



# LANDINFO

Country of Origin Information Centre

**Report**

**Syria**

**Return from abroad**

10 February 2020



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## **Summary**

This report on the question of return to Syria deals with the return phenomena in their broadest sense, and therefore includes both voluntary and involuntary return from the neighbouring countries Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. It also covers the possibilities for Syrians in other countries to return, whether for a shorter period or permanently.

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# 1 Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, there were over 5.5 million Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, over 64 % of whom are in Turkey (UNHCR 2020). Although organisations such as UNHCR do not recommend returning to Syria, there are refugees returning, both organised and on an individual basis. UNHCR has verified that well over 90,000 refugees returned from abroad in 2019, many of whom returned outside organised programmes, so-called “spontaneous returns” (UNHCR 2020). Lebanese authorities are cooperating with Syrian authorities on organised returns (Xinhua 2019), though to a lesser extent than had originally been envisioned. No other state has such cooperation with the authorities.

Some of the information this report is based on was obtained during Landinfo’s fact-finding mission to Syria in April 2019. Given that the issue of return is sensitive, most of the oral sources used in the report are anonymised. However, the phenomenon is widely discussed in the media in all countries that house refugees, and in Syria it is discussed in both opposition and regime-friendly media. Given that the topic is highly politicised, it is challenging to weigh different sources against each other to find the most objective description possible of the ongoing returns.

The biggest challenges concern the unorganised returns, spontaneous returns, where it is very difficult to find reliable figures and also problematic to map the factors that cause refugees to return without using organised returns where possible.

In 2019, there has been an increasing focus on returns, and this issue is also thoroughly discussed in Syria, not just in neighbouring countries and the rest of the world. Landinfo got its own impression of this during the trip in April 2019. A number of reports have been produced in 2019 by various actors who address various aspects of returning to Syria – these have also been an important part of the source material for this report.

# 2 Conditions for return

People who have fled Syria during the civil war constitute a diverse group – everyone from political dissidents who have actively participated in the fight against the GoS (Government of Syria) and the Asad regime to those who have fled because their livelihood was taken away. For a great many young men, the issue of military service was the most important factor in deciding whether to flee the country, and it is an important factor when deciding whether to return.

However, a study from UNHCR published in March 2019 shows that the issue of avoiding military service is not the most important factor when refugees in

neighbouring countries consider returning. The security situation is consistently at the top of the list of factors that are important to refugees, followed by other conditions such as access to basic services, access to livelihood and the ability to have a roof over one's head. Improvement of the security situation is the most important factor for those who have returned or who have specific plans to return (UNHCR 2019a).

This is further substantiated by a larger study conducted by the World Bank, partly based on data from UNHCR, which shows that security-related conditions are amongst the most important factors when refugees consider returning (World Bank 2020, p. 227).

## **2.1 Security clearance**

All refugees who want to return are subject to a security clearance. The Syrian national security agency grants this clearance, and without it, one risks being detained at the border. The security agency coordinates their work with the various existing intelligence services (Yahya 2019).

For organised returns, e.g. from Lebanon, the organisers mediate the security clearance, or rejection of the clearance, while people who organise their own return must arrange for the security clearance themselves (international organisation d, meeting in April 2019).

## **2.2 “Sorting out of affairs” (*taswiyat al-wadaʿ*)**

This is the same procedure that people who stayed in opposition areas had to undergo if they wanted to remain in the area after the GoS took back control (Landinfo 2019, p. 10–12). People returning from neighbouring countries will be able to do this after they have returned to Syria, and they will then have a period of three to six months to arrange this (international organisation a, 2019; al-Jablawi 2019).

People who want to return from other countries may start the process through the nearest Syrian embassy. On the website of the Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, there is a separate form that must be completed for people who have dodged compulsory military service (Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, n.d.a). See also Section 6.1.

## **2.3 Visiting Syria**

Syrian citizens who have fled to other countries, such as Norway, have the opportunity to return to Syria on a limited ‘see how the conditions are’ visit. On the websites of the Syrian embassies around the world, there is a separate form that must be completed to apply for a permit to visit al-Qutr, which literally means

‘the region’ or ‘the country’, and is Ba’th jargon for ‘Syria’. The condition is that you have a valid residence permit in the country where you live (Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, n.d.a).

People can apply via the nearest embassy, and it will take 10–60 days to process the applications (Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, n.d.d). A permit will allow the person the opportunity to travel back to Syria and stay there for up to three months. The individual must then decide whether to stay in Syria or travel back to the country they were staying in before the temporary visit to Syria (international organisation a, meeting in April 2019).

Landinfo was made aware of this arrangement during a visit to Damascus in the spring of 2019, and though it was a relatively new arrangement at the time, the attitude was initially positive amongst the organisations that knew about it (international organisations a and b, meetings in April 2019).

## **2.4 Simpler procedures at the borders**

According to several sources that Landinfo met in Damascus in the spring of 2019, the GoS issued a new circular earlier that year dealing with Syrian citizens who have left the country illegally. These sources stated that the personnel who staff the border crossings were allegedly instructed to accept returning refugees ‘in a positive manner’ (international organisations a and b, meetings in April 2019).

The circular letter further stipulated that returnees now only had to fill out a document where they must state where they crossed the border and the date they left the country. It should no longer matter whether they left the country via an illegal border crossing or whether they left the country from an area controlled by the opposition (international organisations a and b, meetings in April 2019). Such cases had previously been transferred to one of the security services, while they are now permitted to return without this condition being an obstacle.

One of the organisations mentioned above also stated that there has been a change with regard to men who are wanted for having evaded military service. Previously they would have been dealt a prison sentence for this, whereas now the person in question will get a note asking him to report to the enrolment office he belongs to within 15 days. After this, he will in principle get a ‘grace period’ of six months to sort out his situation (international organisation a, meeting in April 2019).

Although various procedures have been simplified, Landinfo assumes that an individual must still expect to go through some form of security clearance.



### 3 Returns from Lebanon

Lebanon is the neighbouring country with the largest number of refugees relative to its own population. In January 2020, just over 914,000 Syrian refugees were registered with UNHCR (UNHCR 2020), but this figure is assumed to be higher. The Lebanese government operates with a figure of around 1.5 million Syrians in the country (HRW 2019a).

Lebanon's political system is based on a division of power based on confessional affiliation, where Christians and Muslims have half of the representatives in the national assembly and state apparatus in general. The three largest confessions; Sunni Muslims, Shi'a Muslims and Maronite Christians, hold the top three positions in the country, the Prime Minister, Speaker and President, respectively. Factors that could upset this balance of power are viewed with great suspicion and alarm, the Palestinian refugees in the country and their position and history there are very important to understanding Lebanon's concerns around Syrian refugees. The Palestinians played a key role in the Lebanese civil war of 1975–1990, and Christian parties in particular are worried that the presence of hundreds of thousands of mainly Sunni Muslim Syrians will lead to new unrest.

The Syrian refugees, and how Lebanon should deal with them, is thus a very heated issue. The country was under Syrian occupation from 1976 to 2005, when the Syrian forces were forced to withdraw in the wake of the killing of former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, a killing Syrian authorities were accused of being behind. However, a number of practices from before 2005 still continue, and as a result of this, a number of sectors in the country are completely dominated by Syrian labouring force, without formal work permits. This particularly applies to the building and construction sector and within agriculture (Bou Khater 2017). Lebanese and Syrian citizens also do not need a passport to travel back and forth between the countries, but can use a valid national ID card.

It has become significantly more difficult for Syrians to travel to Lebanon than it was before 2015, when new restrictions were introduced (BBC 2015). For example, a Syrian who has an appointment with an embassy in Beirut will get a 48-hour entry permit if he or she can present documentation of the appointment (UNHCR 2016). However, there are reports of Syrians with all the necessary papers in order who were denied entry to Lebanon (Tello 2018). The estimates of the number of Syrian workers in the country before 2005 vary between 400,000 and 1.4 million (Bou Khater 2017), but even though the number decreased somewhat immediately after the Syrian withdrawal, it is estimated that several hundred thousand Syrian workers were in the country when the uprising broke out in 2011.

President Michel Aoun has insisted on a number of occasions that the refugees must return, and criticised the rest of the world for doing too little to facilitate the return of the refugees. He states that a return must be initiated even if no political

solution to the conflict has been found (Francis & Chmaytelli 2019). Gebran Bassil, the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs, and President Aoun's son-in-law, has stated that the majority of the Syrians in the country have economic reasons for not returning and that they both take jobs from Lebanese and have better health care than them (Wintour 2019).

It is primarily parties and groups that support Asad who have called for Syrian refugees to return, and Hizballah has been active in organising returns of refugees. As is known, Hizballah has participated in the war on the GoS side. But Landinfo has also met a prominent Lebanese lawyer and activist, a known opponent of the Syrian regime, who stated that over 90 % of the refugees in the country were not political but economic refugees (Lebanese lawyer and activist, meeting in 2018).

The estimates of how many people have returned, voluntarily or not, vary widely. UNHCR operates with a figure of 22,732 (UNHCR 2020), while President Aoun stated in November 2019 that over 390,000 people had returned (Dutton 2019). Landinfo believes that the actual figure is far closer to the figure UNHCR operates with than the figure the President states.

### **3.1 Organised returns**

There are supposedly several authorities, parties and organisations involved in the return process from Lebanon. Below is an overview of the various actors who are involved in organised returns in different ways.

#### **3.1.1 Returns organised by Sûreté Générale**

SG is part of the Lebanese military and, amongst other things, is responsible for foreigners in the country. SG also issues passports, visas and residence permits to foreigners. The Directorate is headed by Abbas Ibrahim. According to the religious division of power in the country, it is a Shi'a Muslim who leads SG, and Ibrahim was nominated for this position by the two Shi'a Muslim parties in parliament, Amal and Hizballah (Abbas 2017). He is believed to be close to Hizballah, something political opponents of the party find particularly problematic (Badran 2019).

SG organises returns for Syrian refugees on behalf of Lebanese state, in cooperation with Syrian security authorities (Xinhua 2019). People who want to return contact one of their offices around the country and register their name there. The names are then communicated to Syrian security authorities, who review the lists from SG. Everyone who wants to return must go through a security check, and the lists of the names of those who have been granted permission to return are then returned to SG. According to a statement from Abbas Ibrahim, around 10 per cent of those who want to return are rejected by Syrian security authorities, this is in addition to wanted persons. Wanted persons

are informed of this and must choose whether to go back to Syria and undergo a *taswiyat al-wada'* (“sorting out of affairs” process) there or refrain from traveling (Bassam 2018). Landinfo is not aware of how Lebanese authorities respond to people who are refused return by Syrian authorities.

Landinfo has asked sources in Lebanon if they are aware of the criteria Syrian authorities have for who is allowed to return. However, there seems to be an element of arbitrariness in who is allowed and who is denied. An organisation Landinfo met in Lebanon stated that people who have been denied security clearance in the first application have gotten permission when they applied again two or three months after having applied the first time (international organisation a, meeting in April 2019). There have allegedly also been cases where someone in a family has gotten permission while other family members have not, and cases where children have not gotten permission, while the adults in the family have been accepted. Landinfo is not aware of how extensive this practice is or what the basis for it is. The same organisation pointed out that in some cases, it could be a matter of people with the same name as people who are wanted by the Syrian authorities (international organisation a, meeting in April 2019).

### **3.1.2 Returns organised by Hizballah**

Hizballah, in cooperation with the Syrian authorities, has taken its own initiative to organise returns for Syrian refugees. Little is known about the practical organisation of these returns, or the extent to which this is done in cooperation with *Sûreté Générale*. One source says that people who have registered wanting to return with political parties are transferred to SG and that they do their own investigation to confirm that the return is voluntary (Amnesty 2019a). It is not possible for Landinfo to confirm whether this is true.

In July 2018, Hizballah announced that they have opened offices in nine different places in the country to receive Syrian refugees who want to return. All offices are located in areas of the country where the party has major influence, and are supposedly open every day (except Sundays) from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Places with such offices are Ba'albek (Biq'a'a), Hermel (Biq'a'a), al-Labwa (Biq'a'a), Badnayil (Biq'a'a), al-Dahiyya al-janubiyya (Beirut, southern districts: Bir al-'Abd), al-Nabatiyya (southern Lebanon), Tyr (southern Lebanon), Bint al-Jbayl (southern Lebanon) and al-Adisa (southern Lebanon) (al-Manar 2018).

### **3.1.3 Returns organised by other actors**

Landinfo is not aware of other actors organising returns from Lebanon in the same way as SG and Hizballah. One source pointed out that a small pro-Syrian party, al-Hizb al-lubnani al-wa'ad (the Lebanese Promise Party), has supposedly organised a door-to-door campaign and been active on social media to get

refugees to sign up for the returns SG organises (Sewell 2019a). However, this party is very small and has never been represented in the national assembly.

### **3.2 Spontaneous returns**

Alongside the organised returns, there is a not insignificant number of spontaneous returns from Lebanon to Syria. Previously, many of those who returned were refugees residing in the Beqaa Valley, on the border with Syria, and they returned via one of the unofficial border paths, of which there are many. Many of the refugees also originally came to Lebanon this way. Lebanese authorities have made significant efforts to get control of this border, and the traffic is far less than it was at the beginning of the conflict. There are also no rebel-controlled areas left on the Syrian side, and the Syrian army and Hizballah have full control there (Alfred 2018).

### **3.3 Returns of PRS (Palestinian refugees from Syria)**

Before the conflict broke out in 2011, Syria had a Palestinian refugee population of 560,000–580,000, which is now around 445,000. Of these, 418,000 receive some form or another of assistance from UNRWA (UNRWA 2019).

In 2018, around 1,400 PRS returned from Lebanon, while around 500 PRS went to Lebanon. The figures from the first half of 2019 show that 1,300 PRS returned from both Jordan and Lebanon (UNRWA 2019).

### **3.4 Deportations**

The human rights organisation Human Rights Watch has criticised Lebanon for deporting Syrian refugees and have pointed out many cases where deportees have been arrested by Syrian authorities. These deportations started after the Lebanese authorities decided in April 2019 that all Syrians who had entered the country illegally after 24 April 2019 will be deported. HRW also pointed out that people who have been in the country long before this date have been deported, but this is supposedly a very small number (HRW 2019a). According to figures from SG, they have deported almost 2,800 Syrians during the period from the end of May to the end of August 2019 (Sewell 2019b). The organisation Sawa also reports that they have received reports of a large number of deportations (Dutton 2019). It has not been possible for Landinfo to clarify whether this practice is still ongoing.

### **3.5 Documentation requirements**

Many refugees lack documents, everything from national ID cards to birth records for children. However, supposedly it is not a requirement from SG that people who want to return have a national ID card. An organisation Landinfo met in

April 2019 said that one could expect the documentation from the Lebanese authorities to be at the nufus level (population register), but noted that it seems that the mukhtar level is sufficient.<sup>1</sup> In other words, this allows for the return of children who are not registered with the Syrian authorities.

In many cases, SG has seized this card from people, for example in cases where they have not been able to pay fees for hospital treatment. SG has supposedly shown a willingness to make an effort to find and return seized ID cards in order to make a return easier (international organisation a, meeting in April 2019).

## **4 Returns from Jordan**

The Syrian refugees are a less heated topic in Jordan than in both Lebanon and Turkey, and there is not as much political pressure for them to return. The number of refugees in Jordan is lower than the two other countries, slightly over 650,000 refugees are registered in the country (UNHCR 2020). But the economic situation is difficult, and there were major demonstrations against the government's policy in 2019. Despite this, no similar public pressure has emerged for the return of refugees, and official Jordanian policy is that they will not force anyone to return against their will (Hamou 2019).

### **4.1 Organised returns**

Landinfo is not aware of organised returns for Syrians by Jordanian authorities or organisations. However, there are supposedly Syrian initiatives or organisations organising returns, but the number of people returning is far lower than in Lebanon (Hamou, Nassar & al-Maleh 2019).

The same source who reported on returns organised from Syria cites UNHCR in that they, together with IOM and the Jordanian authorities, have organised transport to the border for refugees who want to return home. It is not clear how this has come about or where these transports go from (Hamou, Nassar & al-Maleh 2019).

The closest one comes to any form of organised returns from Jordan are arrangements in the Rukban camp, which is located on the border between Jordan and Syria. The majority of the inhabitants of this camp fled in the direction of Jordan from 2014 and the following few years. Jordan had already closed its borders then, so the inhabitants of this camp did not get the same opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Syrian identity papers, see Landinfo 2017. The mukhtar level is the lowest administrative level, a mukhtar issues e.g. birth certificates that are used to register newborns.

example to get work as other refugees living in camps within the country or who had settled in cities such as Amman.

During the period of 24 March to 3 September 2019, nearly 19,000 people left the camp, the overwhelming majority of them in organised groups. Around 800 people had left this camp via “unofficial routes” (OCHA 2019). According to the same source, the vast majority of them, around 14,500 people, settled in the Homs district.

## **4.2 Spontaneous returns**

Almost everyone who has returned to Syria after the Jaber–Nassib border crossing reopened in October 2018 have chosen a so-called ‘self-organised return’. According to figures from UNHCR, 24,395 people travelled from Jordan back to Syria on their own initiative during the period from when the border opened until 31 August 2019 (UNHCR 2020).

Although Jordan and Syria have diplomatic relations that have been maintained throughout the conflict, it is not possible for Syrians in Jordan to go on a ‘see how the conditions are’ visit to Syria (Morris 2019; see also Section 2.4). Landinfo is not aware of whether Syrian authorities require a security clearance similar to what is done for refugees in Lebanon who want to return (see Sections 2.1 and 3.1.1). However, there is reason to believe that this also includes refugees who return from Jordan, as is the case with *taswiyat al-wada’*, where the person must clarify their legal position relative to the authorities (see Section 2.2).

## **4.3 Deportations**

Landinfo is not aware of the Jordanian authorities having deported people back to Syria against their will.

## **4.4 Documentation requirements**

As with refugees in the other neighbouring countries, one of the major challenges for refugees in Jordan is the lack of civil registration documents. However, the Syrian authorities have supposedly loosened the document requirements; a birth certificate from Jordan should for example now be enough to get into the country (international organisation a, meeting in April 2019).

Landinfo is not aware of what the document requirements are for adults who want to return, but people who return from abroad with incomplete or non-updated documents will have to arrange for these after returning. For people who return, there is an amnesty so that they do not have to pay the fines that their countrymen who stayed in Syria without updated documents during the conflict had to pay.

For both categories of people, the post-registration means that they have to go through the legal system to obtain valid civil registration documents.

UNHCR confirms that the biggest challenge for people who want to return is the lack of documents (Turnbull 2019).

## 5 Returns from Turkey

Turkey is the country that houses the most refugees in the world, a total of 4 million registered refugees. Of these, over 3.6 million are Syrians, and there is also an unknown number of Syrian refugees who are not registered. The Turkish authorities stopped registering Syrian refugees in 2016 and are now in the process of a comprehensive programme to verify the identity of those who arrived before the registration stopped.

The presence of Syrian refugees is also a heated political topic in Turkey, which ties in to a larger debate around the country's political course. President Erdoğan and the ruling AK party were early in supporting the uprising against President Assad and actively supported parts of the armed Syrian opposition. Therefore, in the polarised political landscape, the refugees are associated with President Erdoğan and his policies. Partly as a result of this, and as the Turkish economy has become weaker and weaker in recent years, the resistance to Syrian refugees has increased (Cagaptay & Yuksel 2019).

A new part of this development is that there is also a growing resistance to the refugees within the AK party. Erdoğan's response to this has been a strategy of creating so-called safe zones in northern Syria, where the initial goal was to expel PYD/YPG, the Syrian-Kurdish branch of PKK, from these areas, which they currently control. To counter the increasing pressure from the population to "do something" about the refugee problem, in the autumn of 2019, the President advocated for repatriating large numbers of Syrians in the country to these areas. This not only requires a Turkish military invasion and occupation of these areas, in line with what previously occurred in Afrin and the so-called Euphrates Shield area, but also a massive effort to build an infrastructure that makes such repatriation possible. In October 2019, Turkey initiated the so-called Operation Peace Spring, where the Turkish army, supported by loyal Syrian militias, occupied an area between the cities of Tall Abyad and Ras al-'Ayn. This area is much smaller than what the Turkish authorities originally stated they would take control of (Salacanian 2020). It is highly uncertain whether Syrian refugees will settle in this area to a significant extent.

## 5.1 Organised returns and voluntary returns

Figures from UNHCR show that from 2019, a little over 34,000 people returned to Syria (UNHCR 2020). This is in sharp contrast to statements made by the Turkish authorities; the Turkish Foreign Minister stated in August 2019 that nearly 350,000 Syrians had returned to areas in northern Syria that are under Turkish control (Bayar & Geldi 2019). This relates to the Afrin district and the area between the cities of A'zaz, al-Bab and Jarablus, and covers the period from the autumn of 2016 to the autumn of 2019. Another source who describes the situation in October 2019 says that 200-300 people return voluntarily on a daily basis, but this has stopped in connection with the ongoing Turkish military offensive in the area (Najjar & Salem 2019).

One source writes that, for a period of a few months in 2018, the Turkish authorities supposedly asked Syrian refugees if they were willing to move to Afrin, with financial support from the authorities. The same source also questioned both the number of people who supposedly returned and the voluntariness of the returns that were made (AIDA, n.d.).

## 5.2 Deportations

In the autumn of 2019, there were a number of reports that the Turkish authorities were forcibly returning Syrian refugees. These were supposedly both people who did not have TP<sup>2</sup> (temporary protection), and thus did not have legal residence in the country, and people with legal residence. The refugees were supposedly returned to areas of northern Syria that are under the control of militias allied with Turkey, and to the Idlib province, which is controlled by HTS (Hay'at tahrir al-Sham), the Jihadist group that was formerly al-Qa'ida's Syrian branch.

The Turkish authorities deny that they sent refugees back to Syria against their will and claim that these are voluntary returns. Several media outlets have published interviews with Syrians who say that they were pressured to sign papers in Turkish that they did not understand, only to find out that what they signed was a statement that they requested a voluntary return. Many say that they signed these papers under threat of torture (Ingleby 2019; Dadouch & Ashawi 2019; Amameh & Rollins 2019).

Several human rights organisations have criticised Turkey for deporting Syrians, including both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International (HRW 2019b; Amnesty International 2019b).

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<sup>2</sup> TP, temporary protection, is the status all Syrian refugees have in Turkey.



### **5.3 Spontaneous returns and temporary visits**

In connection with religious holidays such as al-‘id al-mubarak, several thousand Syrians with residence permits in Turkey visit areas in Syria outside the regime’s control, such as the Idlib province or the triangle between A’zaz, al-Bab and Jarablus. In connection with ‘id al-adha in 2019, a Turkish newspaper reported that around 40,000 people had crossed the border at Öncüpinar and that they were going to return to Turkey after the visit, as they have legal residence in the country (Hürriyet Daily News 2019).

Landinfo does not know how many refugees may have returned to Syria on their own initiative, nor about the figure of 21,000 returnees that UNHCR operates with (see Section 5.1).

In this context, it must also be pointed out that a not insignificant number of Syrians living in Turkey travel back and forth between the two countries in a job context. During a visit to Gaziantep in October 2018, Landinfo met a number of Syrians who work for various NGOs and who travel between the countries on a weekly basis. These people do not travel to areas controlled by the GoS.

### **5.4 Documentation requirements**

Syrians who return on a permanent basis must give up their Turkish ID card, kimlik, at the border, and they must also sign a document preventing them from returning to Turkey for the next five years.

In connection with the holidays ‘id al-fitr (after Ramadan) and ‘id al-adha (after hajj), the Turkish authorities allow for registered refugees to use the Turkish ID card. Upon departure, the individual is given a deadline for when they must return to Turkey. There are several conditions that factor into how long a deadline the individual is given: first and foremost the individual’s own wishes, but also the traffic situation at the border crossing in question. In any case, the period will be from two weeks up to three months. Landinfo is aware that this applies to the border crossings Öncüpinar-Bab al-Salam and Cilvegözü-Bab al-Hawa. The first of these leads into the triangle A’zaz-Jarablus-al-Bab, and is right next to the Turkish city of Kilis, while the other crossing is by the city of Reyhanlı and leads into the Idlib province, and is controlled by HTS (Hay’at tahrir al-Sham, the former Nusra front, al-Qa’ida’s Syrian branch) (Syrian NGO, meeting in 2019).

If the person who wants to cross one of these borders has a business ID, they can travel back and forth freely. A business ID is issued by the Turkish authorities to Syrian and Turkish traders and makes border crossing relatively easy (Syrian NGO, meeting in 2019).

## 6 Returns from Europe

There is a not insignificant number of Syrians who return to their home country from Europe each year, for various reasons. Some countries have voluntary return programmes where they receive support for both the journey home itself and to establish themselves in Syria. In Germany, over 3,000 people have supposedly used this opportunity (Soguel 2018). The same source has interviewed a number of people who have returned or are planning to return to Turkey or to areas of Syria that are not controlled by the GoS. It is not clear how many people this is, but the routes back to Turkey are the same as are used by people who are smuggled out of the country (Soguel 2018).

### 6.1 Documents and procedures

Syrians who want to return from Europe must have valid documents, which are possible to get by applying for them to be issued from one of Syria's embassies. An overview from the Syrian Embassy in Stockholm shows that during the period from 1 April to 22 October 2019, the embassy issued 600 passports. This figure says nothing about how many of these have returned or visited Syria.

There are separate procedures for men who have evaded military service (see Section 2.3).

People who have left the country illegally i.e. via an unofficial border crossing must undergo a "sorting out of affairs" process (see Section 2.2). To do this, the person must appear at the nearest embassy and will be given a form that must be filled out. They must also submit a handwritten application (talab), have a valid Syrian national ID card or passport and residence permit in the country they are living in (Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, n.d.b).

All persons who want to travel to Syria must also fill out a separate application for an entry permit (Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, n.d.c). Landinfo assumes that all persons who apply for such a permit will be security checked.

## 7 The Syrian authorities and returns

The Syrian authorities have on several occasions encouraged citizens who left the country during the war to return home, to hidn al-watan, the bosom of the home country. The phrase is also used on the embassies' websites in connection with taswiyat al-wada' ("sorting out of affairs" process) (Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, n.d.b). The authorities have also implemented a number of measures to make it easier for refugees to return, although there are still many challenges, particularly with regard to the document situation for refugees in neighbouring countries (see Section 2.4).

Critics of the government claim that they do not want the refugees to come home again and refer to statements from Syrian government officials against those who fled the country (Batrawi & Uzelac 2018, p. 2–3). They also refer to Law no. 10, which is interpreted as targeting areas where the opposition was strong and that it is used to prevent people from returning and to change the demographic composition of the country (Abu Ahmad 2018).

The demographic change that the GoS was blamed for initiating in areas such as Zabadani has not materialised, which the critics have also admitted (EIP 2019, p. 25). However, there are major challenges after the war with cities and districts that have been destroyed, and a large number of internally displaced people.

As stated in Section 2.1, the authorities require a security clearance for people who want to return to the country, and they also do this for people who want to undergo a “sorting out of affairs” process (see Section 2.2).

Landinfo is not aware of people being denied returning due to ethnic or religious affiliation. Syria was and is a multi-religious and multi-ethnic country, although it is beyond doubt that Alawites, the Muslim minority President Asad belongs to, are overrepresented in positions of power. The majority of the population are Sunni Muslims, as are a number of prominent and powerful people in the GoS, such as Ali Mamlouk. (He is the leader of the national security agency, and one of the President’s most trusted men).

What started as an uprising against an authoritarian dictatorship quickly developed into an armed uprising with strongly sectarian features. A large part of the rebel factions defined themselves as Sunni Muslims, and many also as Islamists, in addition to both al-Qa’ida’s Syrian branch the Nusra Front, Ahrar al-Sham and other groups having an aggressive Jihadist rhetoric, directed against the Alawites and other religious minorities. This has undoubtedly contributed to a relatively small number of the minorities having actively supported the uprising. However, this does not mean that the GoS views Sunni Muslims with suspicion per se, but there are other factors which can arouse the authorities’ suspicion. Geographical affiliation (whether one comes from an ‘active’ uprising area) (international organisation a, meeting in 2018) and family affiliation (whether one is in a family with known rebels or known GoS followers) will be important factors in this regard.

Nevertheless, it is clear that there are groups that the authorities do not want back, and who will be imprisoned if they return despite lack of security clearance or “sorting out of affairs” process. Landinfo believes that this primarily involves former rebels who have undergone a “sorting out of affairs” process, dissident media activists and people who have worked with the White Helmets i.e. many of the same groups that did not enter so-called “reconciliation agreements” with the GoS (Landinfo 2019, p. 12).

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