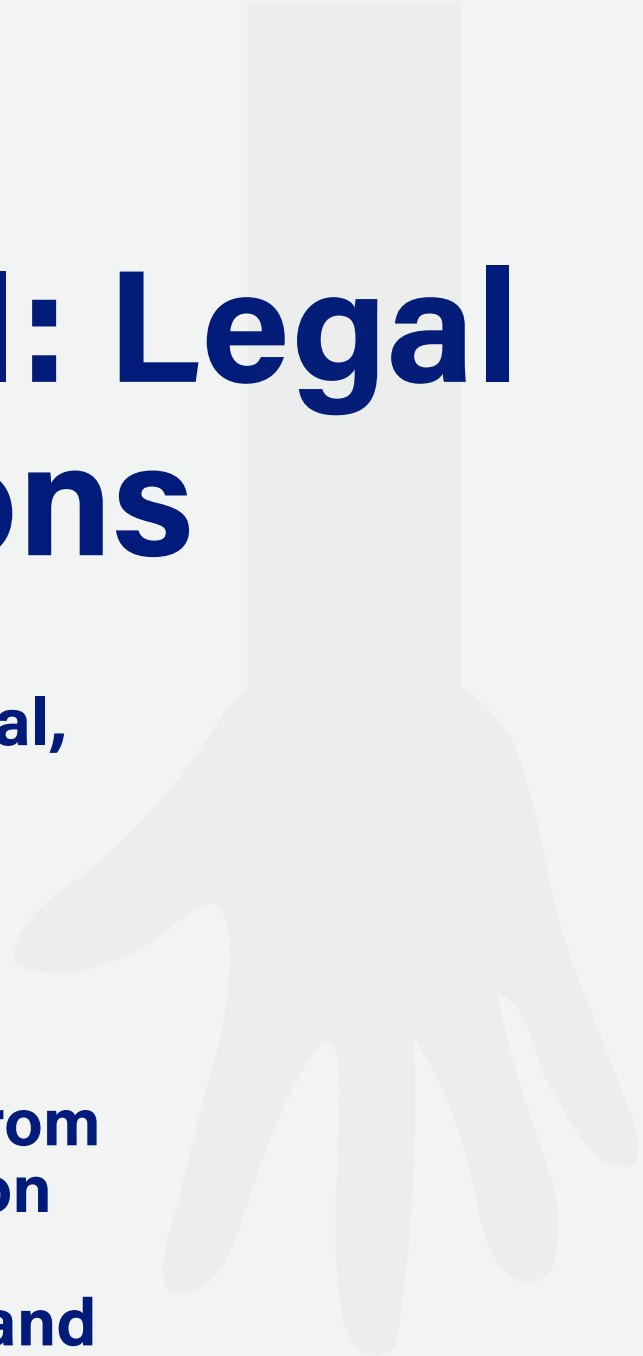
Right to be protected from hostile acts of retaliation

Right to know the fate and whereabouts of missing relatives

Right to education

Right to the protection of property and possessions.

Right to respect for private and family life





Photograph: Thaeer Mohammed/AFP

The act of forcible displacement and relocation violates a broad spectrum of civil, political, economic, and social rights outlined in the Human Rights Charter. Such actions not only result in the establishment of exceedingly challenging and distressing conditions for displaced populations but also, particularly in cases of violent conflicts and severe human rights abuses, lead to the separation of families, the severing of social and cultural ties, the loss of stable employment and educational prospects, and the deprivation of fundamental necessities like adequate housing, food, and medicine. Moreover, this situation exposes innocent individuals, particularly women, and children, to violence, leaving them in precarious circumstances that require continuous protection and support.

International law prohibits forced displacement as a general rule, permitting only specific and justifiable exceptions under certain circumstances, none of which apply to the Syrian context. Even within these limited exceptions, forced displacement must adhere to minimum guarantees and take place in conditions that safeguard human dignity.

The overarching principle is to exert every effort to prevent unlawful displacement. In the event of displacement, efforts should be deployed to mitigate its adverse effects on individuals and communities, ensuring a comprehensive resolution for all those affected.

Following international acknowledgment that existing legal provisions fall short of providing adequate protection and assistance for displaced individuals and are scattered across various international instruments like International Human Rights Law, International Humanitarian Law, and Asylum Act, which renders them loosely focused. Thus, the Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement²⁴ were established and were officially endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1998 to address the unique challenges faced by internally displaced persons (IDPs) and provide a comprehensive framework for their protection and assistance.

Despite not having legal binding force, these guiding principles have achieved broad acknowledgment and acceptance within the international community. They outline specific rights and guarantees related to safeguarding individuals from forced displacement, providing assistance throughout displacement, and supporting their return, resettlement, and reintegration. Furthermore, they have broadened the legal responsibilities incumbent upon states.

²⁴[Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement](#)

Right to physical, mental, and moral integrity

Undoubtedly, forced displacement has significant implications for human rights and the legal protection of individuals in general. However, in-depth interviews with displaced women reveal that these adverse effects have a more profound and potent impact on women and children. This is especially evident concerning their rights to freedom, security, protection from violence, and their physical, mental, and moral integrity. Many of the women we engaged with conveyed a sense of insecurity in the communities they were displaced to and emphasized their need for protection.

(H.G.) who lives in the Atmeh Camps says, “We live in an unsafe area, and I face threats because I am a journalist. Women, in general, are under immense pressure.”

Many women have openly discussed and expressed their sense of insecurity, attributing it to the prevalence of weapons and the violence perpetrated by armed factions, and some of them have been subjected, along with their families, to direct threats at gunpoint. (Y. H) states, “I am deeply concerned for my family and children. In Afrin, everyone is armed. As employees of humanitarian organizations, we face threats from armed individuals, in full view of everyone.”

As for (A.B.), she shared her story with the armed faction controlling the sector in Al-Fu’ah, which evicted them from their home by force of arms. She narrates, “Armed individuals entered to remove us from the house we had been residing in after our displacement. My daughter started filming and recording, and one of the members pointed a gun at her. My husband confronted him, and they assaulted him and my daughters as they defended their father... My son’s wife suffered a broken arm, and we had to vacate the house to prevent the arrest of my ailing husband.”

Right to proper accommodation

The seventh principle of the guidelines acknowledges the right of those forcibly displaced to access proper accommodation with satisfactory conditions of safety, nutrition, health, and hygiene—a right that, as per our numerous interviews, remains largely unfulfilled.

Numerous interviews underscored the dire housing conditions in which women live with their children. This situation arises due to their inability to afford proper and suitable accommodation, limited job opportunities, and meager wages, despite some of them working tirelessly throughout the day in a desperate bid to secure a livelihood and make ends meet. (R.A.) provides for seven children (three of whom are from her late ex-husband), along with her current husband and his second wife. Even though the three of them work tirelessly all day in the diaper industry, their total income does not exceed 700 Turkish Lira.

(R.A.) says: “We live in an old stone building that is on the verge of collapsing. The house’s door doesn’t fully close, and it has no lock. We prop it with a makeshift iron support before going to sleep. We pay \$50 in rent, but the landlord wants to raise it to \$75 at the beginning of the

year. He’ll evict us if we don’t pay. We live in humiliation, and we don’t know when the situation will change. When we go to ask for aid, they shout at us and insult us. We used to live with dignity and peace of mind when we were in Ghouta, working on preparing and selling jams.”

Before displacement, (S.Q.) lived with her family in a three-story building in the Qaboun area. They also owned additional properties, providing them with a good income. Additionally, her skills in handicrafts and sewing medical tools not only contributed to their financial well-being but also granted her complete financial independence, allowing her to find fulfillment in self-realization.

Now, for the past six years, (S.Q.) has been residing in Atmeh Camp with her disabled mother, widowed sister, her brother, and his wife, and their two children. The family is entirely dependent on the income earned by the brother through his work with a civil organization. Despite an ongoing sense of insecurity arising from the fear of a potential loss of their sole source of income, she is thankful that the family has managed to build a bathroom, two rooms, and a kitchen.

(S.Q.) says: “At first, we all lived in a tent, and the situation was very tough. My mother is disabled, and she encountered great difficulty in accessing the bathroom. Also, as women carrying a toilet pot all the way to the public toilets was difficult. So my brother built a private toilet in the tent without having any prior experience. We helped each other in carrying the blocks and engaging in construction. Later, we built a kitchen, and then two rooms. Gradually, we managed to build the house, and now our situation is good compared to others.”

(Z.G.) states, “I am the sole breadwinner. I work as a caretaker at an elementary school. I live with my mother, and my daughters, for whom I am responsible, in a shop that was previously occupied and had some repairs done to it.”

Um Jihad and her family, consisting of 11 members, currently live in a house in Al-Fu’ah after being displaced from Baba Amr. The family relies on the income of their three children, each receiving 700 Turkish liras. Um Jihad is unable to work, and her husband, who sustained injuries during the war, is no longer capable of employment.

Reflecting on their situation, Um Jihad shares, “In the past, I lived in my own house, and my husband had a good job. Now, we find ourselves in a house that we neither own nor rent. This house lacks windows and doors, and to combat the cold, we resort to using plastic and blankets.”



Photo from The Daily Beast

Right to be protected from hostile acts of retaliation

In addition to the violence experienced by displaced individuals from armed factions on the ground, many of them continue to endure retaliatory and hostile actions, including aerial bombardment targeting camps and residences. This persists despite strict prohibitions against the targeting of displaced civilian populations.

The ongoing military airstrikes by the Syrian regime and Russia persistently target displaced individuals in their places of displacement, causing extensive destruction, casualties, and forcing large numbers of displaced people into new displacement. A notable offensive unfolded on October 5, 2023, affecting over 2300 locations in Idlib and western Aleppo.

According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs²⁵ (OCHA), this offensive resulted

in the renewed displacement of 120,000 people. The assault featured the widespread use of banned cluster munitions by the Syrian regime in the town of Termanin, north of Idlib.

As of November 27, the toll stands at over 70 casualties, including 14 women and 27 children, with an additional 338 individuals wounded, including 77 children. Meanwhile, Turkish airstrikes persist in northeastern Syria, targeting multiple areas with aerial bombardments and drone attacks²⁶.

Our witnesses were not spared from these airstrikes. In November 2023, the home of (T.H.) in Darat Izza was bombed, resulting in the tragic death of their 13-year-old granddaughter. The attack also led to the burning of the entire house, along with all its contents, including vital official documents for every member of the family.

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, North-west Syria: ²⁵ Escalation of Hostilities - Flash Update No.4, 27 October 2023

Human Rights Watch, Türkiye's Strikes Wreak Havoc on Northeast Syria, ²⁶ 9 February 2024

Right to know the fate and whereabouts of missing relatives

The families of missing individuals endure the consequences of forced disappearances, grappling with the pain of loss and the excruciating wait for answers. For women, particularly wives who shoulder the responsibility of caring for children and safeguarding their families, these challenges are even more pronounced. The profound suffering is further intensified for displaced women, compelled to abandon their homes, communities, and all connections to their loved ones. Deprived even of the fundamental right to inquire about the fate of their husbands, these women are left to navigate their lives alone, amidst challenging psychological, economic, and social conditions.

(J.D.) says, “I feel fragile and exhausted. I have achieved a good position here because I love work and education. I may appear strong, but I am not. I’ve lost everything and am alone.” (J.D.)’s husband was arrested in Damascus when he went to buy goods to sell in the area, and she has not known anything about his fate since that day. Despite the challenging solitude and the burden of waiting, the emotional and financial strains intensify with the presence of young children requiring care, and regularly inquiring about their father’s fate. The husband of (J.D.)’s daughter was arrested at a checkpoint while on his way to buy vegetables for the family. Despite offering them all the money he possessed, they refused to release him. (J.D.)’s daughter and her three children know nothing of his fate to this day.

(J.D.) shares, “We received information that he has been held in Adra prison for two years. His family visited him twice, but during the third visit, he was nowhere to be found. There was no trace of him. The authorities informed his family that he is in ‘amanat’ (custody), a term often associated with individuals slated for execution. Yet, we remain in the dark about his fate, and are still waiting.”

Right to education

Photograph: Omar haj kadour / AFP

It is not uncommon for forced displacement to result in a violation of the right to education, as affirmed by international conventions and underscored in Article 28 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. When asking the respondents, particularly female students, about whether they or their children faced disruptions in education due to forced displacement, 68% responded affirmatively.

In several interviews, mothers expressed the prolonged disruption in their children's education (for years), attributing it to factors such as sieges, airstrikes causing school destruction or school inaccessibility, and the substantial challenges in adapting to their new environment, away from their original schools and educational environments. Furthermore, some mothers noted that their sons and daughters, or at least some of them, have not resumed their studies post-displacement due to the psychological impact, affecting their concentration and readiness for learning.

The education of (Y.D.)'s children faced a three-year hiatus when they left Darayya, seeking refuge in Damascus. The fear of potential inquiries about their father,

who remained in Darayya, prevented them from enrolling in schools. Upon the mother's return after enduring a year and a half of detention, she managed to secure their enrollment in schools in Darayya. However, following their displacement, her children encountered obstacles that hindered the continuation of their education.

(Y.D.) shares, "I enrolled them in Ataa Village School, but everything became challenging for them, leading them to discontinue their education."

(A.B.), who, along with her three children, was displaced from Barzeh, reflects, "My children faced challenges in completing their education due to displacement. Presently, my eldest daughter, aged 27, is pursuing her high school diploma."

As for (M.G.), who currently resides in Afrin, she says, "My children had to leave school when we were in Ghouta due to the shelling, and we couldn't provide them with education here. Schooling is costly, and they had to leave school to help their father. There are no aids, and we have to buy everything."

Right to the protection of property and possessions.

Principle 21 of the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement addresses the right to protect the property and possessions of internally displaced persons. It states the following:

-No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of property and possessions.

-Property and possessions left behind by internally displaced persons should be protected against destruction and arbitrary and illegal appropriation, occupation, or use.

In stark contrast to the principles and international conventions safeguarding an individual's right to be free from unjust attacks on their home and the protection of their property against unauthorized dispossession, the Syrian regime, and its affiliated militias have violated the homes and properties of those opposing the regime. This violation commenced with targeted bombardments, followed by looting and/or seizure, particularly in regions where many of our witnesses have experienced displacement, including Darayya, Jobar, Baba Amr, and Al Qusayr. When asked about their properties in

Jobar, (S.J.) explained that they used to reside in a privately owned house jointly owned by her and her husband. They also owned agricultural lands and buildings, all of which were completely destroyed, leaving nothing behind. She mentioned that they can do nothing to remedy this because the Jobar area is closed, and access is impossible. She added, "My father-in-law, who still resides in Rif Dimashq, has all the pertinent legal documents for the properties. However, he remains unable to initiate any course of action. He takes a taxi just to drive along the outskirts of Jobar, merely to catch a fleeting glimpse of what was once ours."

(M.H.) spent 22 years in Baba Amr, from her marriage until her first displacement in 2011. She reflects, "I lived in a house that I owned, and my husband had a good job working in Lebanon. I used to receive guests throughout the day." Currently, (M.H.) resides in the village of Al-Fu'ah with her family of nine in an apartment without windows and doors, resorting to plastic sheets and blankets for protection against the cold.

(Y.D.), displaced from Darayya, laments, “We once owned a home, a car, and a shop selling crystals and mirrors. Unfortunately, have no documents to prove this. Even if we did possess the paperwork, we remain powerless to take any action. In this new place, we cannot even hire a lawyer. I cannot even claim the inheritance left to me by my parents.”

(Sh.Sh.), who was displaced from Afrin due to Operation Olive Branch, shares, “I was happy – We lived in a house that we owned, my husband was working, and we lacked nothing. Every necessity was at our disposal.

Yet, here, we face continuous sieges, and there’s no diesel.” Additionally, she noted that the family possessed olive groves in Afrin and a building owned by her husband and his brothers, all abandoned upon their displacement. Prior to the displacement operations, 86% of the

witnesses’ families owned the homes they lived in, and the majority had additional properties such as lands, commercial establishments, or others. When asked about the presence of official documents verifying home ownership or any other assets, 44% of the women indicated the existence of ownership papers. However, these documents are primarily with the remaining family members in areas controlled by the Syrian government, making them inaccessible. Another 44% of them do not possess official documents and were unable to retrieve them, with some losing them during bombings or repeated displacement operations. Furthermore, 13% of the women are unaware of whether there are ownership papers, either due to their young age during the displacement or the lack of entitlement to information about the family’s finances and assets.

Right to respect for private and family life

Undoubtedly, engaging in discussions with displaced women about their right to the respect of family relations, along with their roles and responsibilities as mothers, proves to be a sensitive and challenging task.

This is primarily due to the emotional burden they carry for the hardships their daughters and sons endure amid the challenges of displacement. However, addressing these rights, duties, and everything related to children becomes particularly difficult and painful when talking to mothers compelled to leave their children and distance themselves from them due to displacement, and the entrenched gender bias within Syrian laws, societal norms, and cultural traditions. These legal frameworks strip mothers of the opportunity to remain with their children post-divorce, assigning custody to fathers or male relatives like grandparents and uncles. This intensifies the suffering and pain of women who endure separation from their children without any foreseeable communication or solutions within the context of displacement.

Following her husband's disappearance and her need to constantly relocate to escape bombardment, the five children of (Z.G.) were split between her and her missing husband's family. The two younger daughters stayed with her, while the boy and the two older daughters remained with their grandparents. (Z.G.) could occasionally visit them during the siege. However, a decision from her husband's family severed all communication with them completely after her displacement from Ghouta with her own family. She knows nothing about them, and the fate of her missing husband remains unknown to her.

(Z.G.) tearfully says, "Everything has become a source of pain and profound shock – leaving those dearests to my heart, losing my husband, and the separation from my children. My brother suffered injuries, and we lost many family

members. It's all so shocking." She adds, "My young daughters miss their siblings, relatives, and the comforting family environment. I attempt to fill that void, but it's no easy task."

After divorcing her first husband, (A.D.) initially managed to retain custody of her son with the support of a close relative. However, a cunning scheme orchestrated by her grandfather led to the child being taken away and handed over to the family of her ex-husband. They issued threats of retaliation against the entire family if any harm befell the child, claiming him as their son and "property". Since that day, (A.D.) knows nothing about him. She poignantly states, "I could have brought my son with me to Idlib... I will never forget him and will never forget that day, even if I give birth to ten other children, I will also never forgive my grandfather."

Right to birth registration, official documents and to recognition as a person before the law

In terms of official documentation, it is noteworthy that 96% of the women have their marriages officially registered, whereas 4% have not registered their marriages. The latter entered into marriage post-displacement and cannot register their marriage with the Syrian government, relying solely on marriage contracts obtained from the Sharia court. The right to access official documents and to recognition as a person before the law is considered a fundamental human right that reinforces the concept of equality before the law. This right is instrumental in safeguarding individuals against discrimination and violations of their basic rights. These documents include ID cards, birth certificates, marriage certificates, passports, and other official records.

The interviews conducted with displaced women have revealed that the violation of

the right to access official documents and recognition of legal identity, and the ensuing repercussions, is a common factor among many of the women.

It was also disclosed that difficulties in obtaining documents are even more pronounced for single mothers. (H.G.), a mother of twin daughters was abandoned by her husband during her pregnancy due to her political support for the revolution. Left alone during the siege and denied any legal documents for her twin daughters after displacement, she says, “I’ve done everything alone, but still, he has guardianship. The right to custody is mine, but I am not their guardian, so I can’t obtain passports for them.” When asked about the official documents she possesses, (Z.G.) responded, “My marriage is registered in Damascus, but I haven’t been able to obtain the document. Also, my daughters’ documents are in Damascus, and I couldn’t get them either.”

Documents issued by local councils

Regarding the registration of children, 74% of women registered their children before displacement through the civil registry in the area of residence of one or both parents. For those women who gave birth during the sieges, registering their children posed challenges, requiring either substantial payments or, in some cases, reporting the death or disappearance of their husbands if they were pursued by security forces.

It has been found that 28% of women have children; some are registered (those born before displacement), while others are not registered with the Syrian government (those born in displacement locations or during sieges). In such cases, births are registered by local councils or religious

authorities, and official documents like birth certificates and IDs are issued. However, these documents are only acknowledged within the respective areas of control and are not recognized by the Syrian government. The latter refuses to register births occurring outside its areas of control, requiring proofs that are often unavailable or impossible to obtain²⁷.

When asked whether their children are officially registered or not, the responses indicated that only the older girls and boys are registered, while those born during the sieges or displacement are not registered. (M.Gh.) answered, “My elder children are officially registered, and I have a formal family record document. Only my youngest daughter is not registered due to the ongoing events. When I say ‘registered,’ I mean possessing official documentation from the country.” (F.D.) states, “My children were born here after displacement, so they are not officially registered. The eldest girl is registered with the local council, and we plan to register the second one soon.”

When asked about the official documents she possesses, (S.J.) responded, “My children are registered with the regime. I paid large amounts in dollars to be able to do that.” She adds, “My second marriage, after displacement, is registered. I registered it in Hama after paying a large sum of money. My third marriage is registered in Afrin, but my documents are not recognized outside Afrin.”

²⁷ Human Rights Watch “[Syria event of 2022](#)”

Chapter III: Psychological and Security Impact

Negative changes in cognitive patterns, mood, and on the level of thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

Intrusive symptoms, such as the involuntary recall of distressing and traumatic events and nightmares.

Avoidance symptoms, such as refraining from discussing the event or avoiding certain people and places associated with the event

Changes in physical and emotional reactions, such as bouts of anger, sleep difficulties, constant vigilance, and others.

Grief, loss and multiple shocks

Sense of Security

Emotional, behavioral, mood, and cognitive changes impacting the psychological well-being of children in the family.

According to psychological studies and research, women experience compounded suffering from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and other trauma-related psychological disorders. This is primarily attributed to the association of most of these disorders with gender-based violence, especially sexual violence (Vallejo Martín et al., 2021)²⁸. Studies indicate that these psychological disorders are heightened among refugees and forcibly displaced individuals, encompassing PTSD, depression, acute stress disorders, uncertainty, and more. This is a result of exposure to humanitarian crises, discrimination, psychological shocks, violence, grief, and the loss of places and people. Consequently, it leads to severe psychological and emotional distress. According to the same study, these effects are further compounded for refugee women and girls due to gender-based violence (Vallejo-Martín et al., 2021)²⁹.

According to the DSM-5, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) includes intrusive symptoms such as involuntarily reliving painful events, experiencing flashbacks, and nightmares. It also involves avoidance symptoms, like avoiding discussions about the event or avoiding individuals and places linked to it. Furthermore, there are changes in cognitive processes, thinking, mood, and social interactions, manifesting as challenges and difficulties in concentration, maintaining relationships, emotional numbness, and changes in physical and emotional reactions, such as anger outbursts, panic attacks, sleep difficulties, and constant vigilance, among others³⁰.

²⁸ Gender : Refugee women with a history of trauma.(2021) M.J Canto &A.Sánchez Sancha.,M.Martín International Journal of Environmental Research. traumatic stress disorder -vulnerability in relation to post,). 4806.(9)18, and Public Health

²⁹ Same as previous reference

³⁰ American Psychiatric Association: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition. Arlington, VA, American Psychiatric Association. 2013

The findings we have deduced in this report, based on the conducted interviews:

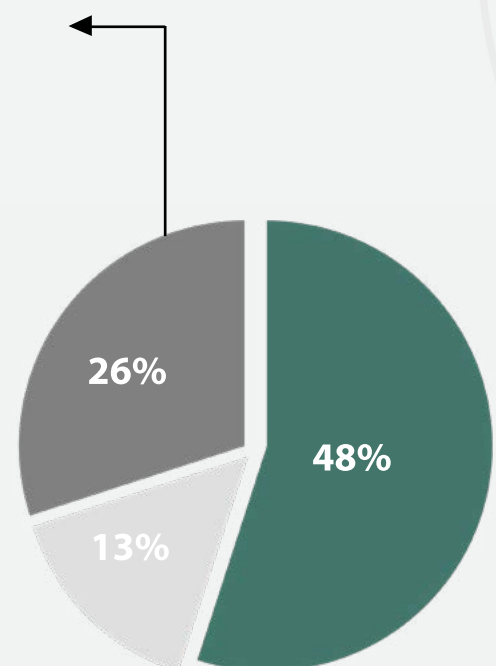
Negative changes in cognitive patterns, mood, and on the level of thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

96% of the interviewed women who responded to the psychological questions reported a change in the levels of emotions, mood, thoughts, and usual behavior. This included negative thoughts about themselves, others, and the world in general, feelings of despair, disruptions in social relationships, occasional social withdrawal, shifts in previously held interests, emotional numbness, bouts of anger, and difficulty controlling emotions.

Intrusive symptoms, such as the involuntary recall of distressing and traumatic events and nightmares.

Among the interviewed women, 48% consistently grapple with the recollection of distressing events and memories, with 13% facing such recollections frequently and 26% encountering them occasionally.

In terms of persistent nightmares, 30% of them suffer from this issue, with 9% experiencing it frequently, 29% occasionally, and 4% rarely. Furthermore, 26% always experience sudden feelings centered around the idea that the traumatic events could recur, while 13% often have such episodes. Additionally, 39% occasionally go through these moments, 9% rarely experience panic attacks, and 13% have never experienced panic attacks.



Avoidance symptoms, such as refraining from discussing the event or avoiding certain people and places associated with the event

Among the women interviewed, 35% exhibit avoidance symptoms related to thoughts and feelings associated with those traumatic events. 9% of them frequently experience these symptoms, while 39% have them occasionally. Only 4% rarely encounter such symptoms, and 13% did not disclose any avoidance symptoms during the interviews.

Changes in physical and emotional reactions, such as bouts of anger, sleep difficulties, constant vigilance, and others.

Among those we interviewed, 9% expressed suicidal thoughts, while 43% reported feelings of guilt, exhibiting varying intensities. Nervousness and episodes of anger were experienced by 70%, with differences in both intensity and frequency. Concentration difficulties were reported by 74%, and 87% faced varying degrees and frequencies of sleep problems. Additionally, 70%

conveyed a sense of constant caution and vigilance, with variations in intensity.

87% of the women have been experiencing most of these symptoms for more than a month. The question posed to them was as follows: Have these symptoms been continuous and present in the two weeks leading up to the date of this interview? This serves as an indicator of the possibility of them suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder without receiving adequate psychological treatment or support, if available. 83% of the women we interviewed had not received any form of psychological support, while 13% received limited psychological support. 5% of the women we interviewed did not respond to this question.

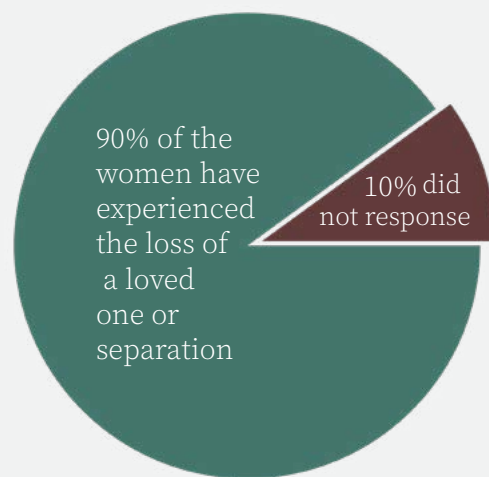
Internally displaced women and their families have experienced compounded shocks. These began prior to displacement within the harsh circumstances of siege, warfare, famine, the painful loss of loved ones, and heightened concerns for the safety of children and family members. Additionally, some of the women we spoke with have suffered physical injuries resulting from shelling, leading to chronic disabilities that impact their ability to perform daily tasks.

In addition to these physical hardships, these women have confronted numerous psychological traumas throughout the journey of displacement, both prior to and during their forced relocations. These traumas have occurred in multiple locations and on various occasions, exacerbated by the conditions of war and siege. Furthermore, they have been subjected to gender-based violence. The involuntary displacement and separation from their families or traditional support structures have left them more susceptible to instances of domestic violence.

One of the women we met said, “I feel more vulnerable because my family is not with me. Even if a problem arises between my husband and me, I don’t feel comfortable talking about it or leaving the house because I don’t have a place to go. I feel broken knowing that my family is away from me.”

Some women we interviewed shared experiences of gender-based violence, including early marriage, domestic abuse, and a loss of agency due to an inability to participate in crucial decision-making alongside male family members. These challenges are compounded by the backdrop of fear, war, family dispersion, or the arrest or death of loved ones, adding to the complexity of their situations.

Grief, loss and multiple shocks:



90% of the women we encountered have experienced the loss of a loved one or separation due to displacement, or the loss of their homes and the disruption of their previous way of life. This has resulted in profound psychological pain, symptoms of grief, and notable psychological changes in their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Furthermore, they have reported difficulties in sleep and concentration. 10% of those we met did not provide a response to this question; however, their other remarks about their present lives and the loss of their environment and home underscore a palpable sense of loss.

(Z.G.) is separated from some of her children, lost her husband, and witnessed the forced displacement of her

family members. She experienced multiple instances of forced displacement, leading to her current residence in a shop in Afrin. She grapples with a persistent sense of insecurity, intrusive symptoms such as a constant fear of the event recurring, accompanied by anxiety, and the recollection of painful memories. She also exhibits avoidance symptoms, such as avoiding reminders of the event and forgetting some details associated with it.

The psychological traumas endured by (Z.G.) have induced negative shifts in mood and thinking, altering her perception of herself, others, and the world. She consistently grapples with feelings of despair, emotional numbness, constant vigilance to potential threats, guilt, suicidal thoughts, anger outbursts, and sleep disturbances. All these symptoms align with those associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

(Z.G.) says: “I parted ways with people who are dearest to my heart, first and foremost my dear brother, who got killed in the war. My children and husband, I have two daughters and a son with living my husband’s family. We separated because they didn’t want to come here.”

(B.D.) lost her family and relatives, and her father died under torture. She says: “Yes, I lost my father; he passed

away due to torture in detention. I also became separated from my family; I migrated to Idlib while my family remained in Damascus.”

(B.D.) suffers from a persistent sense of sadness and yearning for her previous life in Damascus. She also grapples with intrusive symptoms, such as recollection of images, memories, and thoughts about the traumatic experiences and the displacement ordeal. Additionally, she experiences distressing dreams, sleep disturbances, difficulty remembering certain details related to the traumatic memories, a sense of apprehension, and frequent caution, along with some difficulties in concentration.

She finds a semblance of security in the camp, shielded from bombardments, but she yearns for happiness and feels an irreplaceable void for the losses she has endured. (B.D.) states, “Yes, I feel secure here in the camp area, but I don’t want to live in the areas that are being bombed in Idlib. My children have been robbed of a care-free childhood; they’ve endured a lot of bombing and displacement. I fear for my children. I fear that my husband will be injured in conflict again, I fear bombardments and displacement. We thought we would leave for some time, maybe a year or two, but not for this long period. I still have hope that we will return to our homes.”

(Sh.G.), a woman in her fifties from Eastern Ghouta, displaced to Barza and eventually found herself in the Atmeh Camps, says, “My goal was to reunite my family. I grew very weary of having my husband and children in one place while we were in another. Two of my sons were martyred, and I don’t even know where their graves are... Three years and I still haven’t been able to reunite with my husband. All my children decided to leave because the situation became unbearable – bombings, hunger, and family dispersal. I fluctuated between happiness and sorrow. I was going to see my husband and children at last, but I left my entire family behind, my siblings, my mother, and my four martyr children. We thought it was temporary, but when we reached Idlib, we felt there was no going back.”

The events experienced by Mrs. (Sh.G.) have given rise to severe and diverse psychological traumas. She lost four children, three of whom perished in battles, while the fourth disappeared after being detained by the Syrian regime. This has led to the manifestation of several post-traumatic stress symptoms, including intrusive symptoms such as flashbacks of painful memories, nightmares, anxiety, sleep disturbances, negative thoughts, memory problems, and avoidance symptoms like difficulty recalling certain details of the traumatic events.

Furthermore, Mrs. (Sh.G.) and her family have not received any form of psychological support. The family is currently reliant on humanitarian aid, facing economic hardships. (Sh.G.) experiences loneliness and yearns for the pre-war environment, factors that further exacerbate psychological distress and disturbances.

(Sh.Sh.), displaced from Afrin, grapples with the profound sense of losing her family, as the family members found themselves scattered in different places during their displacement. She reflects, “We all went our separate ways—each one finding refuge in a different location. My family members are now dispersed far and wide, with no opportunity for visits. I can’t even visit my sister in Qamishli; there’s no accessible route for us to take, and if we were to go, we wouldn’t be able to come back.”

The presence of family members united used to be a source of solace and support for (Sh.Sh.). Today, due to displacement, she finds herself yearning for that profound sense of security. She says, “Every individual yearns for the comforting presence of their family. We were all together, even those in the village; we would gather at each other’s homes, be it morning or evening, whenever the need arose. It’s a poignant feeling. The companionship of family instills a sense of safety and resilience, and that’s some-

thing I have lost.” Tragically, she lost her husband to COVID-19, as he didn’t receive adequate healthcare. Reflecting on this, she laments, “My husband succumbed to COVID-19 two years ago. We left our homes, thinking they could be replaced—material possessions can be regained, but his death is what truly affected me. Money comes and goes, but what matters is health and safety. Yet, my husband is gone. The healthcare services here are poor and leave much to be desired; there is a clinic, but its functionality is limited. The availability of specialized doctors is scarce—it’s more of a clinic than a hospital.”

(F.D.), a mother of two displaced from Darayya, currently resides in the Atmeh Camp. She grapples with the loss of numerous loved ones and a deep yearning for her former life and environment, as a consequence of the involuntary displacement. This has led to an enduring state of mourning due to the persistent instability, a pervasive sense of loss, and the absence of genuine support, be it psychological, social, or economic.

(F.D.), a displaced mother of two from Darayya, grapples with a myriad of psychological symptoms associated with post-traumatic stress disorder. These include intrusive experiences such as nightmares, flashbacks, difficulties in concentration and clear thinking, as well as mood and thought fluctuations. This has precipitated changes in her social relationships, presenting challenges in maintaining connections, and fostering feelings of solitude, emotional numb-

ness, sleep disturbances, and episodes of anger.

Reflecting on her experiences, she reveals, “During the siege, I was separated from my aunt, who had nurtured and raised me. Losing my mother at the age of one and a half, my aunt played a pivotal role in my life, her presence outweighing even that of my father. The inability to witness her illness or eventual passing has left an indelible impact on me. The most formidable moment, surpassing even the hardship of leaving and being forcibly relocated from Darayya, was my aunt asking me to find a means to bring her to Darayya, but we were concerned for her safety due to her old age and the absence of medical facilities except for the field hospital. She told me that she was afraid to die without seeing me. The news of her death constituted a profound shock.

On the night of her passing, I was aware of her hospitalization and sickness, yet my sister assured me of her stable condition. That night, however, I was not at ease and couldn’t muster my usual laughter. I was looking at her photos and feeling choked, and by morning, I found out she had died. I couldn’t cry because I don’t cry much, but this affected my health. To this day, I keep her pictures close and listen to the voice recording she sent me, asking me to return and not stay in Darayya.

I still regret not leaving, and her words linger in my heart when she said, ‘I will

die without seeing you.' I can't get it out of my head that she was asking to see me for a whole year and her neighbors were telling me that my aunt would die because of how much she misses me and that I would regret it if anything happened to her. I honored her memory by naming my daughter after her, a poignant testament to the enduring impact of her memory in my life."

(F.D.) had experienced multiple shocks due to the siege, war, and displacement. She witnessed the relentless siege and bombardment imposed by the Syrian government, encountering psychological trauma and horrifying incidents during the journey of displacement on the green buses. The ordeal included degrading acts, such as pro-government militias and supporters spitting on them and brandishing shoes at their faces, inflicting a form of psychological torture that left her with a profound sense of degradation and intense emotional pain.

The family went through various displacement stations, eventually ending up in the Atmeh Camp. They face challenging living conditions, and long for their previous life. (F.D.) says, "I used to live a different life with various interests, spending my time on leisure activities. However, now I've lost that passion. Even when I go out for a stroll, I find myself questioning why bother going out and returning to this dreary house. I no longer experience happiness. My constant thought now is about returning to Damascus."

The current living conditions for (F.D.) and others like her living in camps and informal settlements fall below the minimum standards of dignified living. This results in compounded psychological distress, particularly as these conditions intensify the yearning for the previous environment, the homes they were displaced from, and the dignified life they lost due to war and forced displacement, as revealed in the interviews conducted for this report.

(F.D.) states, "I live in a camp. When we arrived at the camp, there were two sponges and a few kitchen tools. Later on, humanitarian organizations started providing us with some assistance. However, after a year, I felt like I was going to die because I couldn't adapt to this place. I developed a severe psychological condition due to the sense of alienation and being in a place I didn't know. When we arrived, it was like a desert, no shops, or markets. If we needed to make a call, we had to go to a distant location. That day, the air was thick with swirling dust, and I started crying. I wanted to go back to Damascus. I felt scared and couldn't muster the courage to leave the house. The atmosphere was strange to us." Reflecting on a song, (F.D.) adds, "Neither the land is my land nor the surroundings are mine." She continues, "I used to hear this song and these lyrics and think that every word is true. To this day, I haven't fully adapted to my new reality."

According to a 2020 report by Amnesty International addressing the lack of

economic and social rights in the displaced camps in northwest Syria, women in these camps face challenging living and economic conditions and various forms of gender-based violence. The report states, “Factors such as overcrowding in displaced camps, lack of suitable housing and healthcare facilities, exclusion from decision-making processes regarding camp planning, and the lack of opportunities to earn a livelihood have subjected women and girls to a spectrum of gender-based violations. These include instances of violence perpetrated by family members, camp management, residents, strangers, and humanitarian aid workers.”

Sense of Security

Some families find a relative sense of security in living in camps away from airstrikes. However, other families residing in Idlib are exposed to bombardment by the regime and its allies. In a heartbreaking account, one woman we encountered in Darat Izza shared the tragic incident of her house being targeted in an airstrike, resulting in the tragic death of her 13-year-old granddaughter and the complete destruction of their home. Testimonies also shed light on the perils faced by residents from armed factions and forces controlling their current living areas. (Y.H.), who works for a humanitarian organization, expresses her deep concern, stating, “I am profoundly worried about my family and children. In Afrin, everyone is armed, and as humanitarian workers, we are openly subjected to threats from armed groups.”

As for (A.B.), she recounted how armed men raided their home to force them out. When her daughter attempted to film the incident, one of the assailants pointed a weapon at her. They also physically assaulted her husband and daughters, breaking the arm of her son’s wife. Fearing the husband’s arrest, they were compelled to evacuate the house.

(Sh.Sh.), displaced from Afrin and currently residing in Tal Rifaat, describes the profound loss of security, lamenting, “The ground is riddled with numerous landmines, causing many to lose limbs, legs, hands, or something else. The situation has persisted for two long years. We remain under siege until today, subjected to relentless artillery fire and airstrikes. We are in the midst of the war.” She goes on to express, “Our freedom is constrained here, unlike Afrin. The security conditions are dire – besiegement and continuous shelling persist. We are in a border amidst the regime, Kurds, and Turks, we essentially confine ourselves indoors – there is no safety.”

Emotional, behavioral, mood, and cognitive changes impacting the psychological well-being of children in the family.

95% of the women we interviewed and responded to the psychological questions reported experiencing changes in their emotions, mood, usual behavior, and thoughts. These changes include negative thoughts about themselves, others, and the world in general, a sense of despair, problems in

social relationships, occasional social withdrawal, a shift in previous interests, emotional numbness, bouts of anger, and difficulty controlling emotions. (Z.G.) says, “My behavior has changed a lot, and my thought pattern has shifted. Now, if someone jokes with me, I feel like I’m a burden to them, or if someone gives me a remark, I get upset.”

(F.D.) says, “I used to live a different life with various interests, spending my time in leisure activities. However, now I’ve lost that passion. Even when I go out for a stroll, I find myself questioning why bother going out and returning to this dreary house. I no longer experience happiness. My constant thought now is about returning to Damascus.”

When asked about her age, (S.Q.) from Barzeh, who has undergone multiple displacements, said her biological age is 48 years but akin to 148 years as a result of the challenging circumstances she currently faces. She also told the interviewer: “I explicitly agreed to the interview based on my personal connection with you.

I don’t care what the international community will read, know, or feel, for they lack any semblance of empathy”. (S.Q.)’s self-perception and worldview have undergone profound changes, leading to feelings of despair, betrayal, and anger over the ongoing situation in Syria. Reflecting on her forced displacement and the traumas she endured, she commented,

“I used to be a sensitive person who would easily shed tears. Now, I only experience sorrow if a significant tragedy occurs, and joy is reserved for truly extraordinary events. I have become hard-hearted.” She further elaborated, “At the onset of the events, we believed the world sympathized with us. However, I now regard the world as contemptible, and human life seems exceedingly undervalued.

A significant conspiracy unfolded against us; an entire population was displaced, and our country was divided among powers like the US, Russia, Turkey, and Iran, all for their self-serving interests. They fool us with a mere bag of rice and a gallon of oil.”

As for (J. D.), she says: “Certainly, I’ve undergone a radical change – a complete 180-degree shift. A substantial transformation has occurred, impacting my emotions and the sense of loss on all levels: losing people, losing someone who truly understands you. I wasn’t one to shed tears before, but now, I find myself shedding tears quite frequently.”

(T.H.) says, “I have become isolated, I don’t like to talk much, I don’t wear bright colors, and I don’t form friendships.”

These transformations were not exclusive to adults and women within the family. According to interviews conducted in this report, the children in the family also underwent changes. These changes included intense crying,

feelings of pessimism, yearning for the environment before displacement, loss of friendships, introversion, a general sense of weakness, and alterations in academic performance, for those who were able to return to school after displacement, or those who had to discontinue due to the displacement conditions and a sense of insecurity in the new environment.

(J.D.) talks of her son saying: “I began to observe a distinct change in him after displacement. He became introverted, never going out. He took on responsibilities in place of his father. During the bombing, the windows would shatter, and he would repair them despite his young age.”

(Sh.G.) talks about her daughters who discontinued their education: “My daughters have had to discontinue their education, which has been a difficult adjustment for them. One of my daughters is still trying to resume her education. They keep asking me to return to Damascus, to Ghouta, where they felt more comfortable.” The significant changes in the social environment pose an additional challenge for girls in a more conservative setting, increasing psychological pressures on women and girls and complicating their psychological recovery and stability.

(M. G) speaks about the constant sadness experienced by her children: “They have been deeply affected.

They’re in a constant state of sadness, always pessimistic...I mean, there is nothing left for one to be optimistic about... It feels like everything has closed in on you, leaving no room for joy. No one has adapted.”

Most of the women we interviewed live in a constant state of anticipation. This leads to a persistent sense of fear and anxiety due to the psychological traumas they have endured and were left unresolved or untreated, and also due to forced displacement and detachment from their environment.

(A.B.) says, “In the past, I lived in stability with my children; we didn’t think about separation and distance. We had a home. Now, I wonder if I’ll reunite with my son. Will I stay in this house? If they force me out, where will I go? Will Idlib be surrendered to the regime? I’ve become more sorrowful and tearful,” She elaborates on the impact on her children, stating, “They used to have their own home, rooms, and closets. They didn’t easily adapt to the constant movement and instability. However, the situation has somewhat improved.” She adds, “My eldest son used to experience distressing dreams.”

Women and children are also grappling with mood changes due to the pressures they face in the new environment and the profound shifts that have occurred in their lives, surroundings, and lifestyles. According to (R.A.), “Even my

children sensed that we were not in our homeland from the moment we arrived. Just two days ago, my daughter started shouting at me that she wants the fees of her tuition and doesn't want the money to go for rent. They're not studying well because they work with us all day, and we can't afford the fees for the baccalaureate courses." Reflecting on the personal changes she has undergone, she expresses, "I've become more irritable.

My husband tells me that I wasn't like this when we got married. I'm stressed because I have no one. I used to be calm; I enjoyed staying up, reading the Quran, for instance. Now, with no electricity, I go to sleep at 8:30, and there's nothing to do. I have often cried myself to sleep. I haven't experienced a single happy day since the beginning of our marriage."

As for (Sh.Sh.), who was displaced from Afrin, she describes her children's nostalgia and their struggle to adapt, stating: "They always remember their lives in Afrin – every detail. They haven't fully adapted. But, they have to adapt, there's no other choice."

This report provides abundant indicators, derived from testimonials and responses to psychological assessment questions, consistent with symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in most of the women

we interviewed. These symptoms have significantly impacted various facets of their daily lives, encompassing social interactions, family relations, mood, and personality aspects. Moreover, notable signs of distress among children within these families, stemming from the repercussions of forced displacement, were also identified.

This suggests that the experienced traumas and the profound psychological challenges faced by family members may signify the potential transgenerational transmission of these effects within these families and others who have confronted violence and psychological traumas throughout the course of the Syrian war. Importantly, it underscores the absence of accessible psychological interventions to facilitate healing and recovery, especially for those individuals still residing within Syria or in the neighboring Syrian countries.

Shocks, including those related to political persecution and wars, experienced by one generation can impact the mental and overall health of subsequent generations, even those who did not directly witness these shocks themselves, through what is known as "intergenerational trauma". This can influence behavioral patterns, personal satisfaction, life skills, and self-esteem³² (Jeyasundaram et al., 2020).

³² [Jeyasundaram, J., Cao, L. Y., & Trentham, B. \(2020\). . Experiences of intergenerational trauma in second-generation refugees: Healing through occupation. Canadian Journal of Occupational Therapy., 422-412 ,\(5\) 87](#)

Chapter IV: Socioeconomic Impacts

**“It's like placing thorn upon silk,
you can't fix it... You can remove
the thorn, but its imprint is lasting...
Displacement is the thorn that has
ruined our lives...”**

(H.G.), displaced from Ghouta



Syrain women paid the heaviest toll in the war. In addition to being exposed, like all segments of the Syrian population, to killing, arrest, torture, siege, starvation, loss of livelihood, and the painful separation from loved ones, each new stage of the conflict brought a new form of violence. There was a noticeable shift in their roles, but this change did not alleviate their burdens. It was a result of external factors—the war and the state of conflict—rather than a conscious transformation in the dynamics of local communities³³. In the case of our forcibly displaced witnesses, not only have their roles changed due to the war, but forced displacement has also presented them with immensely challenging social and economic obstacles. They find themselves facing these challenges without the resources to confront them, having lost everything before boarding the green bus.

In this section, we will focus on the social and economic impacts of forced displacement on women. This will be done by analyzing the new challenges imposed by the change in location, the new social environments, and the responsibilities placed on women.

These responsibilities include family reunification or maintaining what is left of it, ensuring the continued education of children, providing them with food and clothing, and preparing the new place of residence to make it suitable for living. In addition to these new roles, there is the necessity to seek employment in the context of the war economy, which has led the majority of the population in northwest Syria to rely on food baskets and humanitarian aid³⁴.

Within the unsustainable work context of organizations, the dire educational situation, the absence of livelihood projects, the prevalence of unemployment, and certain socio-economic phenomena such as child marriages and child labor, deteriorating family living standards, and rising levels of extreme poverty, all reflect a decline in livelihood opportunities and a gradual erosion of the family's ability to adapt, especially among the poor and vulnerable groups³⁵ and others. Forced displacement has further compounded the losses of those displaced, as they did not carry with them to their new places of residence any of the economic and social resources they once had.

The social standing of an individual is tied to the place they are accustomed to and have lived in, and the economic capabilities of our witnesses and their families have become mere images in memory. Most of them have been affected by destruction, bombardment, and confiscation, following laws issued by the regime³⁶ to legitimize their displacement and punish them.

³³ Changes in Women's Roles in the Syrian War – A Study – Haramoun Center for Studies

³⁴ Report by Human Rights Watch published in 2023 covering the 2022 events in Syria.

³⁵ World Bank, Syria Economic Monitor, 2022

³⁶ The Day After, Violating the HLP Rights Post the Trilogy (Siege – Destruction – Displacement), January 2024

New form of violence added to the existing ones.

For the women we encountered in the course of preparing this report, forced displacement is a form of violence—another layer added to the other sources of violence imposed upon them by oppression, initially, and subsequently by the ravages of war and its aftermath. Forced displacement has deepened the vulnerability of their lives, which were already shattered by the brutalities of war, military conflicts in their regions, and the systematic violence that plagued their original homelands through bombings, destruction, siege, and starvation. It is crucial to recognize that women were not involved in the decision-making processes related to war, peace, or the acceptance or rejection of settlements that ultimately led to their displacement. Instead, their forced displacement and uprooting, along with their families, were the outcomes of a protracted series of violence inflicted upon their regions.

Agreements offer no fair guarantees for the forcibly displaced.

After the green bus journey reached its end and our witnesses arrived in the north, they were immediately confronted with new social and economic challenges. The displacement deal did not guarantee them or their families decent living conditions. (M.H.), displaced

from Rif Dimashq and residing in Al-Fu'ah, describes her situation: "I live in an apartment that is neither owned nor rented, with no windows or doors. We hang plastic sheets and blankets to protect against the cold."

The agreements did not include a condition allowing families to bring what they needed to the new place, especially the necessities of women and children, including clothes. In the brief window granted for them to take their essentials, they were unable to transport many items or assemble the necessary documents for the future, such as property deeds, birth certificates, children's educational records, family registers, and more. (Y.D.), displaced from Darayya, said, "After packing my clothes, they didn't allow me to bring them with me. They said only one set of clothes per person is allowed. They told us we would return after a short period, in about two months." This was corroborated by (A.B), displaced from Barzeh, who stated, "They gave us a quarter of an hour to enter and bring our essential belongings... When we entered, they used us as human shields."

The forced displacement agreements, or "settlement agreements" as the regime refers to them, did not include any provisions acknowledging the circumstances of displaced families or the situations of women, children, the elderly, or those with disabilities. Those who arrived, weary and escaping from hell, were and continue to be in dire need of both financial and moral sup-

port to recuperate from their protracted and taxing journey. Yet, they found themselves relocating to areas far from secure, while the looming threat of war and bombardment persists, casting a shadow over the prospect of yet another round of displacement. “We live in constant fear that the regime might reclaim control or that we’ll be compelled to endure displacement once again,” expresses (Z.G.), displaced from Rif Dimashq.

Bombing and displacement wherever they go

Some of our witnesses have endured renewed displacement once again, even after two years since reaching what they thought would be their final destination in Idlib. A case in point is (M.H.), displaced from Rif Dimashq, then displaced again from Maarat al-Numan to al-Fu’ah in 2020³⁷ after a journey of displacement that took her from Homs to Idlib in 2017. Her initial displacement occurred in 2011 when she fled from Baba Amr to Rif Dimashq. Reflecting on her experience, she shares, “Since leaving my home in my village, I can only now manage to furnish the room with mattresses of the same color.”

The transition to new conflict zones, marked by relentless bombardment and forced displacement, denied our witnesses the chance to draw a breath. It can be aptly stated that the green buses carried our witnesses and their families into a reality they had only

just escaped. Some initially disembarked in Saraqib, Maarat al-Numan, and other Idlib areas. These regions swiftly became targets for airstrikes and later succumbed to regime control, compelling their residents into yet another forced displacement. (J.D), displaced from Douma, recounts, “Upon arriving in Idlib, there were many who welcomed us. In Saraqib, a person held a sign that read, ‘I have a house for those who need it’. We stayed with him, and after two years, we found ourselves displaced once again, this time to Bab.”

The war and its sorrows persist, reopening their wounds, exacerbating their losses, and destabilizing their lives. The relentless bombardment continues in Idlib. (T.H.), displaced from Aleppo and currently residing in Darat Izza, reflects, “The passing of my granddaughter broke my spirit...All official documents, including property deeds, were consumed in the flames of the last bombing. We submitted a request to obtain documents from the local council to authenticate our identities.”

Absence of support

Our witnesses were uprooted from their homes, communities, and the regions where they were born and lived for their entire lives. They considered that being removed from their communities put them in a situation where they had to face multiple dangers and threats. For they believe that the com-

³⁷ At the end of 2019, the Syrian regime, supported by its Russian ally, launched a military campaign on Maarat al-Numan. Observatories documented the city being targeted with more than 500 airstrikes and missiles within three hours. January 2020 witnessed the continuous bombardment leading to the displacement of thousands of civilians, predominantly women and children. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported, “Maarat al-Numan: The Regime Approaches the Second-Largest City in Idlib”, January 27, 2020.

munities they hail from were ‘protective and supportive’. For married women, the proximity of their parents’ homes served as a potential refuge if they faced any harm or humiliation from their husbands. (W.B.) reflects, “I feel vulnerable because my family isn’t by my side. When a problem arises between my husband and me, I can’t confide in anyone because I don’t have a home to go to. Being away from my family has left me broken.”

The presence of (W.B.) among her family and familiar surroundings was a cornerstone of her sense of security. When contemplating the prospect of returning to their original homes, her words carried a tone of certainty. These homes, for them, symbolized the potential restoration of their dignity, a dignity they lost through displacement and necessity. Leaving their homes marked the beginning of their tragic narratives, laden with memories of bombardment, siege, hunger, and the loss of loved ones. This ordeal, as articulated by (A.K.), a displaced woman from Al-Waar in Homs, persists as “a lingering ache in the heart that refuses to dissipate regardless of the passage of time.” (H.G.), a displaced woman from Eastern Ghouta, says, “The regime set my home and my family’s home on fire. Just a few days ago, I discarded the key, as if someone had extracted my soul from my body.” Settling into new homes was not an easy task for our witnesses, especially

for those who couldn’t forget that they were moving into houses abandoned by their owners. (H.G.), displaced from Eastern Ghouta, recounts that upon arriving to the outskirts of Afrin, the Kurds had also been displaced from there: “They told us we had to choose the residential apartments we wanted, but the good ones had already been occupied by the military before our arrival.” Reflecting on the difficulty of finding a place to stay, (W.B.), currently residing in camps, shares, “When we arrived in liberated areas, we were well received. They provided us with food and water. Subsequently, each family sought refuge in the homes of acquaintances. No one offered us a house or tent. I had to stay with my family for four months in a house where my relatives lived. Then I bought this ‘house’ (referring to the tent) in the camp, with block walls and an insulated roof. We received financial aid twice and relief supplies.”

Old-New Roles and Responsibilities

Moral Burden and Family Reunification

85% of women undertake the pivotal role of primary caregivers within their families, whether attending to the needs of children or caring for elderly relatives.

When questioned about their occupations, the majority of our interview-

ees employed the term “homemaker”, encapsulating their vital responsibilities in managing household affairs and overseeing familial finances. In the fragile and dynamic economy of war, where the ramifications disproportionately burden the underprivileged, this term also conveys the “care role” they shoulder, amplified by the challenges of displacement. Despite being a fundamental pillar for family unity and support, this role often goes unrecognized and underappreciated.

The majority of our witnesses fulfill the role of caregivers, not solely for their children but also for their parents, grandchildren, or the children of siblings who have been absent due to imprisonment or death. Adding to the complexity, they did not possess any resources, as they could only carry a minimal amount of necessities from their abandoned homes. They were informed that they could only take a small portion for their families.

(M.H), displaced from Homs, Baba Amr, currently residing in Al-Fu’ah, recounts her past life where she owned a house, and her husband used to work, providing for all the family’s needs. However, due to a disability, her husband can no longer work, shifting the responsibility of managing the family’s affairs to her. The household has expanded to include her married son and his children, all sharing the same residence to ease the burden of rent. Moreover, she takes care of her son’s

family, who is married to a 17-year-old girl, and their children. They all live together in one house, relying on her sons’ income who work with the Turkish army, earning a monthly salary of 700 Turkish liras.

(M.H.) says, “I am the pillar of the family, carrying the full weight of responsibility. My children work, but their income is insufficient. I must meticulously manage the household budget to navigate the challenges of the new economic reality.” When asked to define self-sufficiency, (M.H.) responded, “Job opportunities for my children...Before displacement, my focus was on ensuring my children’s happiness, decent clothing, and proper nourishment. I envisioned them pursuing their education and achieving success in life.” However, the war shattered all those dreams.

(M. H), in portraying her original community, expresses, (M. H), in describing her original community, states, “We enjoyed freedom of movement, and a woman was respected in her home, able to pursue education.” Regarding the current community, she observes, “There is diversity, with people from various regions, and each woman lives according to the customs she grew up with.” (M.H.)’s words suggest that host communities do not interfere with the “outsiders”, as echoed by some of our witnesses residing in Afrin or Al-Fu’ah. (Z.G.) feels like an outsider, alone and without support, expressing, “Displacement cost me my dearest ones, my children and husband.” (Z. G) left

behind three children and a husband in prison, whom she knows nothing about, and she never communicates with her husband's family, who took custody of her children.

(S.Q.), displaced from Barzeh, shares, "I never got married. Today, I am responsible for my elderly mother, and supporting my siblings when they face problems. I also take care of my sisters' children when they are at work. We rely on my brother's salary from working with organizations. We all live together, and my role is to manage the expenses for everyone's livelihood." (T. H), in response to inquiries about her economic circumstances, remarks, "Not good at all. we depend solely on the sponsorship for orphans."

The necessity of working to survive

When asked about their current employment status, it was revealed that the majority, 77%, are homemakers. Two of them are actively seeking employment, and 23% are currently employed, with variations in the nature and conditions of work. Specifically, 8% of the women we encountered work in civil society organizations, 8% work from home, and 8% have salaried jobs (such as agricultural supervisors or nurses). Inquiring about

their pre-displacement employment showed that 44% were homemakers, 11% were students, 11% were daily wage workers, 19% were employees (such as teachers), and 15% were self-employed in activities like tailoring, among others.

A significant portion, accounting for 70%, were not primary breadwinners for their families. They primarily depended on their husbands, cash or food assistance, or remittances from their children residing abroad. Meanwhile, 22% assumed the role of primary providers for their families, and 7% contributed to family support alongside their husbands.

Before displacement, (Z.G.) never worked and lacks the qualifications necessary for jobs in organizations offering good pay. However, as the sole provider for her mother and two daughters, she is compelled to work for a limited number of hours to care for them. Reflecting on her pre-displacement life, (Z.G.) recalls, "I used to be the spoiled one, being the youngest of my siblings. I transformed from a pampered daughter to a miserable woman in a short time." Her husband is missing, and she resides in a shop that underwent some repairs and modifications to serve as a makeshift dwelling. (Z.G.) defines self-sufficien-



Photo: Hazar Al Zahr/Trócaire

cy, saying, “To be able to buy suitable clothes for my daughter and stationery... to meet the needs of my elderly mother, but there’s no possibility... Sometimes we can afford to buy bread, and sometimes we cannot...”

It can be noted that each phase required our witnesses to adapt to their circumstances swiftly. They play the crucial role of family supporters, taking on the responsibility of caring for children, the elderly, and even grandchildren. The burden of family reunification also fell on their shoulders from the moment they decided to board the buses. They have undergone rapid changes in their roles without sufficient time to prepare adequately. Among them are those who have never worked before and are now

compelled to work for the family’s sustenance due to the absence of the breadwinner or as a result of his disability. Additionally, there are married women who have been in the dark about the fate of their husbands for years, widows, and those who have become sole providers. Some experienced the dispersion of their families when their children sought asylum in distant countries. The women who shared their testimonies for this report are shouldering burdens beyond their capacity. Most of them live in fear of the uncertain future and what awaits them and their children. Many have lost hope, as expressed by (W.B.): “Displacement has altered everything in our lives. Yes, we live here but we do so soulless.”

Some of our witnesses who work in organizations financially support all members of their families, and sometimes even extended family members such as parents and close relatives. “I provide for my mother, father, husband, and my family...

My husband is supportive.” (A.B.), who is displaced from Barzeh to Al-Fu’ah, says, “I have been working as a tailor for forty years. I was well-known and able to meet the needs of my family. My body was stronger, helping me to work. I used to work six hours a day and take care of six people, including my children, daughters, and grandchildren whose mother got married,” She adds, “Yes, I take care of my daughters and my daughter’s children, who lost her husband and got married again.” (H.G.), displaced to Afrin, says, “My husband tried to start several businesses, but he consistently encountered setbacks. Currently, he owns and drives a taxi.

But work is not good. I am the main provider, and he occasionally contributes.”

Furthermore, the majority of our witnesses encounter difficulties adjusting to their new surroundings.

According to (H.G.), “I don’t socialize much in my new residential area. My entire life was in the city of Azaz, where my workplace is located. The community here is more conservative than in Ghouta. People appreciate my work, but they don’t approve of their daughters engaging in the same profession. I am fortunate that my husband is supportive. They view me as an outsider, and if I were a local, they would involve themselves in my affairs.”



Chapter V: Demographic Change

Demographic change refers to the alteration of the population composition in a specific area, involving the replacement of residents with those from a different background. It is known that the demographic changes in Syria were not solely a result of the war but rather a political process orchestrated by the Assad regime, with support from Russia and Iran. This was part of a well-planned strategy to establish a homogeneous Syria³⁸ that ensures the regime's continued rule. Mass arrests, systematic bombardment, and neighborhood invasions were among the primary reasons for the displacement of the original population.

Demographic change has significantly impacted numerous cities and towns in Syria. Residents of Darayya and Muadamiyat al-Sham in Rif Dimashq were compelled to evacuate due to a relentless siege and bombardment, and they were prevented from returning to their homes seized by Iranian and Syrian militias. Furthermore, various neighborhoods in Homs, including Al-Waer district, were evacuated, denying residents the right to return. Moreover, Iran and Turkey, persisting in their policies, have actively pursued demographic changes in Syria with post-war objectives. Forcibly dis-

placed individuals sought refuge in areas outside the reach of Russian airstrikes and regime planes, located under Turkish influence according to Russian-Turkish agreements.

These areas, densely populated due to the influx of thousands of residents from Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, and other regions subjected to bombing and siege, have experienced significant demographic shifts. This has led to alterations in their social and population characteristics. On the other hand, extremist opposition factions displaced Christians from Idlib, with only a few hundred families remaining.

Additionally, the original Kurdish residents of Afrin were displaced, and their homes were given to some of the displaced population, especially those with military ranks.

This is in addition to the displacement of Shiite residents of Kefraya and al-Fu'ah as a result of the Four Towns Agreement. The displacement also affected (Arab) populations in the areas of Tal Rifaat and displaced Kurds from their places. "It's as if I came to another country, a place unlike any I had traveled to before. It was a shock," says (H.G.), who resides in the

³⁸ Al Hurra, Death, and Displacement: How Did War Change Syria's Demographic Map?, Muath Freihah, 12 May 2023.

countryside of Afrin. She adds, “They asked us to choose from the apartments that had been vacated. Most of the houses were taken by the military or those who had been displaced before us.

Eventually, we found a house on the top of the hill, old and overlooking. It was a place where fighters had entrenched themselves. We fixed up the house, periodically making repairs. The cost of repairing it was cheaper than renting an apartment, and we didn’t have to pay any rent. We contacted people who knew the owner of the house and sent her a message that whenever she wanted to return to her house, we were ready to vacate it. Six years have passed, and we are still in the house. It has a small piece of land with fig and olive trees. We planted roses in it.”

The demographic change, or the forced substitution through the deportation of residents from one area and their replacement with inhabitants from another, has caused significant material, moral, and psychological harm to those forcibly displaced. Taking up residency in the homes of the original residents is accompanied by feelings of guilt and social stigma. For they are labeled as “occupiers”, “displaced”, or “outsiders”.

These terms are used to condemn them. Our witnesses in Afrin indicated that they face accusations of being occupiers due to settlement and political agreements with warring factions, involving the displacement of the original inhabitants and their replacement with displaced individuals. This arrangement instills guilt in our witnesses, for they have heard ongoing discussions about the occupation of Afrin and and they adamantly reject being part of such deals. (S.J.) says, “I live in a rented apartment, and we are accused of being settlers. They view us like the inhabitants of Ghouta, meaning we came and occupied the area, this is why I rent an apartment from its owner and pay rent.” Another woman states, “I want to return to my home... Any place, no matter where, doesn’t equal a person’s home, and I won’t feel a sense of belonging until I return.”



Recommendations

A lasting resolution to the displacement and demographic changes experienced by Syrians necessitates the achievement of sustainable peace in Syria. This entails bringing an end to the war and its aftermath, facilitating the voluntary and secure return of displaced families to their original locations, reinstating confiscated properties, and compensating those adversely affected. Such a comprehensive approach should be realized through a transitional justice process that ensures the fulfillment of these objectives.

Ensuring the voluntary and secure return of displaced individuals to their original residences, coupled with redress for the harm they have endured.

Safeguarding property and housing rights for all displaced individuals, with targeted measures to address property rights for women, often unjustly deprived of property rights based on prevailing norms.

Exerting pressure on the Syrian regime to cease practices associated with violations of property and housing rights.

Halting military attacks on displaced civilians and preventing the use of prohibited weapons, such as cluster munitions and chemical arms.

Putting an end to the violations committed by Turkey-backed armed factions against displaced individuals and prohibiting the use of weapons among civilians.

Implementing special support projects for women that consider the circumstances of single mothers and support the education of their children.

Providing urgent mental health support from specialists to families that have experienced displacement, to allow healing from complex psychological traumas.

Empowering on-the-ground grassroots civil society organizations and equipping them with skilled specialists to offer more social and psychological support to displaced women.

Providing financial support to forcibly displaced women, enabling them to fulfill their new roles and easing their burdens. Therefore, there should be projects specifically tailored to address their concerns, help them overcome the fear of leaving their homes, and provide the necessary skills for those seeking employment.

Humanitarian organizations should persist in delivering relief and humanitarian aid, and such assistance should be coupled with the initiation

of sustainable livelihood projects to strengthen the resilience of forcibly displaced women and their families.

The integration of forcibly displaced women into all future recovery projects is imperative. Their active participation is essential in any upcoming reconstruction or other initiatives to safeguard their property rights in their original areas of living.

The injustices experienced by our witnesses and their families cannot be adequately redressed without pursuing justice that commences with a return to the areas from which they were forcibly displaced.

Demographic changes serve as a breeding ground for hatred and sectarian animosities. Addressing this issue is vital, as without a resolution, the entire Syrian society remains vulnerable. Forced displacement crimes can undermine all efforts toward a peaceful political solution and the establishment of an egalitarian state. Hence, this issue must be prioritized in political agendas to achieve a fair resolution for Syrian women and men.

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Biography of the Researchers

Rima Flihan

The founder and executive director of the Syrian Feminist Lobby, a feminist and human rights activist for over 25 years. She has played a role in establishing several feminist and civil organizations. Additionally, she works in Australia as a counselor with refugees who are victims of torture and trauma. Rima holds a Bachelor degree of counseling and is currently pursuing an MA in Counselling and Psychotherapy degree.

She is also an author and screenwriter for numerous Syrian films, television series, and drama that address the issues of Syrian women, society, and human rights. Rima has published several books and articles, coauthored human rights reports, and led awareness campaigns in various fields, including human rights and the environment. She has actively engaged in numerous campaigns advocating for women's rights in Syria.

Rima Flihan relocated from Syria to Jordan in 2011 due to her active role in the peaceful movement in Syria. She was a member of the delegation to the Geneva Conference on Syria for peace negotiations in 2014. In the years 2012 and 2013, she served as the official spokesperson for the Local Coordination Committees in Syria (LCC) and she is a member of the Syrian Writers' Association. Rima resettled in Australia at the end of 2014.

Joumana Seif

Joumana Seif is a Syrian lawyer and a feminist. She is a legal advisor in International Crimes and Accountability program at the European Centre for Constitutional and Human Rights ECCHR, with a particular focus on Syria and sexual and gender-based violence. She is a fellow in the Strategic Litigation Program at the Atlantic Council, Middle East Section. She has been working in the human rights field since 2001 and supported the democratic movements in Syria with a focus on political prisoners. She left Syria in 2012, after the start of the uprising against the Assad regime. Since then, she cofounded the Syrian Women's Network (2013), the Syrian Feminist Lobby (2014) and Syrian Women's Political Movement (2017). She was also the chairwoman of the board of directors of the Day After: Supporting Democratic Transition in Syria (2020-2023).

Wijdan Nassif

Wijdan Nassif, a writer and political activist, has been advocating for human rights and women's rights for over 35 years. She is a member of the National Consultation Team in the Syrian Women's Political Movement, which publishes policy papers containing the opinions of Syrian women on various political topics. Her two books, "Letters from Syria" and "Wherever the Wind Blows", published in both French and Arabic, focus on testimonials. She coauthored reports and research papers on the violence faced by Syrian women and their conditions. A member of the Gender Advocacy Group, which supports the issues of Syrian women, and currently the director of the Syrian Women's Platform.

Julia Jamal

A member of the Syrian Feminist Lobby and a specialized consultant in gender studies. She is a trainer in areas such as sexual violence, gender-based violence, positive male engagement, media content with a gender-sensitive approach, conflict transformation, and peacebuilding. Julia holds a certificate in negotiation and mediation skills from the Clingendael Institute in The Hague, Netherlands.

With over a decade of experience, she has collaborated with both local and international organizations. In her most recent role, she served as the Regional Programs Manager at the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) and worked as a gender specialist with the People Demand Change (PDC) organization. Julia has actively contributed to the preparation of studies, research, and advocacy campaigns focusing on women's rights and combating gender-based violence. Currently, she is pursuing her master's degree in Multidisciplinary Gender Studies at the Lebanese American University (LAU).

Without Saying Goodbye...

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