# Locality-based Perception of Safe and Neutral Environment in Syria after Assad's Fall

## Qualitative participatory analysis of youth sessions and community leader workshops

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# Introduction

Over the course of the past decade, Syria has witnessed a series of profound security, social and political transformations at the level of the state, society and geography. State institutions have been exhausted by the systematic attrition inflicted upon them by regime elimination and subjugation policies leaving behind a fragile state overflowing with corruption and nepotism networks where excessive centralization created imbalanced development and a relapse in the notion of local empowerment. Most importantly, they have become entirely captured by the regime narrative and its general approaches especially vis-à-vis the Syrian revolution and all those who hold different views. Society was exposed to the most violent transformation since the establishment of the Syrian entity as mass displacement, systematic arrests, forced disappearance, all were tools of societal disintegration. Consequently, 14 years on, there is abundance of security and administrative factors that further instill division and exacerbate dichotomies which shatter society ambiguating all its characteristics indicating agency and deepened the trust crisis eventually transforming it into hostile entrenchment against the other. Put together, the above created a multi-dimensional cause of despair.

With the overthrow of Bashar Assad regime on 8 December 2024, however, social expectations of a less terrible future were revived: a transitional future which, despite the complex challenges, is a starting point for a national pathway which could lead to a Syrian reality where society can rise again. Given the massive challenges, starting to confront security difficulties would be a foundational step for societal interaction and engagement in reclaiming voice and agency; and since confronting the security vacuum and the multiple threats is a question for all Syrians to produce a safe and neutral environment, The Day After (TDA) realized the significance of local approaches to mechanisms and dynamics which create the safe environment and the importance of advocating for this issue and ensuring that the Syrian society's vision is noted within the plans and policies of a safe and neutral environment. In order to ensure a comprehensive view of societal approach this report will attempt to describe the sample's description of safety and neutrality defining their main elements and then embarks on examining the obsessions and challenges they perceive in their local settings affecting the safe environment. The report will examine the requirements of safe and neutral environment based on the suggestions made in the sessions. It would further explore the commonalties and discrepancies between governorates in order to offer practical recommendations aligned with social specificity and factoring it in the policies of this environment.

The project has adopted a qualitative participatory approach which reflects the diversity of views among Syrian areas on the one hand and focuses specifically on youth perspective on the other. The project carried out 13 dialogue sessions in eight Syrian governorates including 9 youth dialogue sessions and 4 societal dialogue workshops (workshops with local leaders) in which 239

young men and women and community leader from various backgrounds were involved. Facilitators used a standardized facilitator's guide and made sure the discussion were efficiently managed over 4 hours for each session. As for the selection of respondents, selection focused on reflecting various view points using the following criteria:

1) Age: focusing on youth (18-35 year olds)
2) Community impact: presence of community leaders and local actors
3) Gender diversity: maintaining balanced representation of men and women
4) Geographical diversity: the sessions were carried out in 8 Syrian governorates depending on accessibility and feasibility. They also ensured representation of various of groups based on place of residence in recent years including residents, displaced and returnees.
5) Societal/ cultural diversity: the sessions ensured diversity of participants reflecting the diversity of their governorates

Data collection included: direct note-taking during the sessions, observation of interaction, taking note of the most important discussion ideas and feedback forms distributed at the end of each session. Data analysis relied on cross matching sources indicative of the local reality to extract recurrent patterns in discussion outcomes while adhering to ethical research standards and anonymity of participants.

## Community-based Perspective to Notions of Safe and Neutral Environment

Although there is a substantial body of theoretical literature on safe and neutral environment especially studies of post-conflict states on whose experience many relevant Syrian civil society organizations have drawn, the societal attitude is linked to a special understanding linked to society's direct understanding of security and neutrality. Thus, we will try to integrate both views to form a qualitative Syrian understanding.

Many studies and reports carried out by Syrian human rights organizations indicate the organic connection between a safe environment and the concept of transitional justice and the importance of legal and social mechanisms (such as truth commissions, reparations and prosecutions) to remedy past violations and ensure accountability for perpetrators without undertaking wide purges or justifying them as they may deepen divisions if undertaken without paying heed to societal equilibrium. In addition, rights of victims must be emphasized and a constitutional framework for transition must be in place. These efforts must be coupled with reforms in the security sector (police, intelligence, judiciary) so it is subjected to civilian oversight and respects human rights. This reform process must be part of building a state of law and responsible security governance.

The imperatives of building a safe and neutral environment cannot be separated from governance and local participation. Justice alone is not enough unless it is coupled with:

1) Societal consensus and reconciliation based on recognition of violations, reparations for victims and engagement of all groups.
2) Local peace building
3) Engaging youth, IDPs and returnees in dialogue and decision making for a neutral and sustainable environment.

It is important to note the impact of local discrepancies. Syrian localities have, over the past decade, witnessed a set of transformations and shifts under the political stalemate and the impact of security and military configurations and displacement policies which ultimately led to the division of those localities into several regions separated with administrative borders and crossings making them evolve into regions with varying governance systems and separate economic enclaves, as explained below:

1- Areas under the control of the regime, its networks and military groups whether formal, auxiliary or allied.
2- Areas under a 'reconciliation' model where free Syrian army factions were active with Russian and Iranian networks such as Daraa.
3- Areas with peculiar character such as Suweida under the influence of its own internal dynamics and military groups in addition to Al-Tanf area where troops of the new Syria army are stationed.
4- Areas under the control of the national army and local councils administration in Azaz, Jarablus, al-Bab and Afrin.
5- Areas under the control of HTS and governed by the salvation government in Idleb and its surroundings.
6- Areas of the autonomous administration in north east Syria under the control of Syrian Democratic Forces with some distinct status for Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor.

With the fall of the regime, lines of demarcation disintegrated at face value but were quickly restored due to several factors. Despite reclaiming a significant portion of the administrative geography, the sociopolitical geography continued to follow the war lines. Localities became the bargaining space between the center and the local community where neither the old centralism plausible any more nor has full decentralization matured yet.

As the transitional justice pathway continues to linger and given the difficult legacy the new authorities are left with and the magnitude of domestic and international threats, social concerns were quick to rise and turned into direct or postponed clashes as the center continues to have no control of all peripheries especially Suweida and north east Syria. Many areas are still expressing

their local concerns whether in terms of identity and development such as the coast or in a revolutionary sense and demands of partaking in governance such as in north eastern Syria.

Nonetheless, the sessions agreed on a set of elements which form safe and neutral environment that are not contingent on absence of violence. These include the following:

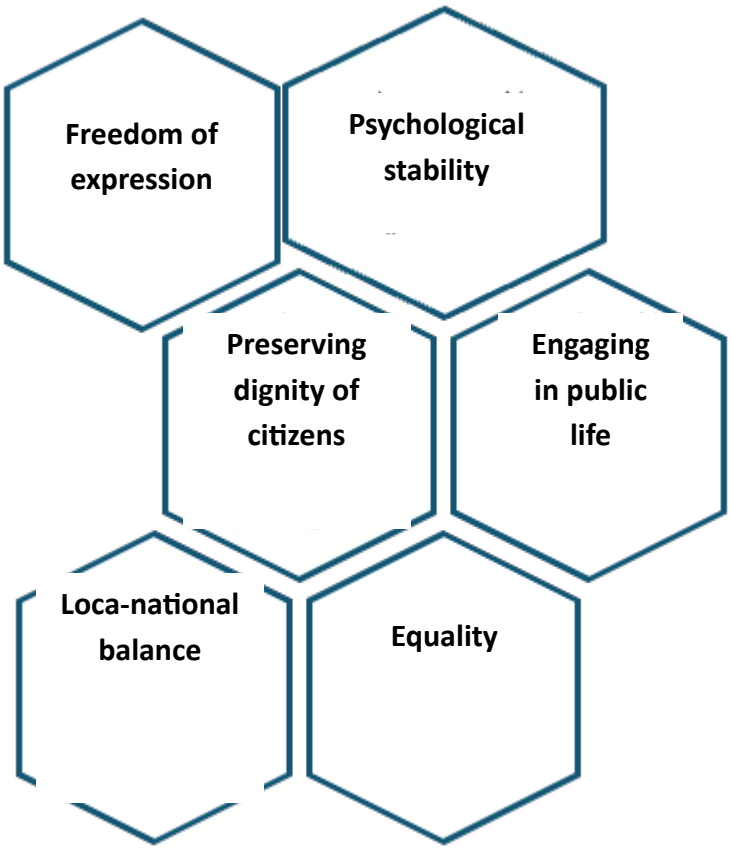


Figure (1)

Using the local conception of a safe environment, we find that each governorate is influenced by its security, social, economic and political context which was reflect in most findings. The most important additions to the concept of safe environment can be implemented as follows:

**First: The freedom-security nexus (Aleppo and Idlib as a model):** In Aleppo, participants emphasized that psychological and social security requires rebuilding the social fabric after years of displacement and destruction.[1] Therefore, it is natural that proposals would be dominated by ideas that promote this, such as local youth committees seeking to integrate displaced people into

[1] Quote from Aleppo sessions: "After years of displacement, security is no longer just physical safety. Rather, it is rebuilding relations between different communities."

civil initiatives to bridge the gap between them and the local population. In Idlib, the concept of freedom and civic participation dominated most of their descriptions aimed at understanding the safe environment.[2] An initiative such as "Youth for Change" embodied this attitude, as it organized leadership and conflict resolution workshops that helped to establish youth ownership of a local future.

**Second: Public services and local empowerment as a locomotive for a safe environment (Hama, Daraa, and Homs as a model):** In Hama governorate, young people focused on basic services (education, health, and livelihoods) as a prerequisite for genuine security.[3] To address this, they proposed activating local committees to monitor resource distribution and ensure equitable access. In Daraa governorate, it was concluded that empowering communities to make their own daily decisions is key to security.[4] They added that supporting small businesses and creating fair job opportunities can be a cornerstone for sustainable local recovery and security. In Homs, participants indicated that a safe environment is linked to a balance between justice, participation, and services.[5] They suggested organizing regular community meetings to promote dialogue among different local groups and their participation in decision making.

**Third: Participation and transparency as a prerequisite for a safe and active environment (Latakia, Tartus and Damascus as a model):** leaders and civilians in these two coastal governorates considered the integration of IDPs and returnees into the local community essential for a neutral environment,[6] and women stressed the importance of programmes to protect girls and provide them with economic opportunities, and the need for equitable distribution of services. Participants in Damascus focused on the interrelation between justice and transparency as imperative for security.[7]

By converging the perspective of Syrian organizations and dialogue sessions expressing the community's perspective, the concept of an effective safe and neutral environment emerges as a complex notion that goes beyond the traditional understanding of security as the absence of violence, to become a consensual societal framework in which elements of justice, participation, freedom, services, and good governance are intertwined. Accordingly, the safe and neutral

[2] Quote from Idlib sessions: "A safe environment is the space in which I can express my ideas freely without fear of retaliation. The youth must take part in rebuilding their society."
[3] Quote from Hama sessions: "If there is no education, health or jobs, we cannot speak of a safe environment. It all starts with accommodating basic needs."
[4] Quote from Daraa sessions: "Society must be empowered to make decisions which affect their daily lives. IDPs must be involved in all economic and political initiatives."
[5] Quote from Homs sessions: "Justice and equality in services is the basis for restoring trust between citizens and the local state."
[6] Quote from the coast sessions: "Displacement is not over. To create a safe environment, all strata must be involved. Otherwise, disagreements would only be exacerbated."
[7] Quote from Damascus sessions: "Without transparency in decision making and holding corrupt people to account, citizens would not feel secure or able to participate."

environment – according to the Syrian societal perspective – can be defined as: a socio-civil space hinged upon transitional justice, reforming the security sector, respecting human rights, providing basic services, and enabling balanced community participation for all groups. This would enable freedom of civil action, mitigate concerns, and enhance mutual trust within a neutral framework that is not controlled by coercive power or political hegemony and managed locally through transparent mechanisms that guarantee equality and fairness.

# Youth Perception of Challenges to Safe and Neutral Environment

Analysis of discussion sessions in Syrian governorates reveals a complex set of challenges facing the population, particularly youth, as they strive to create a safe and neutral environment after the fall of the regime. These challenges are inextricably linked to the destructive effects of Assad's policies and the setbacks resulting from years of conflict, and are also associated with institutional weaknesses, ambiguity of political pathways, and the specificities of local contexts. The Syrian youth's perception of the general situation and their ability to create a safe and neutral environment can be summarized in five key points:

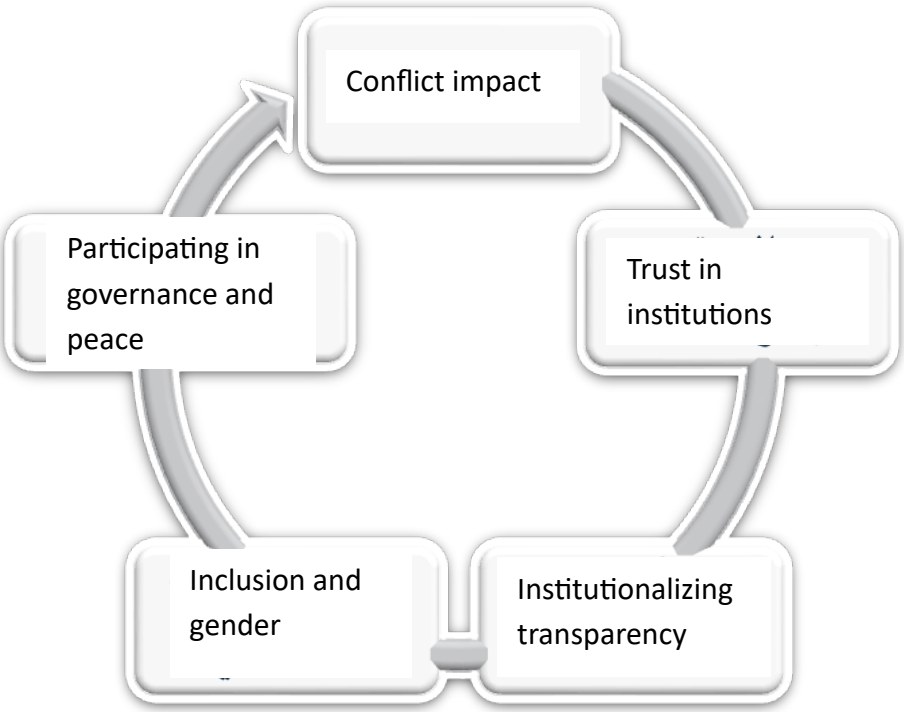


Figure (2)

The youth sessions focused on five variables indicative of the impact of conflict on youth. Their concept of security is no longer limited to physical protection, but has become linked to a wide range of experiences from years of ongoing conflict. These variables are:

1) Direct security and its association with return

2) Limited access to services

3) Economic crises and widespread unemployment

4) Social tensions.

The figure below illustrates the most prominent descriptions for these variables:

| Security and return | Limited access to services | Economic crises | Societal tensions |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1- Experiences of repeated displacement and loss of residential stability constitute one of the greatest threats to security.<br>2- Youth, especially in Idlib, Aleppo and Daraa expressed constant concern about loss of shelter or forced return to unsafe areas.<br>Security here is a fragile condition marked by absence of stability not only absence of security. | 1- Absence vital services like schools, health centers and emergency response points have made many young people regard security as linked to access to education, health care and job opportunities.<br>2- This is particularly clear in Homs and Hama where the deterioration of services constitute a 'living threat' that is no less serious than security threats. | 1- Many participants believe that unemployment and poverty constitute "the most serious form of insecurity" because they give rise to a state of social void.<br>2- This exacerbates displacement and engagement in irregular activities and deepen social tensions and further undermine the bonds between IDPs and host communities | 1- With the absence of the rule of law, friction between IDPs and stable residents has become a constant cause of tension.<br>2- Several groups talked about 'latent biases' and 'prejudgment' which only further reinforce isolation and undermine society's ability to rebuild its fabric. |

Figure (3)

In terms of the reality of youth participation in governance and peace building, analysis of the sessions showed that youth participation in formulating the future of their local environments is still limited despite recognition of its importance. Barriers to participation are manifested at three levels:

1- Weak trust in local leaders and institutions as the youth were skeptical of the ability of local leaders to represent their demands. This is attributed to: lack of institutional structures, weak transparency, persistence of traditional administration patterns.
2- Limited official channels for participation with no organized spaces allowing the youth to negotiate, discuss or plan rendering their participation an 'exception' rather than an integral part of a sustainable process.
3- Stereotypes of women and vulnerable groups: women in particular face deeply entrenched cultural and social barriers preventing them from active participation despite their increased presence in some governorates.

On the parameter of trust in institutions, the sessions revealed that trust in institutions in post-regime Syria is not uniform, but varies according to local experience. High levels of trust emerged in emergency and life-saving institutions such as the Civil Defense and the health sector due to their direct role in protecting lives. This trust is practical, not political. Gender disparities were also evident in the level of trust towards other institutions, with women's discussions indicating lower levels of trust in judicial and security institutions, particularly in areas that experienced widespread human rights violations.

As for the need to institutionalize transparency, participants identified three criteria for restoring trust: **accountability, access to information, and community oversight of government performance.**

Data on gender and inclusion revealed that women and marginalized groups (people with disabilities, the elderly, and newly displaced persons) face three levels of disregard: economic, where women are disproportionately affected by lack of job opportunities and high rates of heading households; social, where large segments of the population are excluded from participation in the public sphere, including local meetings; and political, as evidenced by the low percentage of women holding leadership or representative positions, despite growing awareness of the need for women's participation in peacebuilding.

# Obsessions and challenges at the level of localities – A comparison

Interactions during the dialogue sessions revealed that each governorate has a distinct psychological and social character in understanding risks. The "displacement obsession and persistent fear" parameter came at the top of the list indicating that displacement did not end politically with the fall of the regime, but rather remained socially and psychologically present, whether attributed to the cost of living and the fear of losing housing, as mentioned in the Idlib groups, or to destruction in some neighborhoods in Aleppo governorate, or to economic deprivation due to unemployment and the absence of services, as expressed by the Homs and Hama groups.[8]

The “weak governance and services” parameter was of interest for attendees as the lack of spaces for discussion and complaints with official bodies reinforced the impression that official performance is weak highlighting a crisis of confidence in administrative capacity.[9]

The obsession with "economy and education" has also emerged as one of the obstacles to the formation of a safe environment, because it undermines the livelihood stability and knowledge empowerment. The education system has failed to accommodate for the major transformations that education has experienced in Syria and the its repercussions on the social and economic situation which has contributed to a foggy vision of the future further ambiguated by the failure to launch economic projects with social impact.[10]

In general, if we consider the outcomes of these sessions within the broader Syrian context, it could be said that the above is linked to cross-locality concerns, namely security, identity, governance, and the power of arms. Regarding security concerns, there is a deeply-rooted fear of a return to military chaos, conflicting interests among the controlling powers, and the core demand of local communities is the concentration of power in the hands of a legitimate civilian authority. Within this context, the issue of the presence of foreign fighters, concerns about internal displacement, and the disparities between displaced communities and local populations regarding the sharing of resources and power are prominent. Concerns also arise in relation to

[8] Below are some quotes:

- Idlib: “I live in a rented home for five years. I’m afraid I would lose it at any moment.”
- Aleppo: “Return to our home neighbourhood is difficult because of the destruction and inter-community disputes.”
- Homs and Hama: “Unemployment and lack of services make us feel besieged.”

[9] Quote from Damascus discussions: “Officials do not listen to us. Everything is run without transparency.” From Daraa: “We need a local platform on which we can follow up our problems and take part in solving them.”

[10] Quote from Aleppo discussions: “Disruption of schools and training centers has made up unprepared for any future work.” From Idlib: “There are no job opportunities for returning youth and this is more frustrating.”

property ownership and the return of those displaced by previous forced displacement. People are further concerned about continued identity-based conflict. The group discussions indicated that the priorities of the population are not limited to military security but also service security (electricity, water, salaries), which are seen as cornerstones of stability and preventing the resurgence of tensions.

As for the local specificity, concerns about a return to any form of ‘security fist’ and fears of renewed assassinations and liquidations as a result of political retaliation following the regime's collapse are visible. This is compounded by the threats arising from the security vacuum, where various armed groups and drug trafficking networks operate. If we add to this the existential anxiety, such as that evident in Suweida, the potential complete unraveling of the social contract becomes a top national concern, inevitably impacting the formation of a safe and neutral environment.

In addition to security concerns, participants expressed obsessions related primarily to “reconstruction and expropriation”, the resurgence of old corruption networks, and the potential eruption of covert societal conflicts, as witnessed after the regime's fall. Significant concerns included the potential for political or social reprisals, as well as economic concerns, particularly following the collapse of old privileges. The sessions revealed a tendency among localities to envision a safe and neutral environment based on broad national guarantees that would prevent reprisals and ensure their representation in the new institutions.

# Safe Environment Prerequisites: recommendation on "Sensitivity to local specificity"

Naturally, despite commonalities, prerequisites for a safe and neutral environment are not uniform across Syrian governorates. They vary depending on local structures, the landscape of actors, the level of post-conflict recovery, the nature of relations between IDPs and host communities, and the capacity of emerging institutions to provide services and manage public affairs. By integrating the principles of transitional justice and local peacebuilding, including security sector reform, with the conclusions of community sessions, five main sets of shared requirements can be identified, though their specific details differ from one governorate to another.

**First: Security and Rule of Law Requirements:** Controlling weapons, redefining local authority, and reuniting security oversight under a single civilian institution are crucial. The multiplicity of security forces has led to a state of "security fragmentation" that prevents the formation of a collective sense of security. A proposal was made for elected local committees to oversee the integration process and establish sustainable mechanisms to subject the security sector to community oversight. Furthermore, participants stressed the need to link security with public freedoms and social cohesion, arguing that a truly safe environment cannot be created without guaranteeing the right to expression and civic engagement. They emphasized that rule of law must be built on a new social contract that guarantees the independence of the local judiciary and prevents military factions from interfering in its decisions.

The sessions also focused on the need to establish mechanisms to prevent a return to chaos after the collapse of the old regime. Local stakeholders called for the creation of independent local courts and the reactivation of local conflict resolution committees as a social safety net acting as precursors for formal legal frameworks. Participants also emphasized that security requires building institutions capable of holding corrupt individuals accountable.

**Second: Basic services and local governance requirements.** Services are a prerequisite for building trust after societal division. The sessions have shown that the reconstruction of services (schools, water, electricity) is not merely an engineering process, but a project of social reconciliation. Returning to the shared public sphere is not possible without restoring the services that were disrupted during the war. Establishing elected local oversight bodies to monitor service projects and ensure they are not politicized will be essential.

**Third: A safe environment is contingent upon social integration.** The fall of the regime revealed the fragility of the service infrastructure and the emergence of simmering tensions between IDPs and host communities. Therefore, it is essential to integrate IDPs into integration policymaking processes and to establish programs to protect girls.

**Fourth: Economic Recovery and Livelihood Requirements:** The economic factor was the most prominent in all discussions, as it constituted a crucial condition for reconciliation, justice, and stability. The principle of youth employment and the revitalization of small industries should be fundamental to public policies, such as restarting industrial zones and providing small grants to revive damaged workshops. It is also recommended to support agriculture and local irrigation systems, as failing to provide economic alternatives for young people will reproduce a war economy. Furthermore, it is essential to emphasize the importance of developing an alternative economy to replace the old rentier system.

**Fifth: Requirements for Transitional Justice and Social Reconciliation**: Syrians, despite their different governorates, share the understanding that a safe and neutral environment requires addressing the legacy of violations. Reparations are a priority, with participants calling for the establishment of local truth and reconciliation mechanisms based on transparency and witness protection. They also emphasized that any reconciliation without accountability erodes the trust of youth in the political process. Furthermore, justice requires gradual approaches that provide guarantees to communities to prevent cycles of revenge.

**Sixth: Participation and Inclusion Requirements**: All dialogues emphasized the necessity of involving youth, women, and IDPs in decision-making. Therefore, several modalities should be proposed, such as youth councils with an advisory role, quotas for women's representation, and strengthening local dialogue platforms and linking them to the national dialogue.

All discussions agreed on three common pillars: building transparent and accountable local institutions, providing fair and inclusive services, and empowering youth and women as the core of transformation, not its margins.

The recommendations emerging from the dialogue groups are based on the principle of basic prerequisites, emphasizing the need to rely on supportive programs that foster a climate conducive to promoting a safe and neutral environment. This framework delineates the foundations of security, the role of society, and the relationship between the state and local institutions, outlining its steps as follows:

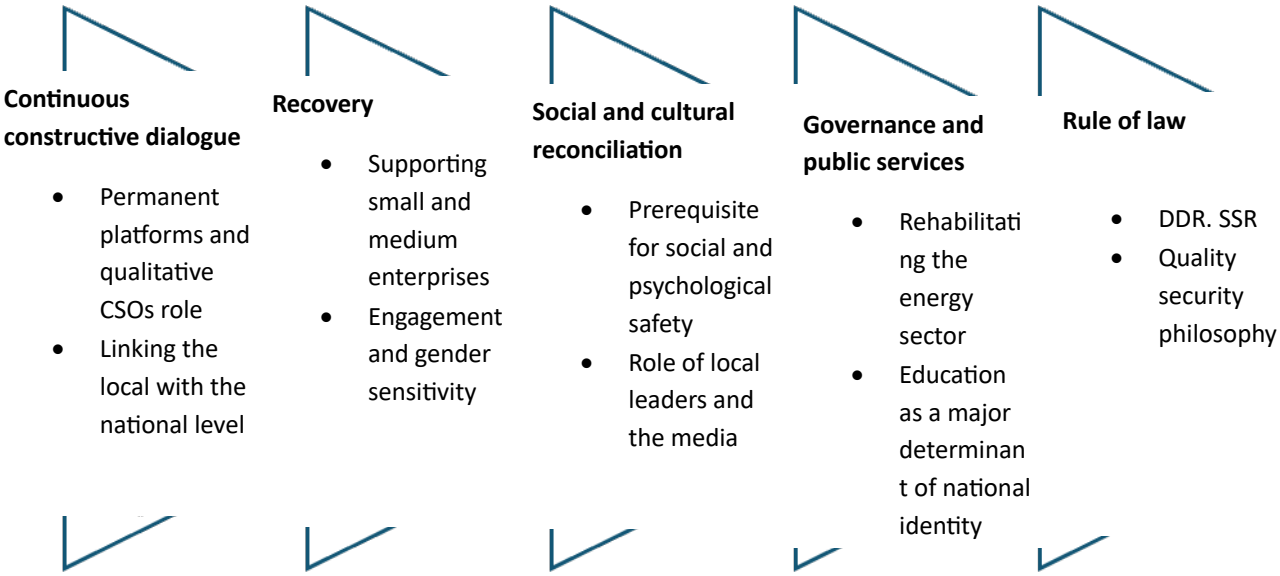


Figure (4)

A series of strategies were proposed including programs for building leadership capacities, creating sustainable job opportunities, psychological support and meaningful representation of marginalized groups. These proposals constitute proactive attempts at rebuilding civil action from the bottom up.

# Conclusion

Participants in the dialogue sessions unequivocally stated that in addition to the need to end the violence, there should be a safe environment hinged on justice, civic engagement, basic services, and mutual trust. Practical visions and diverse local requirements were proposed depending on the specificity of each region, with a common emphasis on the need to involve communities in peacebuilding.

However, the challenges are massive: continued displacement, weak local governance institutions, poverty, and the legacy of the old regime that has not completely disappeared. To achieve the desired transition, effective security reform, genuine transitional justice, inclusive local governance, and the empowerment of youth and marginalized groups are essential.

In this context, perceptions of safety and neutrality cannot remain merely theoretical slogans. Rather, they must be translated into practical policies supported by new institutions and civil society, and ensure that Syria's return reflects not just a shift in power, but a renewal of the concept of peace in the first place.

## Community Approach to Safe and Neutral Environment in Syria after the Fall of Assad


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# Introduction

This study comes at a critical juncture in Syrian contemporary history in the aftermath of the overthrow of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the ensuing radical shifts in security, institutional, social and economic structures in the country. For more than a decade, the country has witnessed a complex conflict leaving behind massive destruction in infrastructure, disintegration in state institutions, profound geographic and identity fragmentation, internal and external displacement which is the largest in the country's modern history. With the beginning of the transitional period, the issue of 'safe and neutral environment' has emerged as a cornerstone in any approach to stabilization, state building, and producing an authority which reflects the voices of Syrian men and women in addition to discussions of return of IDPs and refugees and the restoration of the Syrian social contract.

Although the concept of safe environment has been widely recognized in local, regional and international political rhetoric and throughout the stages and developments of the Syrian landscape, it is quite important to address it in depth from a local Syrian societal perspective or the population's direct experiences with security, justice, services and local authorities. Therefore, this study seeks to offer a qualitative reading of safe environment not just as a legal or political term but as a tangible societal system emerging from the interaction of security, legal, services, economic and identity factors.

The study is based on a field survey which included 2296 respondents from all Syrian governorates and various age, social and economic strata with a focus on youth between 18 and 35 years old including residents, IDPs and returnees. The size and diversity of the sample is the most important feature of this research because it allows for analysis of regional, gender, economic, and identity distinctions and understanding the discrepancies in the conception of safe environment between the various components and local contexts. The study relies on a hybrid methodology which combines quantative analysis and contextual interpretation in order to go beyond statistical rendition to arrive at a more in-depth understanding of the factors regulating this concept. The study starts from two assumptions:

1- Safe environment in post-regime Syria cannot be reduced to absence of violence or the presence of official security agencies only. Rather, it must be understood from a community perspective as a comprehensive living framework which enables individuals to live in dignity, enjoy fair access to protection and services, exercise their rights without fear or discrimination, participate in decision making, with clear guarantees for justice, accountability and respect for diversity.
2- The variety of experiences Syrians went through during the conflict has given rise to divergent and sometimes contradictory conceptions of safe environment and its

requirements. This renders understanding these differences an essential requirement for any political transition or state rebuilding.

**The study seeks to achieve several research objectives, most importantly:**

1. Describing the perception of Syrians of a safe and neutral environment after the fall.
2. Analyzing the factors which form this perception at the security, legal, economic, services and social levels.
3. Identifying the regional, identity and political differences in evaluating the environment.
4. Exploring the requirements for safe return as perceived by the population itself.

As such, this study is not only an academic or knowledge contribution, but also a practical framework based on which governments, local and international actors, and civil society organizations can design policies that are more responsive to the Syrian reality and better able to support stability, build confidence, and promote voluntary return. It is also an essential step towards developing a national model for a safe environment that emanates from the Syrian society itself expressing its aspirations, experiences, and actual needs in the post-conflict phase. Therefore, **in relation to the necessity and significance of this study, it acquires exceptional importance in the current Syrian context for five interrelated reasons**.

**First: Filling a critical knowledge gap on the concept of the "safe environment" from a community perspective,** as the actual Syrian societal view that lives in the daily reality of the security, economic and social environment is absent, i.e., its close connection to security, justice, economy, services, participation, and identity assurances. This knowledge shift in itself will be a new scientific contribution to the Syrian literature.

**Second: Producing a "regulating societal perspective" that can be adopted as an analytical and policy framework**, as it will provide an interpretive model for Syrians' understanding of the safe environment, reveal the relationship between the lived experience and the perception of security, and identify the core elements that Syrians see as prerequisites for return and stability. This model can be used in transitional government policy design, United Nations programmes and in return and reconstruction talks, i.e. the study produces a domestic normative framework that fills a significant gap in decision-making.

**Third: Providing a broad and qualitative field database in the Syrian context**, as evidenced by the size of the sample (2296 participants) and its geographical, social, economic, political, religious and ethnic distribution, and these data provide a realistic representation of life experiences inside Syria and reveal regional, identity, and political differences.

**Fourth: Supporting the path of safe return by identifying the actual obstacles**. In addition to the need for security guarantees, legal arrangements, and political consensus, the study illustrates the

impact of heeding the economic and service situation, governance, justice, security, and identity guarantees. It will contribute to the reformulation of priorities from a national perspective.

**Fifth: Supporting the building of the new social contract**, as a safe environment is not only a security condition but also a foundational condition for rebuilding the Syrian social contract, which gives the study long-term strategic importance.

## Methodological Design and Study Population

The study adopted several methodologies such as the descriptive analytical approach to describe the reality of safe and neutral environment as viewed by locals of different Syrian areas and to understand motives and contexts of responses based on sociological and political approaches which combine digital indicators and contextual reading. The phenomenon at hand is complex (an environment of security, dispute, displacement, social structures) therefore it is necessary to understand the different experiences between areas and actors and employ deductive interpretation that goes beyond the mere numbers. The study also employed a cross-region comparative approach give the sharp differences between the sociopolitical environments during and after the conflict.

As for the study population and the unit of analysis, it includes Syrians living inside post-regime Syria including locals, IDPs and returnees in various areas under different authorities. It will rely on several analytical units, including the Syrian individual as the vehicle of the security and political experience and the location/governorate since security is a socio-spatial phenomenon in addition to the religious, ethnic and economic factors.

**The research was based on a stratified random sample**. The sample was divided on governorates according to population estimates and based on the current governorate (Idlib, Aleppo, Damascus, Damascus countryside, Lattakia, Tartous, Hasakah, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, Homs, Hama, Suweida, Daraa, Quneitra), housing status (stable, internally displaced, displaced, returnee), gender, economic status, in addition to ethnic, religious, political and educational background. Gender perspectives (48% women) and 60% of youth aged 18 to 35 years will be highlighted.

The sample comprised **2296 respondents** which is a large number allowing for comparative analysis between governorates and multi-variable analyses in addition to credible conclusions.

The survey was built based on a review of the literature on the safe and neutral environment, transitional justice models, and the results of the dialogue and discussion groups organized by The Day After in the same context and in most Syrian regions. The survey covered things such as demographic and social characteristics, personal and institutional security, justice and rights, return and integration, political participation, institutions and law, the future and expectations, the survey procedures included the consent of the sample, ensuring confidentiality, anonimity,

avoiding questions which may constitute a direct security threat, and protecting vulnerable groups (women, IDPs, minorities).

As for **data processing and statistical analysis**, the data was entered into Excel and then transferred to an analysis environment, and it was applied: frequency distributions, cross-sectional tables, regional comparative analysis, social structural analysis, and analysis of relationships between variables.

**Sample Characteristics**

In terms of gender, **the sample was distributed as follows**: 48% male, 52% female. This proximity in the number of men and women allows for a stable gender analysis. Thus, **differences between the genders would often be subject to analysis** especially in terms of feeling of security or trusting institutions in addition to participation and public sphere.

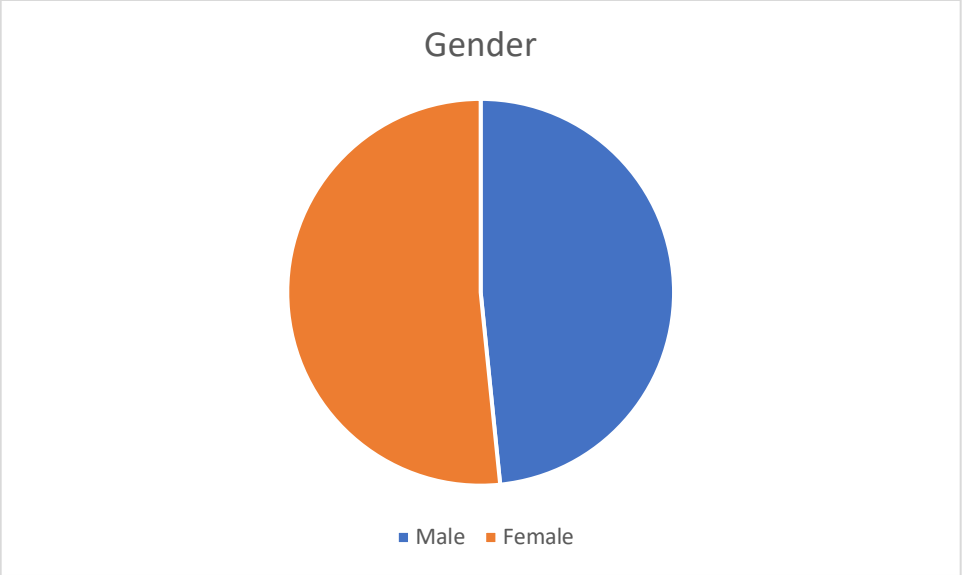



Chart (1)

**According to age, the sample is more than 60% youth** (18–24: 26%, 25–34: 40%, 35–44: 18%, 45–54: 10%, +55: 6%), so many attitudes about the future/return/participation are those of the young generation. This contributes to understanding their perspective on questions related to **optimism about the future and tendency for political participation.**

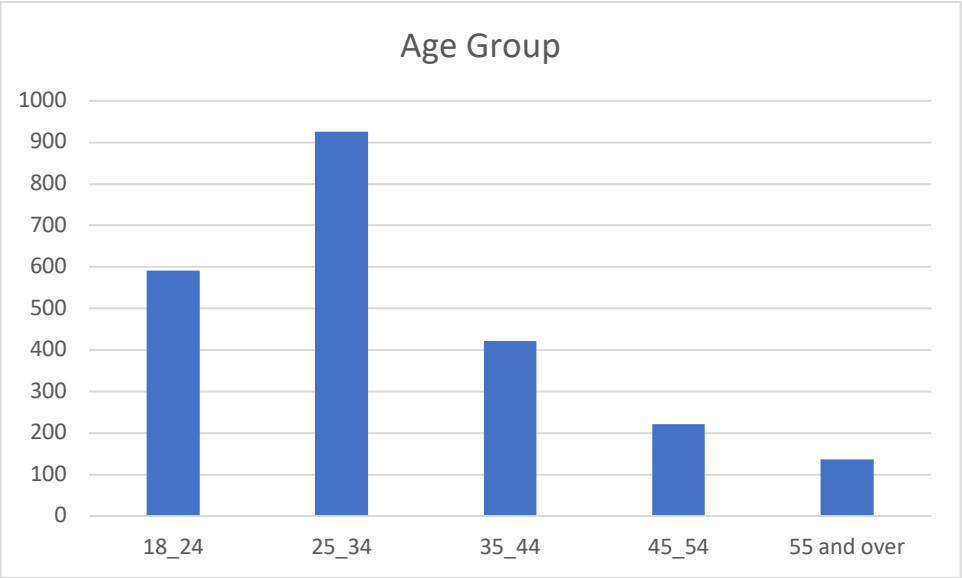



Chart (2)

**In terms of marital status, around half the sample were married** (married: 51%, single: 40%, divorced/widowed: 9%). Hence, there is some **balance in assessment of security threats and services which provides significant room for analysis** of the conditions for return and stability from perspectives including the family perspective.

With regard to the **governorate of origin and the governorate of current residence, the sample focused on residents inside Syria**, with a strong representation of Aleppo and Idlib, a sample that witnessed experiences of displacement and intensive fighting, and there is significant presence of Hasakah, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, Homs and Hama. Although the numbers from the south (Daraa, Quneitra and Suweida) was small, the analysis will highlight their attitudes to understand the safe environment given the security developments there. Similarly in the coast, **Lattakia and Tartus, cities that were less affected by the direct war inside the cities, but their perspective is important in terms of the social contract and identity cohesion.**

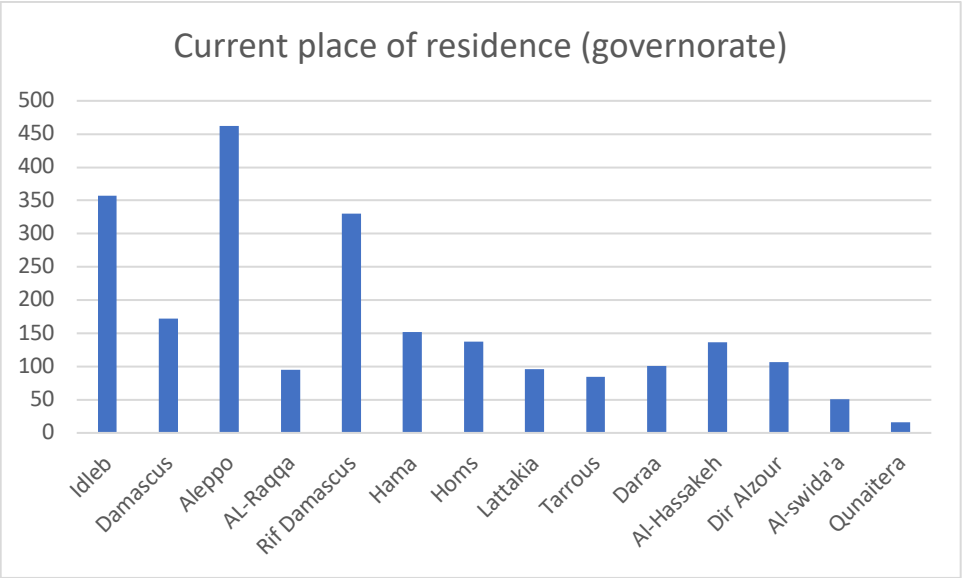



Chart (3)

**Almost one-third of the sample is unsettled** (stable residents: 65%, IDP: 29%, refugee/returnees: 6%), and IDPs are most concentrated in the **north (Idlib/Aleppo countryside)** and some areas of the Damascus countryside. This category has an important perspective in **assessing the safe environment and the region's preparedness for return**, and they are sensitive to economic and service obstacles due to the large rates of destruction that have affected these areas.

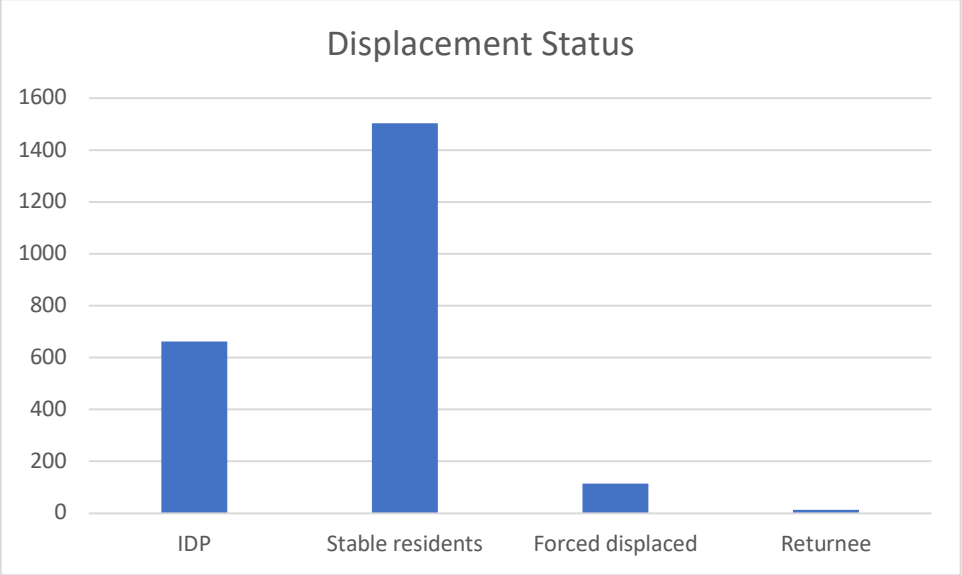



Chart (4)

As for ethnic and religious background, the sample was inclusive in terms of this variable; ethnically: (Arabs: 89%, Kurds: 7%, other components: Assyrian/Syriac/Turkmen/other:4%) and religious/sectarian (Sunni: 76%, Christians: 6%, Druze: 5%, Alawites: 4%, Ismailis: 3%, /didn't

answer: 7%). This allows the analysis to take into account all components and understand their concerns, especially with regard to identity cohesion and fears about the present and future.

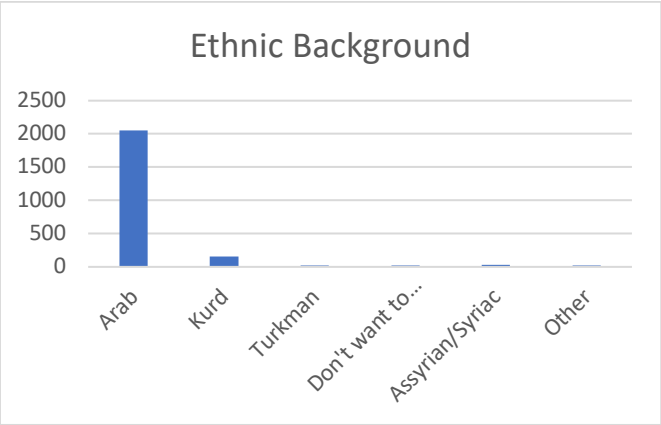



Chart (5)

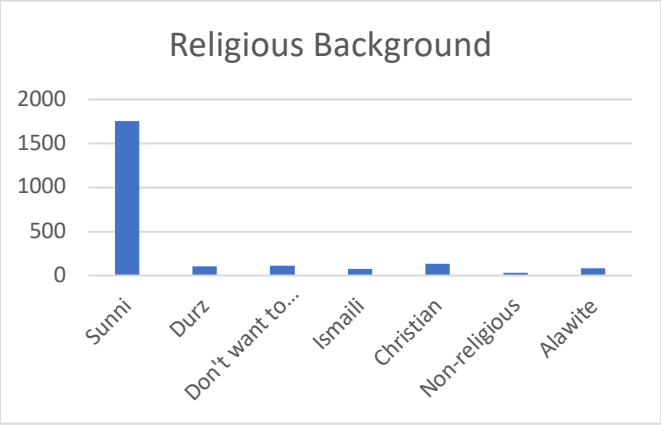



Chart (6)

In terms of the other sample characteristics including education level, economic status, sources of income and type of political participation, analysis of the sample indicates that around half the sample is at university level or above. (university/ higher studies: 49%, secondary: 21%, blow secondary education/ uneducated: 30%)

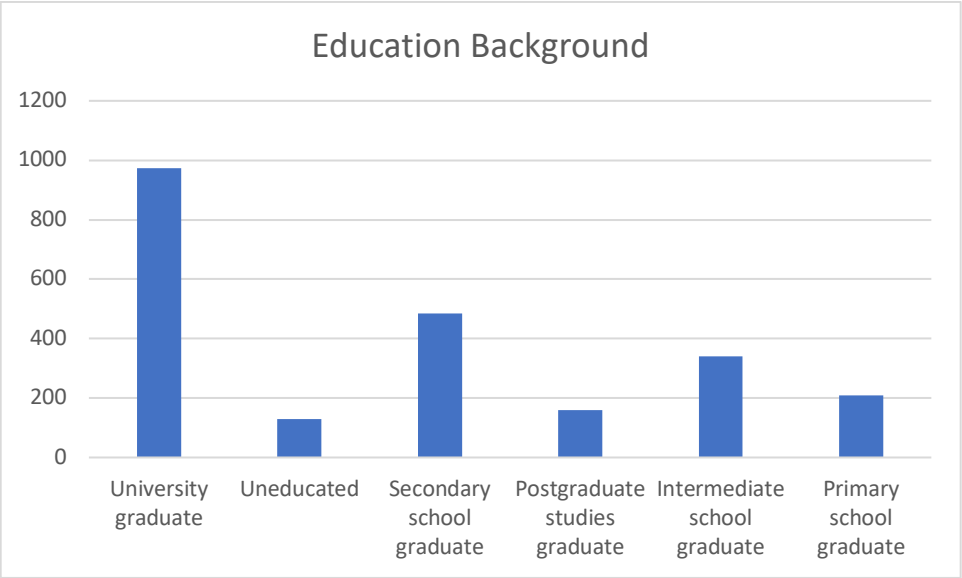



Chart (7)

It is noted that 80% of the sample suffer from income difficulties (no income: 15.5%, insufficient income: 34.7%, barely sufficient income: 30.9%, good income: 18.9%), and the sources of income varied between (daily work: 38%, private job: 32%, government job: 20.5%, aid: 18%, remittances: 15.6%), i.e., **the sample is relatively highly educated, but its economic situation is fragile** which creates an important model in interpreting political and human rights awareness and assessing need, **economic and service barriers and their impact on the issue of return, and with regard to the type of participation, those interested in political, trade union and civil affairs constitute 50% of the sample.**

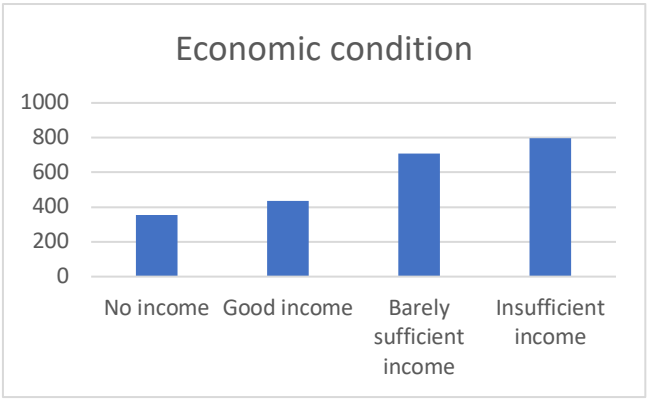



Chart (8)

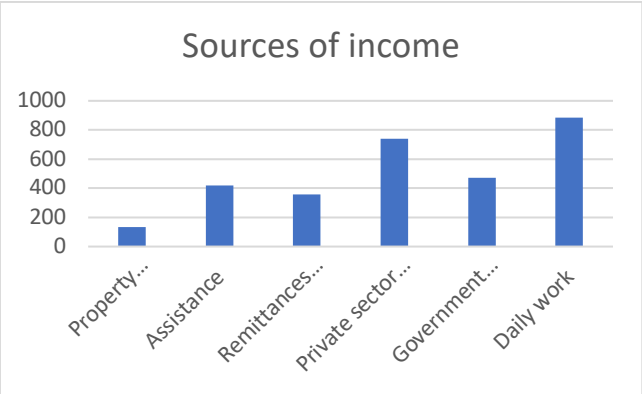



Chart (9)

## Safe and Neutral Environment: Description and Assessment

After the fall of the regime in December 2024, redefining a "safe and neutral environment" in the Syrian context was urgently needed, not only within the framework of international rhetoric, but also from the perspective of the population living the daily experience of security and institutional transformations. Recent Syrian literature and reports from local research centers indicate that a safe environment can no longer be reduced to the **absence of armed violence**, but has become a complex concept based on a set of intertwined conditions, including: the **neutrality of security and administrative institutions** in their dealings with citizens, **the provision of basic services in a fair and balanced manner, the guarantee of human rights and fundamental freedoms, the possibility of the safe and voluntary return of displaced people without fear of reprisals or discrimination**, in addition to **the existence of an open public sphere that allows freedom of expression, organization, and political participation.**

From this perspective, this question is central to the survey, as it aims to gauge the extent to which participants' perception of a safe environment is compatible with this overarching understanding, and to identify the elements they consider necessary for it to materialize on the ground. The question is also an essential entry point for understanding regional, identity, and educational differences in the interpretation of a safe environment, and the extent to which they relate to residents' experiences with conflict, displacement, and local authorities. Thus, analyzing the answers to this question contributes to revealing **the conceptual basis on which Syrians base their assessment of the transitional period**, and identifies the societal conditions necessary for the stabilization, confidence-building, and the launch of the reconstruction process and the new social contract.

The study sample believes that the most important components of a safe environment are the guarantee of human rights, followed by the provision of basic services, then the safe return of IDPs and refugees, then the absence of direct violence, the neutrality of institutions, political freedom and open public sphere.

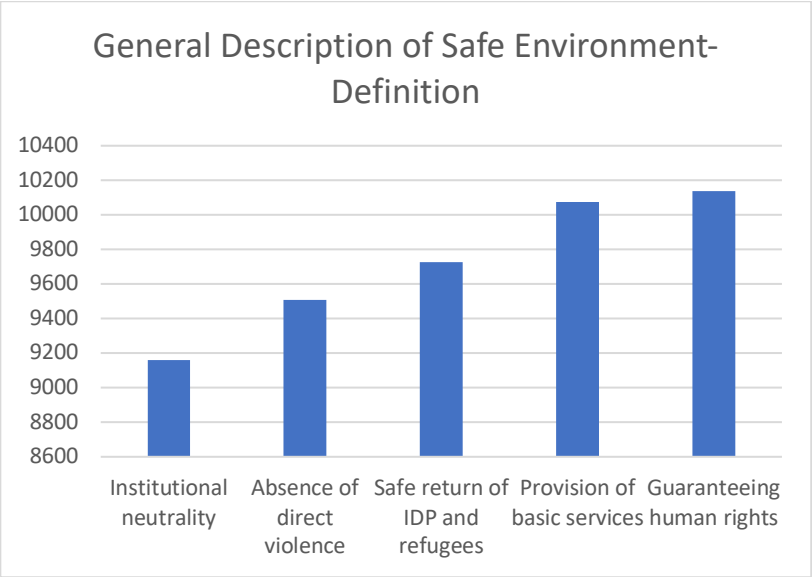
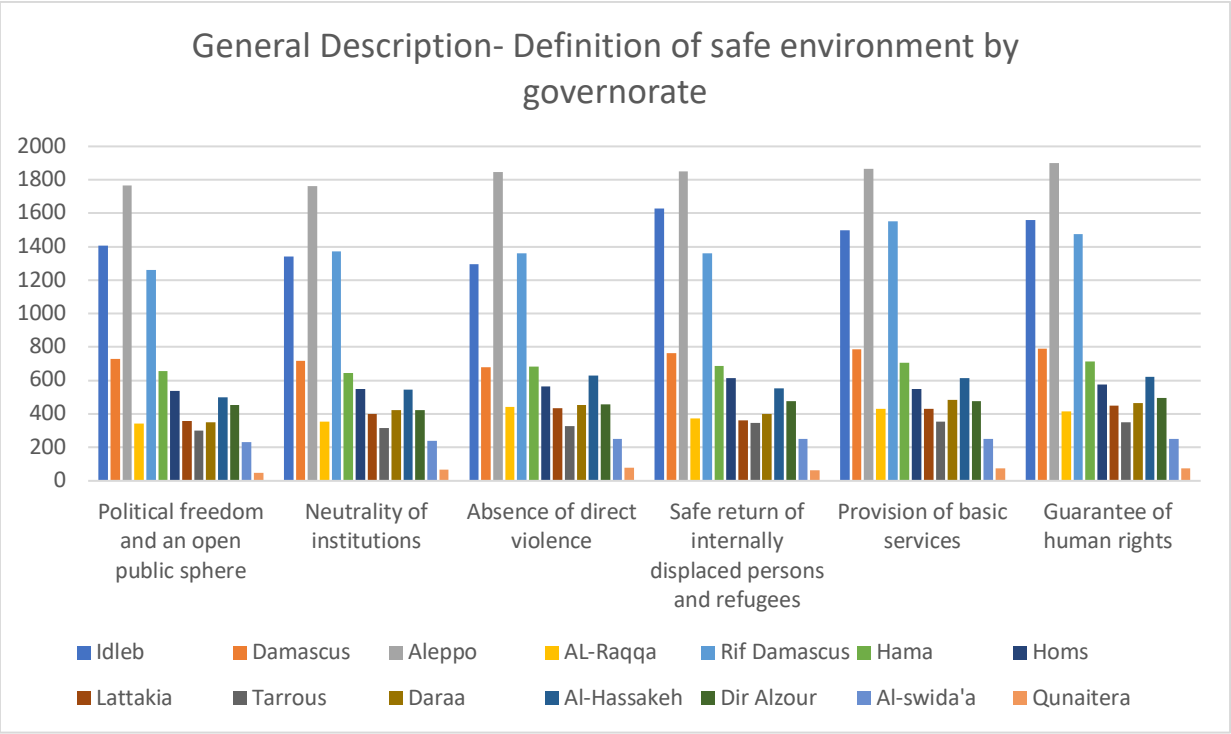



Chart (10)

**In the most devastated areas (Aleppo, Idlib, Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa),** the priority of "basic services" and "reconstruction" within the concept of a safe environment is higher, while in the **relatively more stable areas (Latakia, Tartus)**, the weight of "security stability" and "institutional neutrality" is relatively higher. Notably, ensuring the rights of political components and institutional neutrality take prominence among Kurds and Christians.

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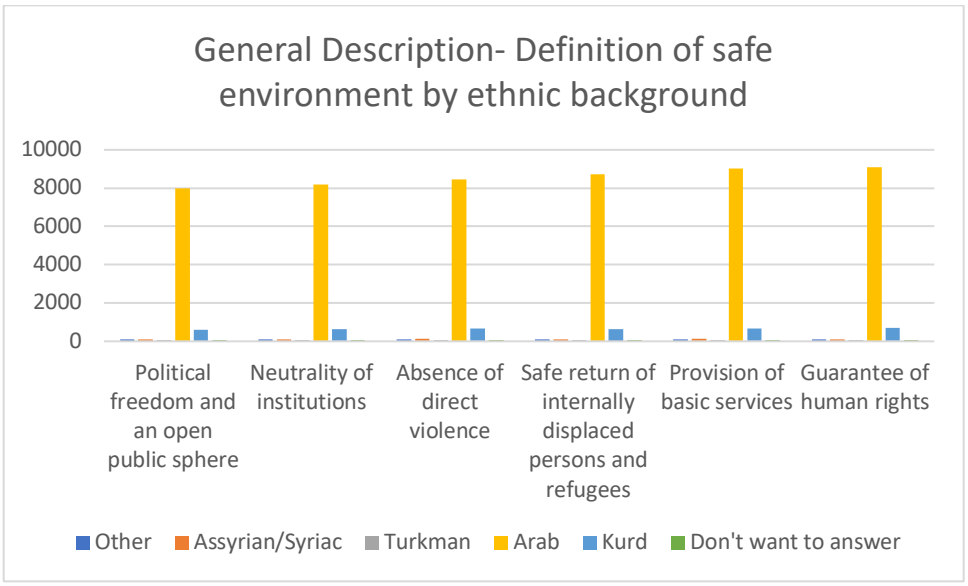



Chart (12)

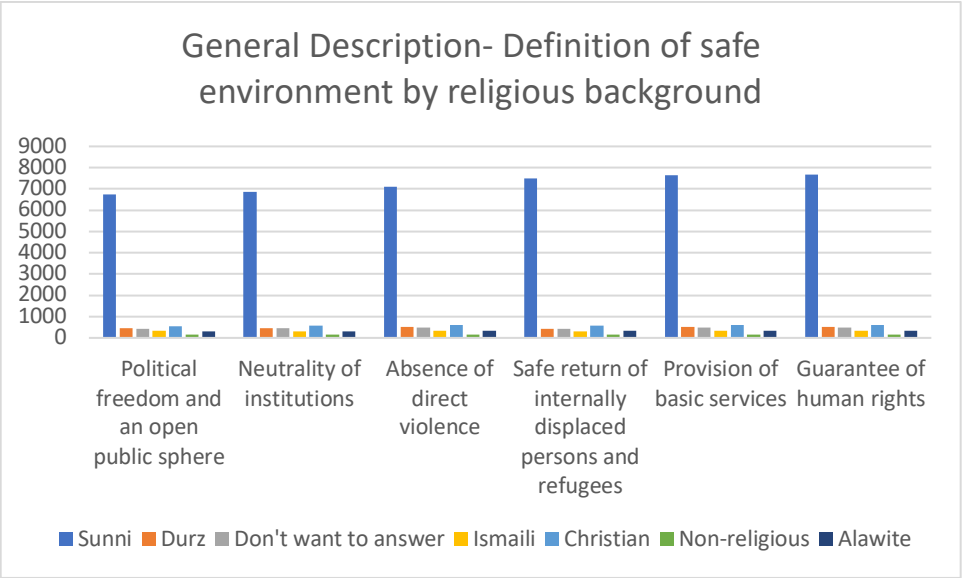



Chart (13)

Perceptions of the availability of these environments varied. About half the sample believed they were sometimes (not always) available while about a third do not feel there is such environment (sometimes: 53%, always 19%, rarely: 18%, never: 10%), suggesting that safe environment is generally unstable. This result is confirmed by the analysis of opinions according to ethnic and religious background, and it also varies according to the region, as in the governorates of Lattakia, Tartous, and some areas of Damascus and its countryside: the percentage of "always" is higher than 20-25%, while in Idlib, Aleppo countryside, Deir Ezzor, and Suweida: higher percentages of "rarely/never" appear. IDPs and refugees tended not to feel the safe environment in addition to those who do not have an income or have insufficient income, as they link security to the guarantee of livelihood and services.

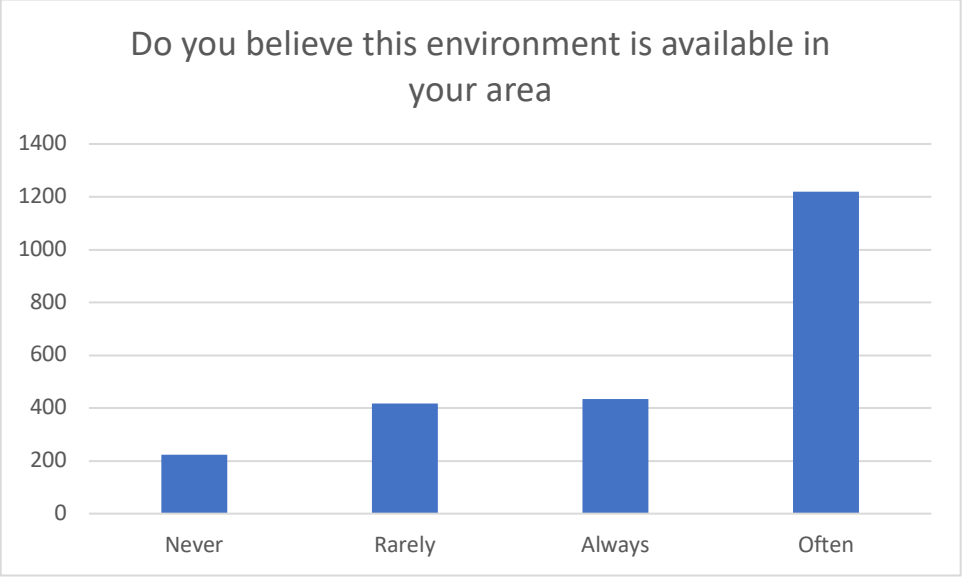
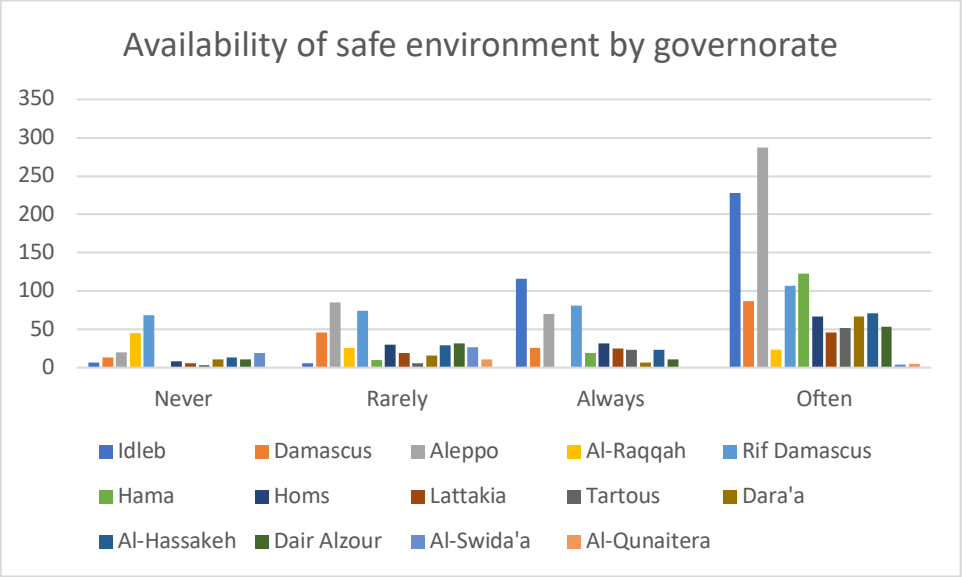


Chart (14)

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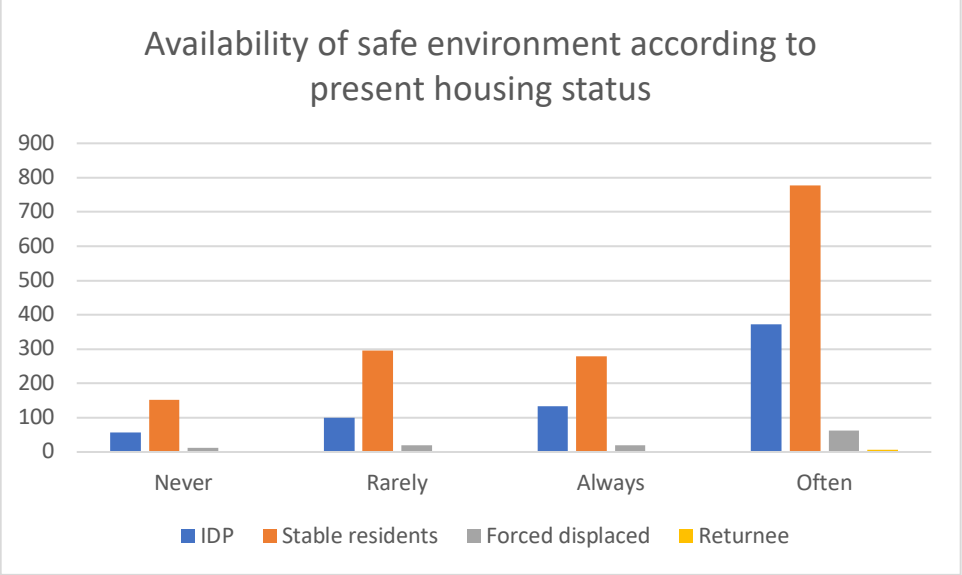



Chart (16)

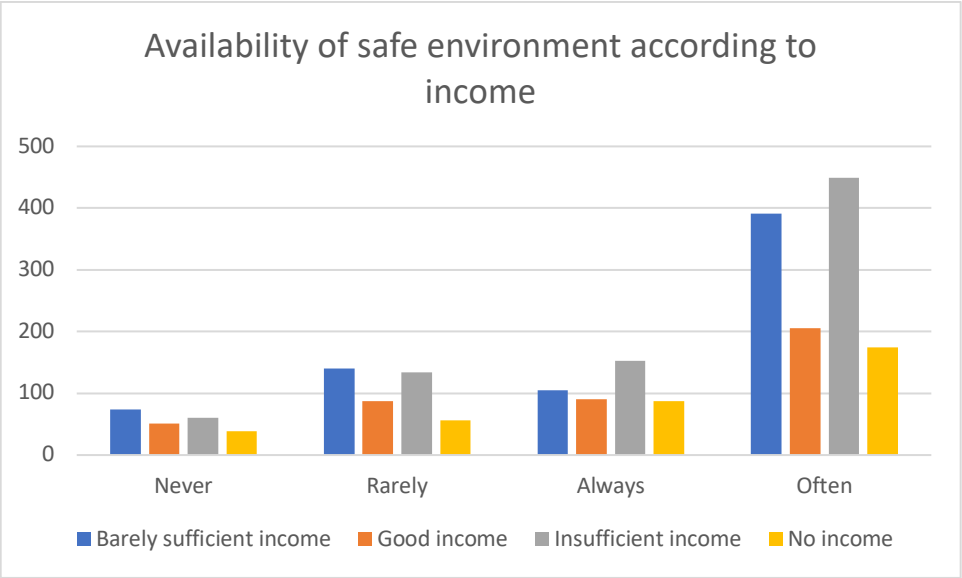



Chart (17)

The sample descriptions generally reveal that Syrian society no longer deems an environment safe simply because a ceasefire is in place or the military threats have subsided. Security is seen as the ability of institutions to operate impartially without discrimination, to provide basic services in a stable and equitable manner, to protect individual and collective rights, to ensure the safe return of refugees and IDPs and to provide public space and political freedoms, and this shift reflects the shift from the concept of "passive security" (the absence of danger) to "positive security" (the presence of guarantees of a dignified life, participation, and justice). Thus, the safe environment in the Syrian consciousness is a comprehensive **institutional-living environment**, defined by the ability of the state and society to provide fair protection, stable services, guarantee human rights, enable free participation, and facilitate the safe return of the displaced. Thus, true security is not measured by the absence of violence, but by the existence of a structure capable of safeguarding human dignity and ensuring equality, non-discrimination and social reintegration. In other words, Syrian society associates a safe environment with a new state project, not to temporary security arrangements.

## Personal and Institutional Security: Imperatives of professionalism, transparency and inclusivity

There are indications that after the collapse of the Assad regime's central political and security system in December 2024, the security transition in Syria has taken on a largely "local" character, with the rise of regional security and administrative forces partially replacing the previous central agencies. Analyses suggest that security after the fall of the regime is no longer exercised through

a unified institution with a clear hierarchy, but rather through hybrid arrangements involving local powers, military councils, civilian police, and influential social bodies. This structural discrepancy in the security apparatus created a clear disparity in the level of protection available to the population from one region to another, which made the sense of security dependent on the effectiveness of local actors, rather than on the structure of the central state which does not geographically control all regions. Measuring individuals' sense of protection is therefore a key indicator for assessing the extent to which the safe and neutral environment necessary for stabilization and voluntary return has been achieved.

The post-regime phase also witnessed a reshaping of the map of security providers, so that formal transitional institutions started to overlap with local armed or societal actors that still do not recognize the central government. Facts on the ground suggest that the collapse of the central security structure has not automatically led to ending previous discrimination patterns in security provision. Fair access to protection is a key element in building trust between the population and the new authorities, and a necessary condition for encouraging IDPs and refugees to return.

In terms of the **sense of protection from arbitrary detention/violence, the general feeling is that it is available, with about 66% feeling that it is available, compared to 34% who don't believe so including 13% who do not feel that it is available at all. Younger age groups feel it in high percentages, and if we analyze the general perception according to the region, the differences are very sharp, in Idlib, there is almost complete (more than 95%) sense of good protection**, and in Al-Hasakah, which is controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces, there is a mixed sense of its availability with around half the respondents feeling protected while the other half do not. In Suweida, which is controlled by local groups not affiliated with the central government, there is an almost complete sense (about 92% ) that it is not available, referring to "the government and its failures". All of the above creates an unbalanced security map inside Syria. Those engaged in civil/political activism are mostly **more sensitive to security threats** so they are highly represented among those who feel protection is unavailable. In addition, the poorest sample have indicated that protection from arbitrary detention or violence was not available.

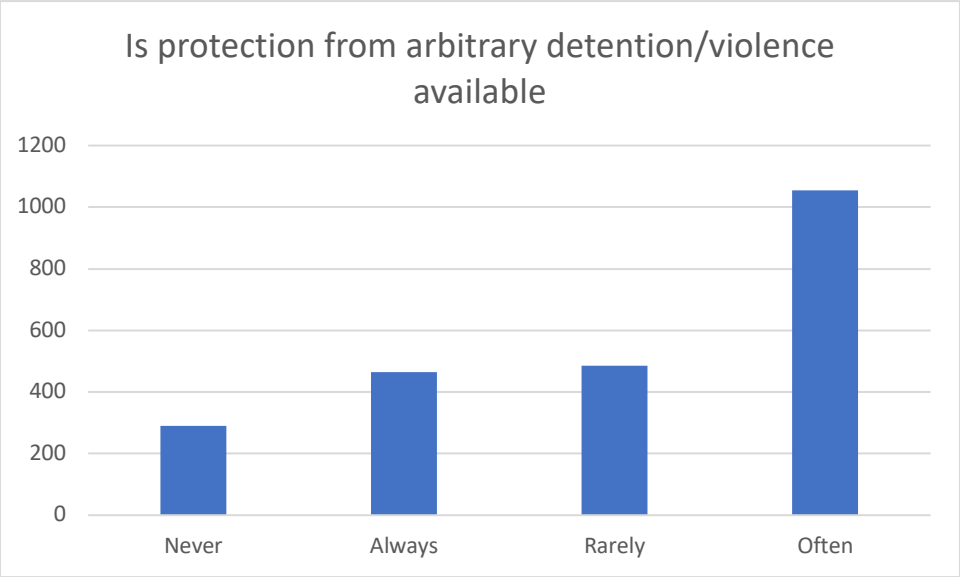
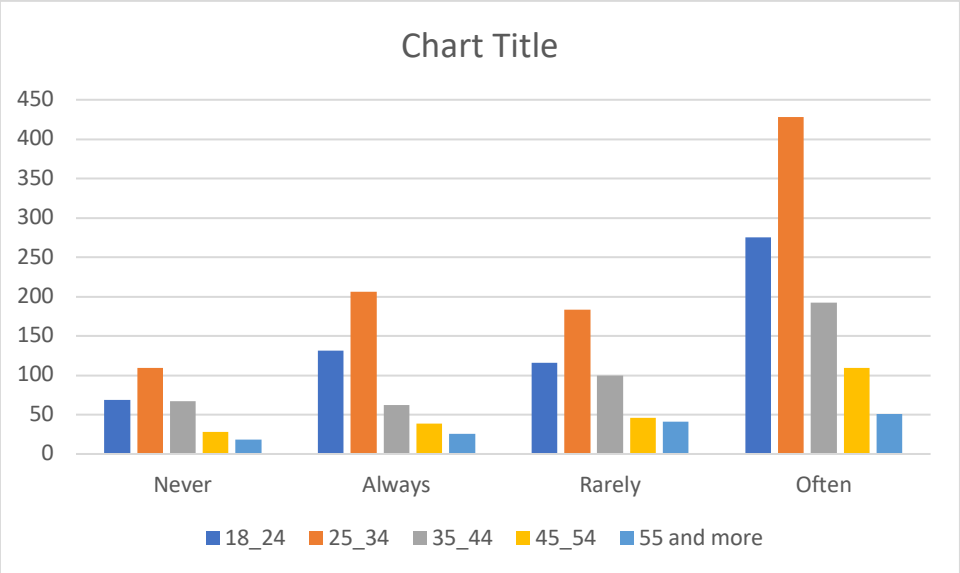



Chart (18)

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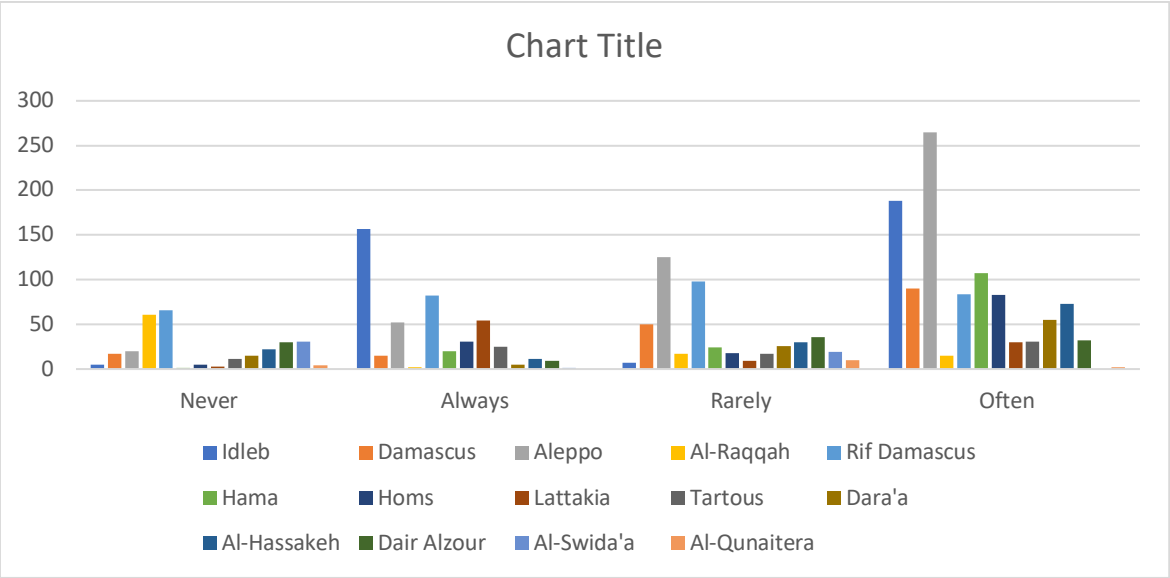



Chart (20)

As for who provides security at the moment, 69.5% believe it is the Syrian government, while 13.6% believe it is local authorities away from Damascus, 10% believe it is community initiatives and 7% believe no one provides security. The views of women were more inclined to attribute security provision to the government while men slightly gave a larger share to local authorities/community initiatives.

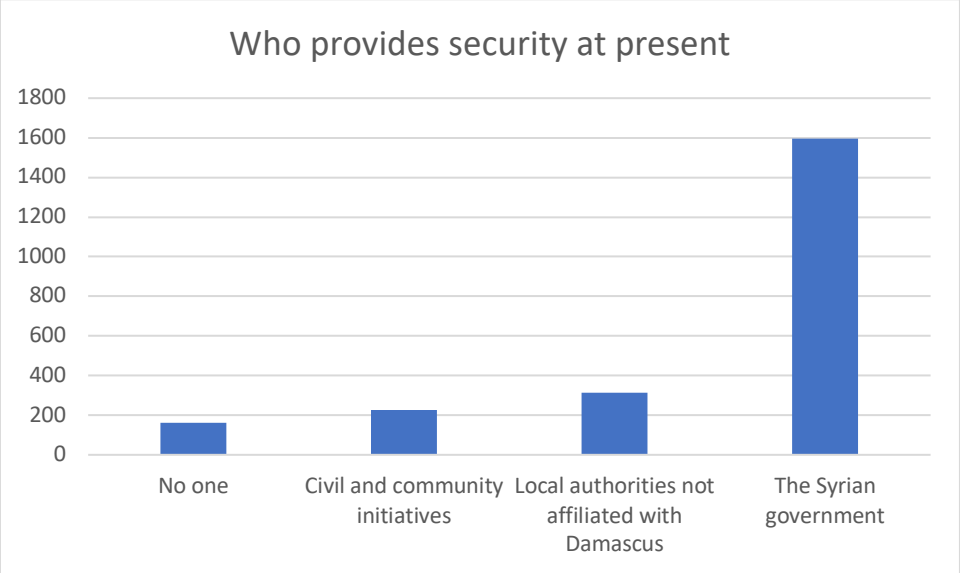



Chart (21)

Given the structural problems that plague security performance in Syria, the sample affirmed security experience was weak and security affiliations varied, which doesn't translate into relative improvement in behavior and discipline compared to the past. The challenge of arms and factions

control came foremost in the sample's view of security challenges, followed by other threats such as Israeli interventions, ISIS, the regime's networks, and the presence of agents not affiliated with the Ministry of Defense structure.

| **Security Challenges** | **Number of Respondents** |
|---|---|
| Arms control | 686 |
| Regime networks | 373 |
| Presence of militant groups not affiliated with the ministry of defense | 319 |
| Israel's constant interventions | 303 |
| Factions control | 210 |
| Single affiliation | 139 |
| ISIS and its growing breaches | 127 |
| Absence of social trust | 78 |
| Loose borders | 55 |
| Other | 6 |

Table (1)

**In border areas (Daraa, Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah**), the risk of "loose borders" is particularly pronounced. **In areas that have witnessed intense factionalism (Idlib/rural Aleppo/Raqqa**), efforts to "factions and arms control" are clearly progressing. In **some central and coastal areas**, "regime networks" are increasingly emerging as an obstacle to stability. All Syrian groups, except the largest (Sunnis and Arabs), tend to fear "uncontrolled arms" and "extremist groups." The Sunni majority, especially those harmed by the regime, speaks more about "regime networks" and "one-party policies," as a significant segment of revolutionary groups believes that the state initially relied in its appointments on those close to the authority.

Gender considerations were less prominent among the sample (approximately 2%) compared to other considerations regarding discrimination and its connection to security. 34% of respondents emphasized sectarian considerations, and approximately 23% cited religious and ethnic factors. From a religious and ethnic perspective, Christians, Druze, Alawites, and Kurds were more explicit in **pointing to sectarian/identity discrimination** as a factor of security or a threat. Those involved in political activism or who have experienced arrest/oppression tend to cite "revolutionary considerations" as a strong determinant of security. Meanwhile, the poor in marginalized areas prioritize "regional considerations" due to the presence of dichotomies such as rural/urban and center/periphery.

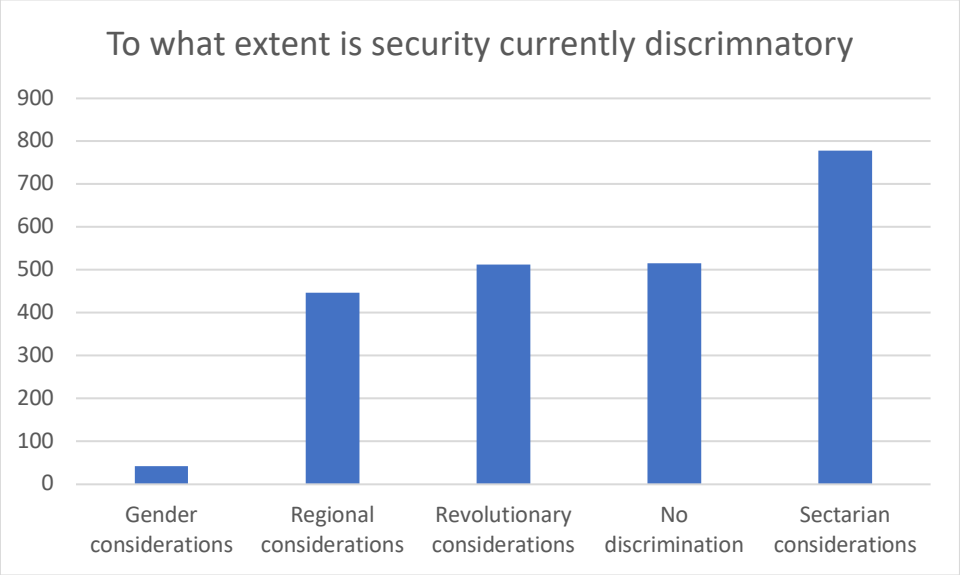



Chart (22)

In parallel, the sample warned against the continuity of discriminatory patterns based on political, ethnic or regional affiliation in some areas although the previous central entities have been dismantled. They reiterated it was important that decision makers take note of the parameter of ‘’people’s recognition of equality in security service provision” as a decisive factor for a safe and neutral environment which encourages return and stability. Security discrimination is considered one of the most repulsive factors that prevent IDPs and refugees from returning to their home areas.

As for the parameter of impartiality and its implications for a safe and neutral environment, at has significant indications with regards to trust in public institutions which is considered the cornerstone of the socio-political transitional process. Formal institutions have previously been associated with corruption and political exclusion causing its societal legitimacy to erode. With the emergence of new local and transitional institutions, the population’s assessment of their ability to provide services in a fair manner accessible for all has become an essential indicator for

the success of the process of building the new state and a safe environment conducive for return and stability. In general, the sample was satisfied with the neutrality of service institutions in **dealing with citizens (around 81%**). Indicators of mistrust are common among Syrian components except for the majority. Also, the groups with good income and better education tend to be more critical and believe this parameter is lacking.

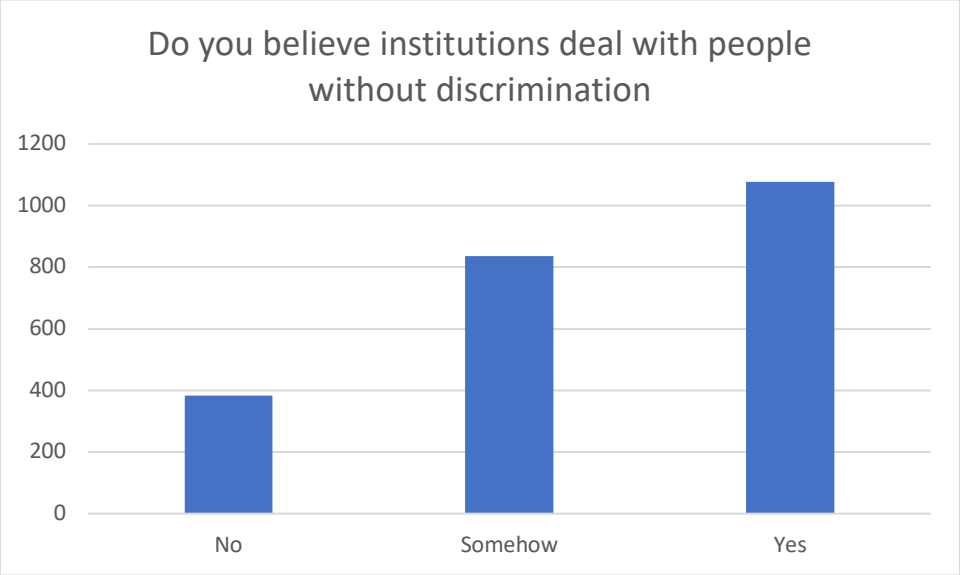



Chart (23)

Thus, trust is there, but it is **not well-established**. For the most part, trust is conditional or with some reserve. Institutional trust in Syria at the moment is more a **geographical/spatial** phenomenon than a social or political one. It is affected by identity in mixed areas and highly associated with economic security.

Even at the level of **availability of job opportunities in institutions for everyone, the general picture indicates the existence of open but unequal opportunities**, as **30% of the sample said there were such opportunities, while 40% indicated that this was not always the case**. Women selected "sometimes" more often. The **general result may be explained** by the presence of formal/functional institutions in some regions versus the fragility of the labor market in others.

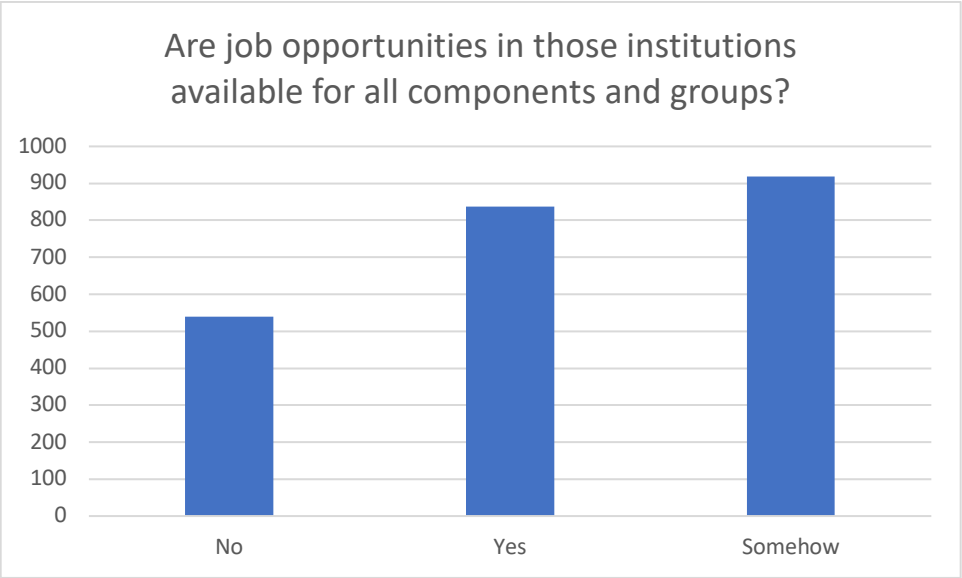



Chart (24)

## Justice, participation and safe return: essential inputs

Conflict resolution, complaint management and access to justice mechanisms is one of the most important indicators through which a state's capacity to restore legitimacy and affirm its authority in a just and non-discriminatory manner is measured. Several comparative studies on fragile contexts conclude that building societal trust cannot be achieved through constitutional texts or political statements. Rather, it is built through citizens' daily experiences in institutions when they are exposed to injustice, breaches, or disputes.

In the case of Syria, after the fall of the regime in December 2024, these mechanisms are even more important because of fragmented judicial structures, multiplicity of security and local actors, discrepancy in the capacity of formal institutions to intervene and resolve disputes, in addition to the persisting influence of community and tribal structures and informal authorities in several areas. Hence, identifying the entity to which citizens resort when there is a problem -be it a formal institution, community structure, or de-facto power- constitutes an essential practical indicator to measure: level of trust in nascent governmental institutions, degree of impartiality in security agencies and the judiciary, the state's capacity to safeguard rights, scope of official justice versus community-based justice and the gap between legislation and practice.

Justice is not just a measure of individual behavior when disputes occur; it is rather a practical test of the essence of a safe neutral environment: is it based on a state of law observing unified standards and ensuring equitable access for all citizens? Or is it still governed by networks of influence, contacts, affiliations and informal structures?

Tracing this parameter contributes to a better understanding of the nature of the ongoing transformation in Syria after the fall of the regime and determines whether the emerging environment is moving towards promoting neutral and legitimate institutions or reproducing tribal, local and discriminatory power structures. This makes this parameter central to the analysis of safe environment, return and societal stability.

In the study population, there is a widely held perception that there is some sort of dispute resolution mechanisms as acknowledged by around 65% of the sample. Stratified ethnically and religiously, not knowing or stating they do not exist rises. This is attributed to the discrepancy in conceptualizing conflict resolution mechanisms. Some believe it exists as a formal framework. Hence, legal uncertainty = lack of knowledge. So it could be said that local justice in Syria after the fall of the regime is not only formal institutional justice, but also hybrid justice which includes: formal judiciary, notables, conciliation councils, and informal security groups.

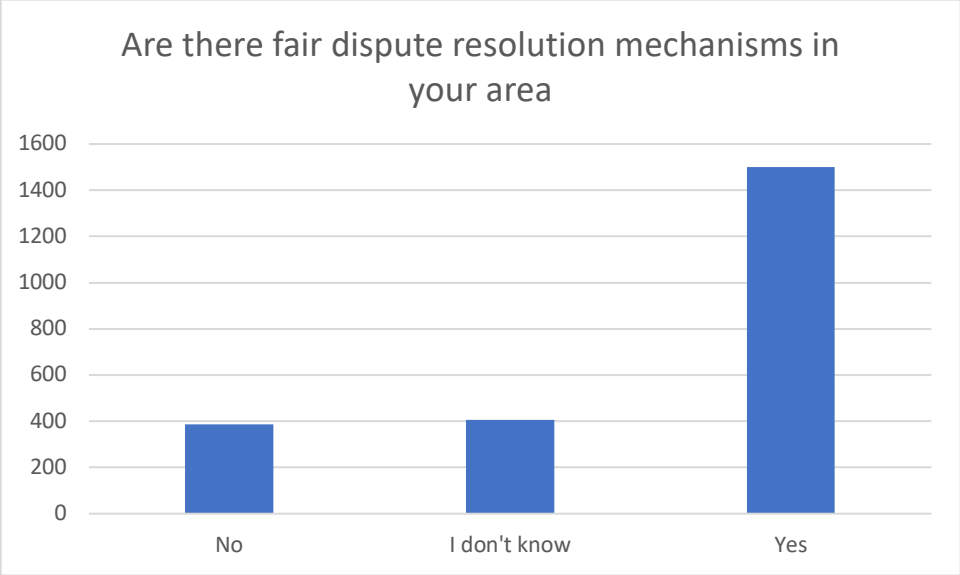
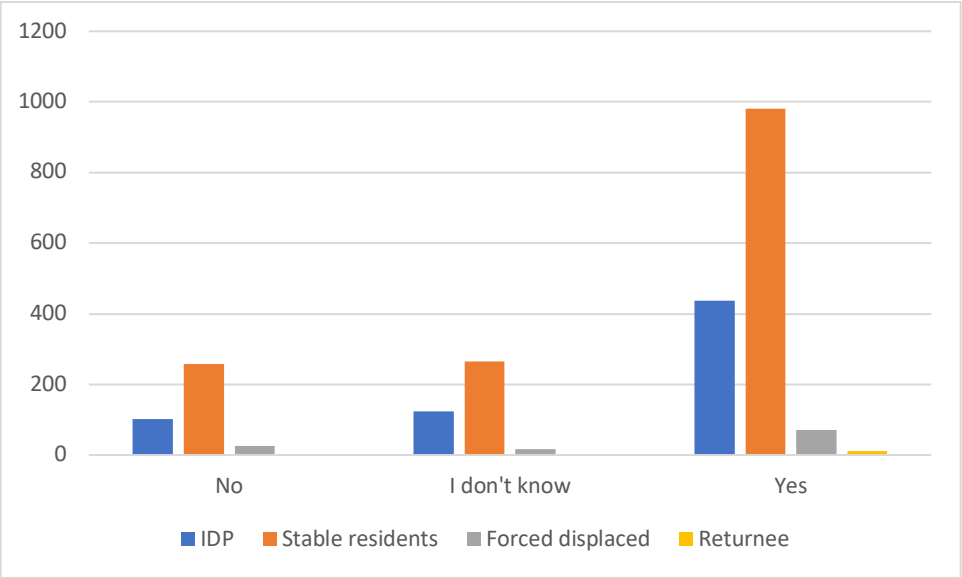



Chart (25)

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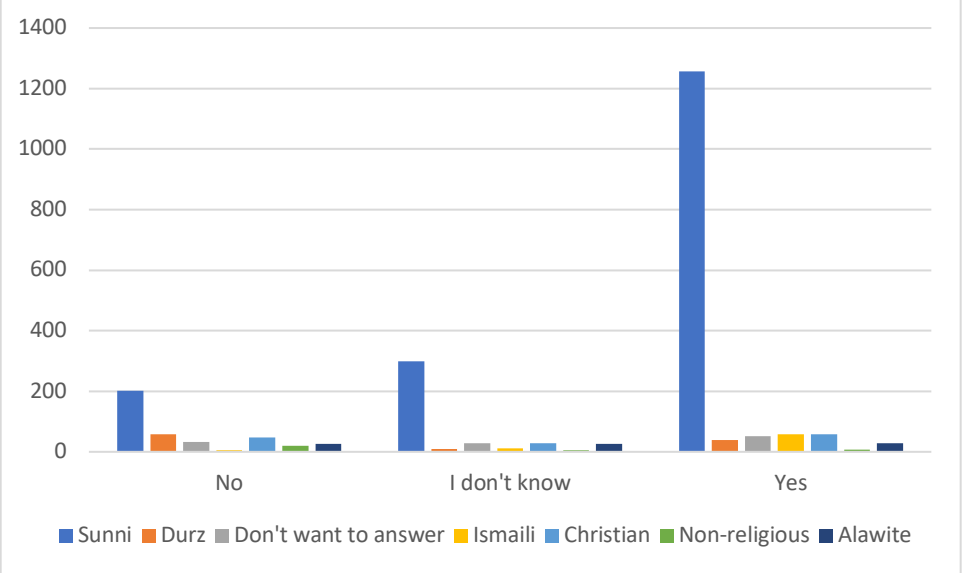


Chart (27)

Stratified by region, the prevailing pattern in north western Syria is (notables, conciliation councils, informal groups) while in Damascus and the coast, they generally rely on the formal judiciary. The poorer economic stratum tends to rely on informal mechanisms given the cost of formal litigation or limited access.

**The sample shows that 57% are able to file a complaint against an influential entity, and this is due to the need to have a sense of trust in the judiciary or the respondent's own ability to file any complaint, while women were less able to file a complaint, which requires measures to promote trust and safety**. Also, those involved in political/civil activity are less confident in the

possibility of filing a complaint because they are aware of the structural obstacles that hinder the functioning of the judiciary in general. However, if the defendant is a security entity, the total percentage indicating the ability to file a complaint decreases to 36%, which reinforces the absence of the concept of civil-security relations in general. What is interesting with regard to the reputation of the judiciary is that about 60% of the sample does not believe that the legal system is fair, and this is due to the fact that judicial and legal reform requires long efforts and policies, both in relation to corruption files and in terms of fairness, especially in the transitional period. About 70% of the sample views the criterion of independence unstable, and almost half of this percentage asserts that it is not independent, which further indicates the fragility of legitimacy, which requires exceptional efforts.

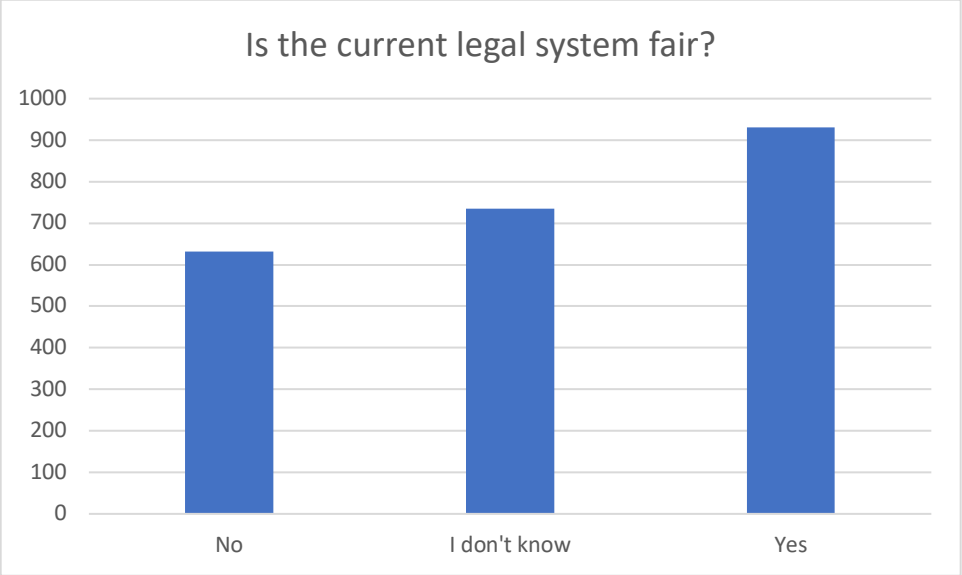


Chart (28)

Independence of the judiciary is one of the most complex issues in the transitional period. Judicial reform is a very complex process which requires concerted national efforts, especially since the influence of the former security services within the judiciary is hard to overcome quickly. Therefore, the population's awareness of the independence of the judiciary and its ability to hold security actors accountable will be a critical indicator of the possibility of building a state of law, which is an essential prerequisite for achieving a safe and neutral environment that encourages voluntary return.

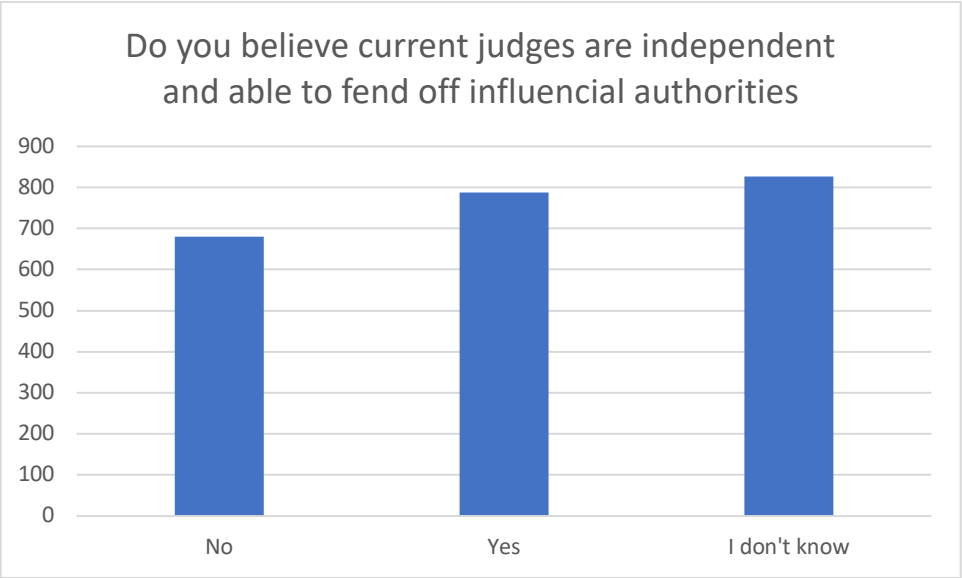


Chart (29)

As for the criteria of expression, participation and return, most general analyses show that the general landscape after the fall of the regime features openness that varies between areas as it is governed by balances of local, military and tribal powers. Measuring freedom of expression and political participation at the local level constitutes a central indicator to understand the extent to which political impartiality is observed as a basic prerequisite for a safe environment. Reports affirm that the decision to return is associated with availability of a services system and socio-economic stability and not only the absence of military operations. Many IDPs and refugees associate return with the presence of clear security and services assurances. Thus, identifying obstacles to return from the population's point of view offers a realistic understanding of the extent to which a safe environment has been achieved.

**About 82% of the sample showed an acceptable level of freedom of expression in the affairs of their regions, and in this context, it is noted that women were less enthusiastic towards this variable, which confirms that the public sphere is less safe for them** (harassment, social stigma, family pressure).

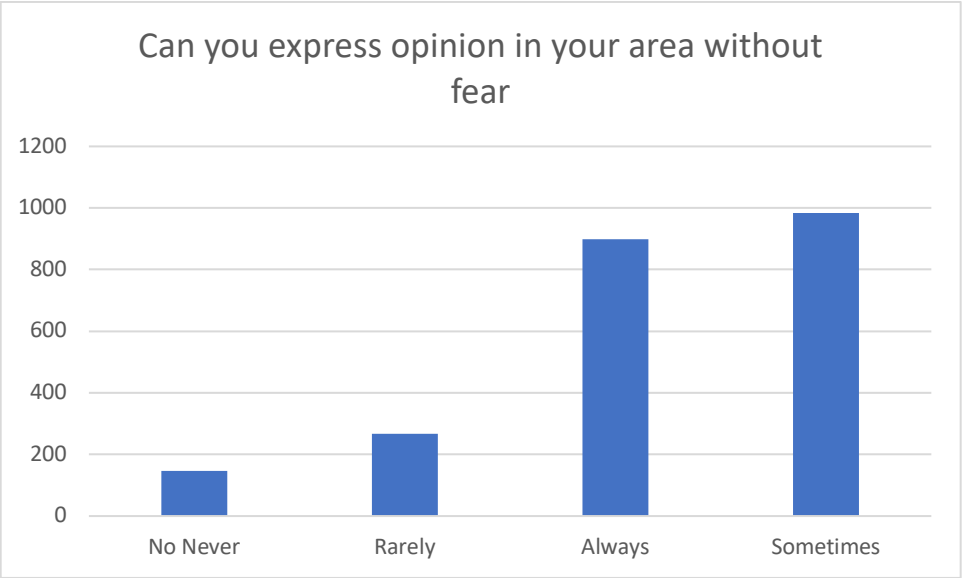


Chart (30)

**In terms of opportunities to participate or run for local offices, the percentage drops to around 50%,** and this result constitutes a clear gap between the ability to express and the ability to influence or run. This is more evident among women indicating that the obstacles are not only legal, but also **social/cultural**: society's perception of women leaders, family constraints, the threat of symbolic violence. Even the Sunni component, although it has shown openness to participation, is limited by the reality of the dominant forces.

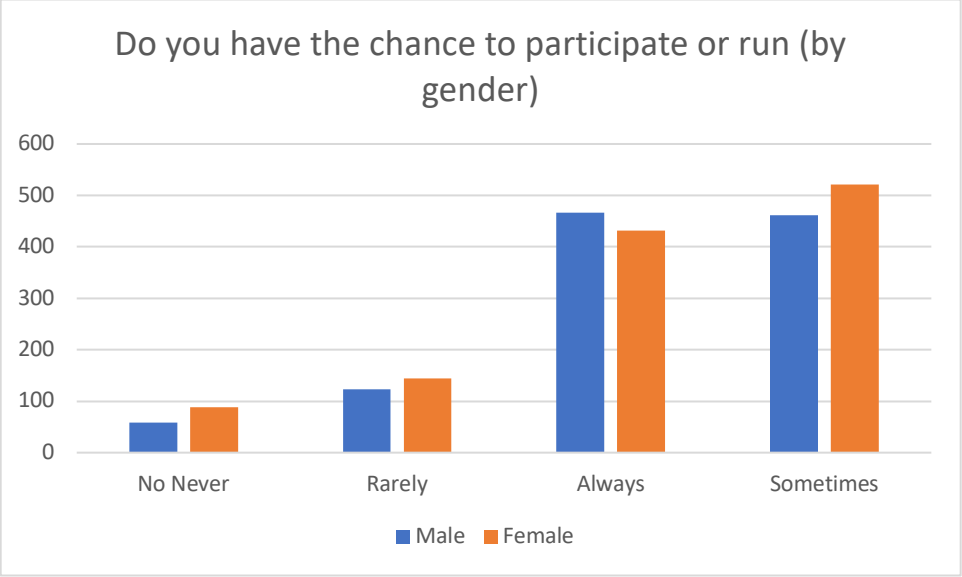


Chart (31)

The above will constitute important determinants to measure the impact on safe return. The majority (80%) of the general sample do not see their areas ready for the return of IDPs and

believe the conditions are not fully available. Stratified by residence status, 79% of the returnees believe the area is ready. They formed this opinion influenced by several observations mixed with non-material factors that make them enthusiastic about return, such as nostalgia or asylum conditions and social costs, while the satisfaction indicators from the perspective of residents are low, as about 50% do not see it ready, as they see the reality firsthand.

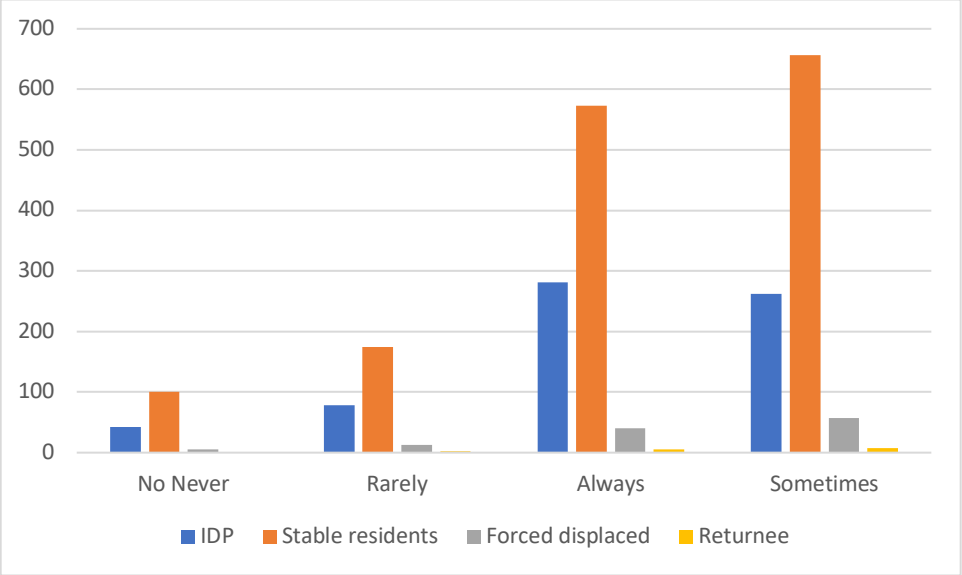


Chart (32)

Discrepancies also appear between governorates indicating that personal judgements are associated with purely local conditions. In Lattakia, for example, there is a feeling that the area is relatively ready to receive returnees. In Suweida, on the other hand, the governorate is seen as completely not ready for return given the lack of conducive economic, political and security conditions. In Aleppo, Idlib, Hama, Homs, Daraa and Deir Ez-Zor, the majority of respondents believe the area is relatively ready. In general, areas that witnessed major battles and massive destruction do not believe the solution is only security but also reconstruction, services and job opportunities. Suweida's distinct situation must be recognized given the events it witnessed and the increasing indications of lack of trust in authorities and the miserable economic reality.

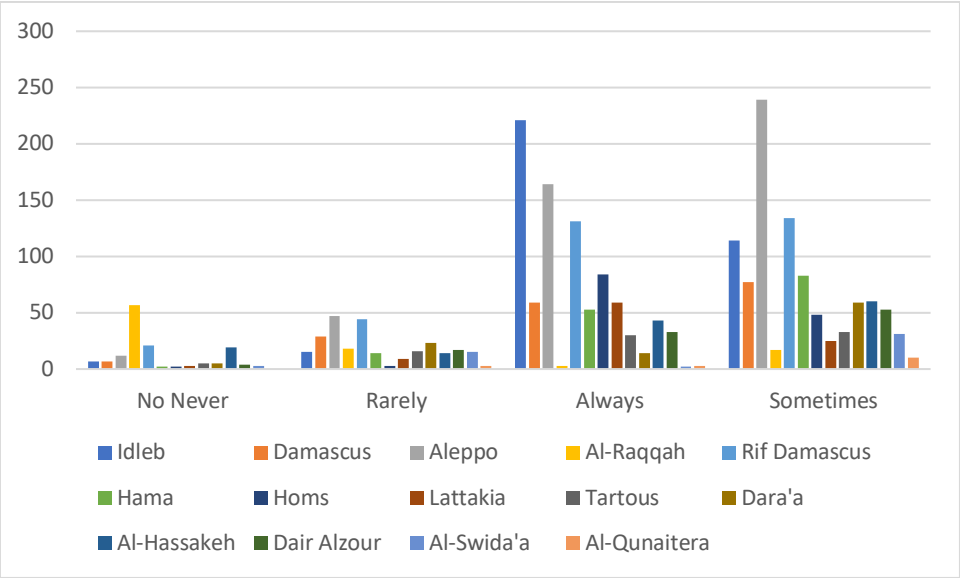


Chart (33)

Those with no income or insufficient income are more inclined to consider the environment ready for return. From their perspective, ability to rebuild their lives upon return is directly associated with economic resources. This is confirmed in the sample's view of the biggest obstacles to return as the sample gave 80% to economic reasons and 42% to social obstacles and 19% to political obstacles.

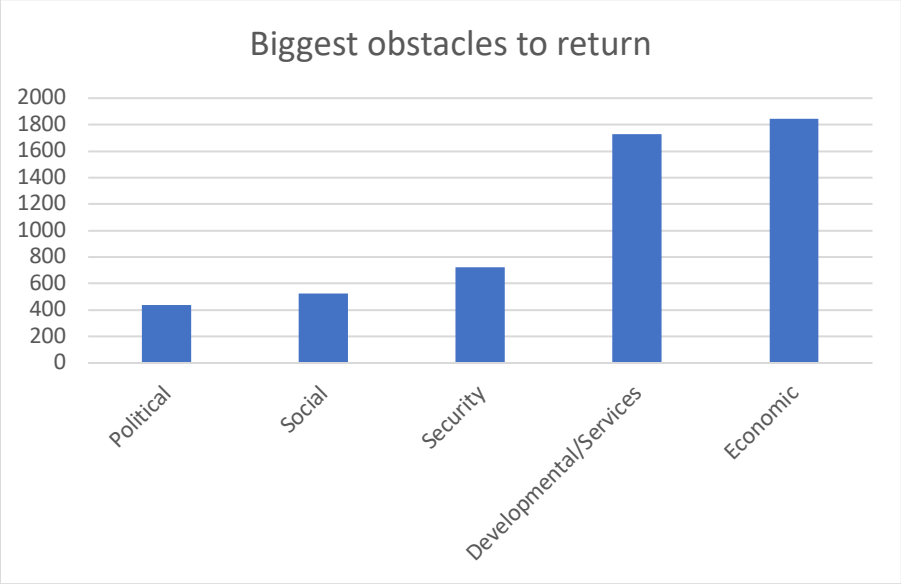


Chart (34)

People with "good" income do not overrule economic obstacles but tend to cite more political and social obstacles to return. The same appeared in stratification according to **social status and the youth.**

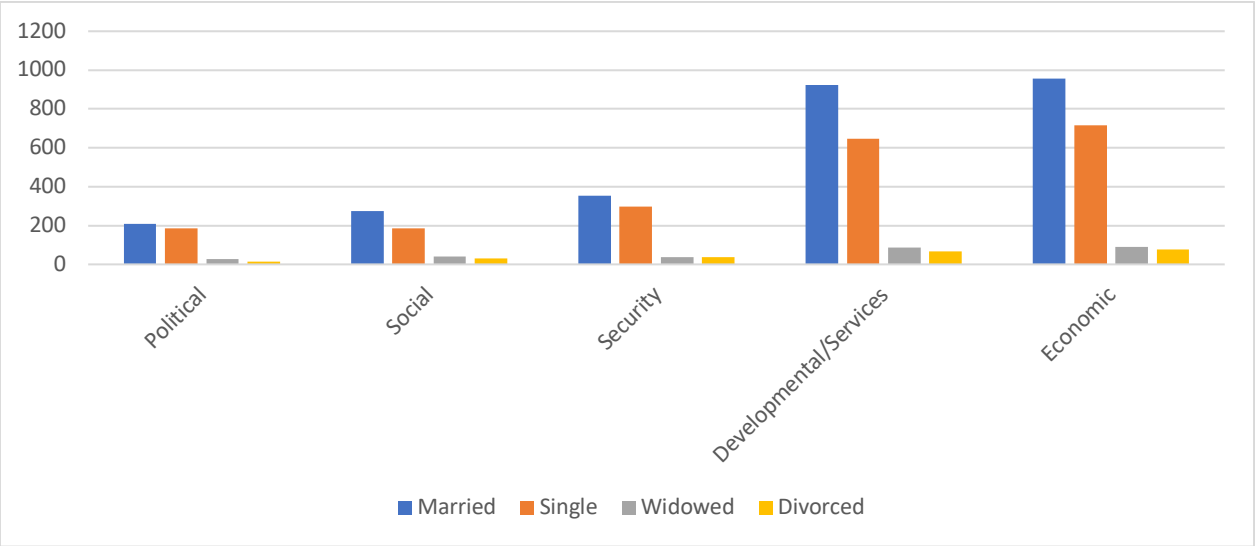


Chart (35)

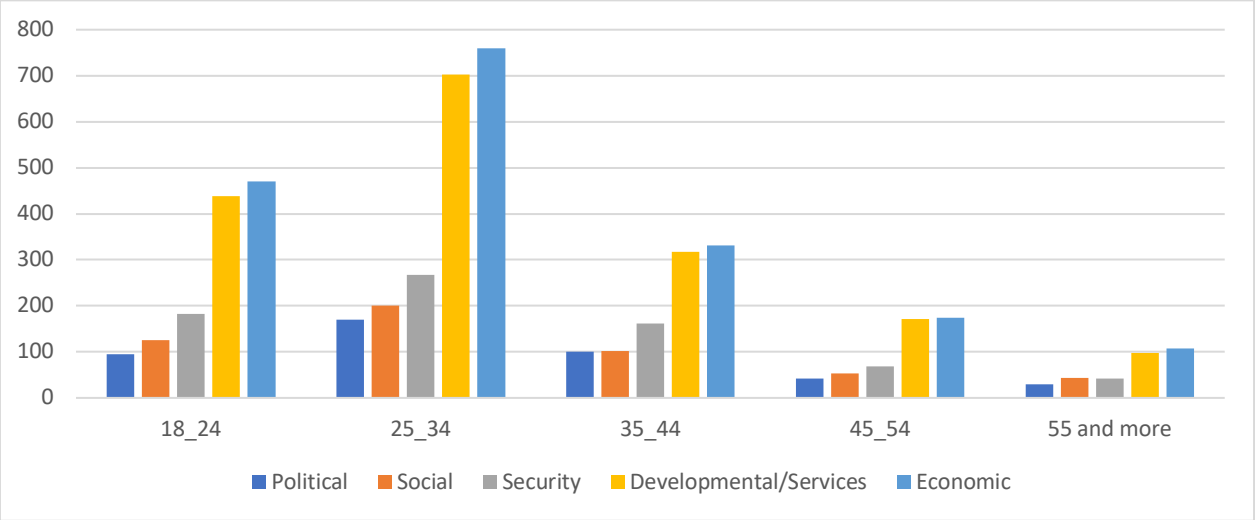


Chart (36)

## Constitutional and legal framework and restructuring: prerequisite for durable stability

Transitioning from a totalitarian authoritarian governance that exercised all forms of isolation and repression on society into a state that hinges on the “rule of law” constitutes the most profound and structural challenge in the post-regime era in Syria. Legal and constitutional frameworks are not merely formal or bureaucratic arrangements. Rather, they constitute the philosophical and functional foundation upon which the “safe and neutral” environment is built as an essential requirement for stability and active political participation. Furthermore, they are on of the most

important parameters of the new social contract. The fallen regime was based on the dominance of the executive branch over all other authorities effectively eliminating neutrality of institutions. The absence of a consensual constitutional framework in the transitional period may lead to a state of "legal and political vacuum" causing the state to slip into chaos or return to "systemic authoritarianism".

One of the components of the concept of safe environment is "legal security" which is an institutional guarantee for individuals' safety and rights. It is not an overstatement to say that a "safe and neutral" environment in Syria is a structural objective rather than a tactical goal. To reach this objective, the legal and constitutional framework must be seen as a prerequisite for peace not a subsequent measure. This indicates that it is essential to transform people's aspirations into binding rules in order to prevent the relapse of the state to being a threat to its citizens' security.

In order to probe the local perception of this framework and its impact on safe environment, the sample's views were probed on several issues especially the constitutional declaration issued in March 2025. Around one third of the sample (33%) were not acquainted with it. Those who were acquainted with it were concentrated in Damascus and its countryside, Idlib and Aleppo given the civil and political activism there. Those who were least familiar with it were in Suweida and Deir Ez-Zor. The sample shows that those involved in civil and unionist work have read the declaration more than other groups.

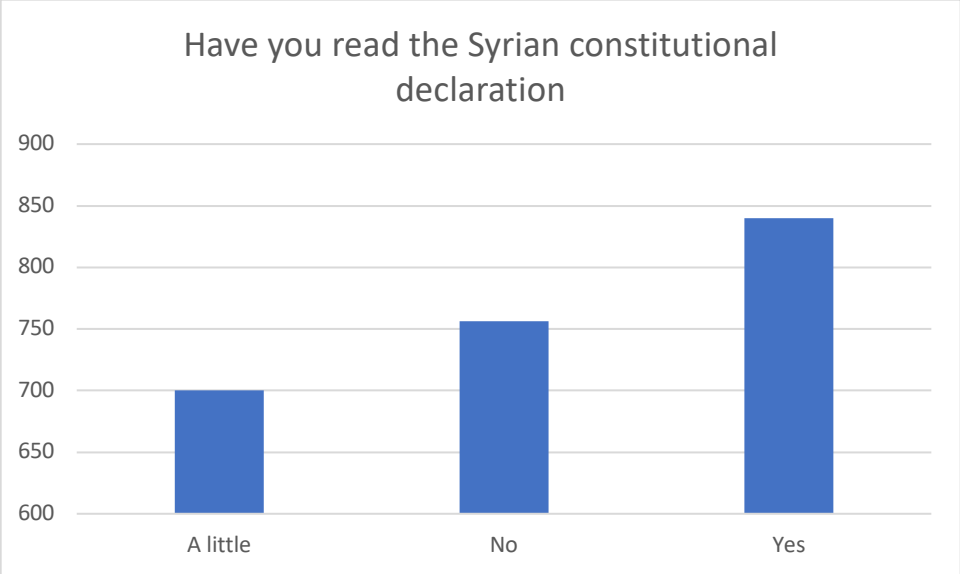


Chart (37)

The fact that one third of the sample have not read the constitutional declaration especially at the beginning of the transitional period affirms that there is little interest in this framework and points to the importance of raising community awareness of the imperatives of this period especially if

we combine this parameter with the degree of dissatisfaction which was around 57% between dissatisfaction and relative satisfaction.

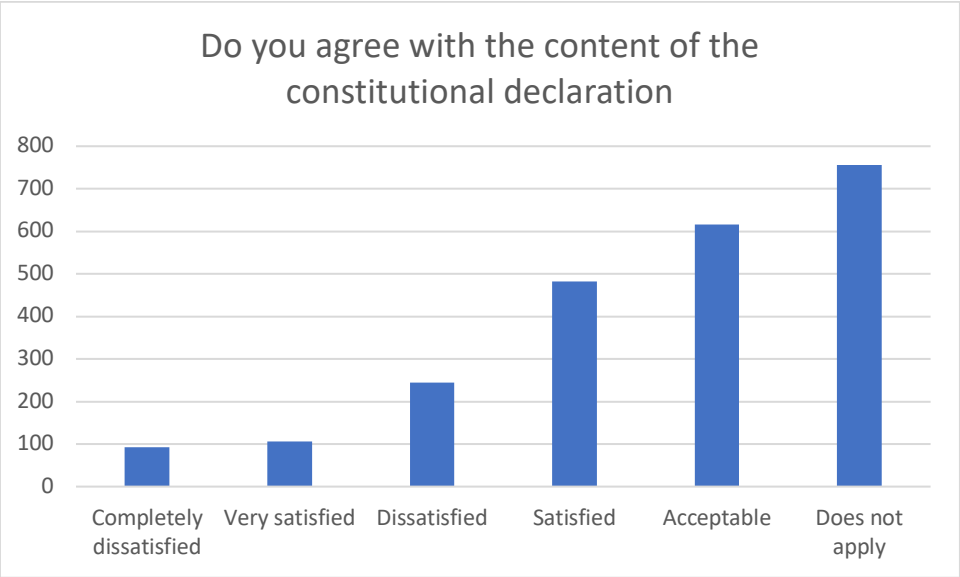


Chart (38)

Although there is a significant percentage of the sample that believes the declaration includes theoretical principles that are conducive for a safe and encouraging environment, the largest percentage of the qualitative assessment of the sample agreed the declaration needed some amendments to ensure participation and open up political and civil life.

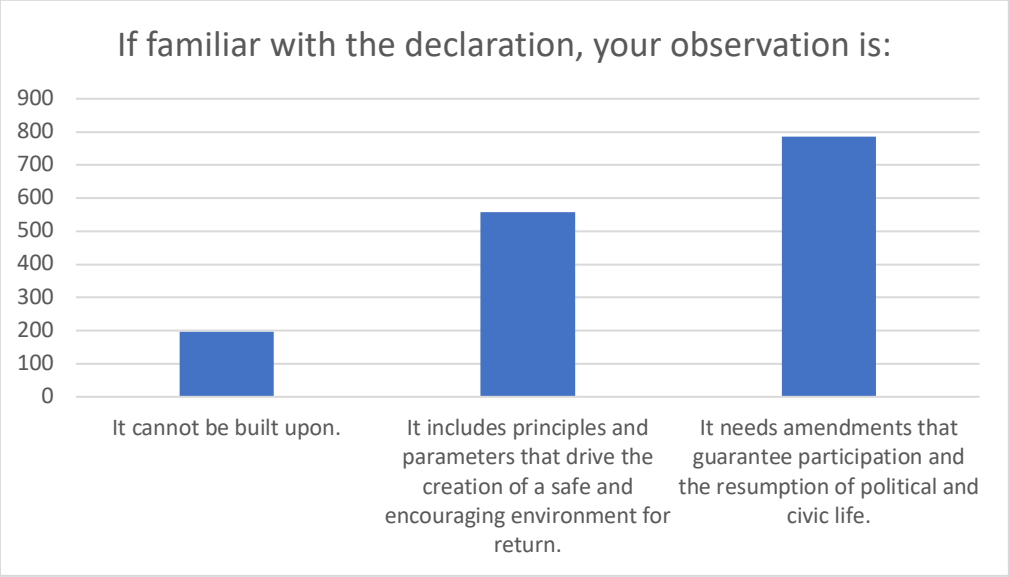


Chart (39)

**Half the sample did not agree on the statement** "I have not felt anything has changed. It is as though the same old system is as is," which is probably an answer reflecting more a political attitude than a technical one. So when we move to understanding lack of change, the largest percentage associates this with the complexity of the process and the time it takes for change to become manifest. 37% of the sample said they recognize change but only in accelerating procedures.

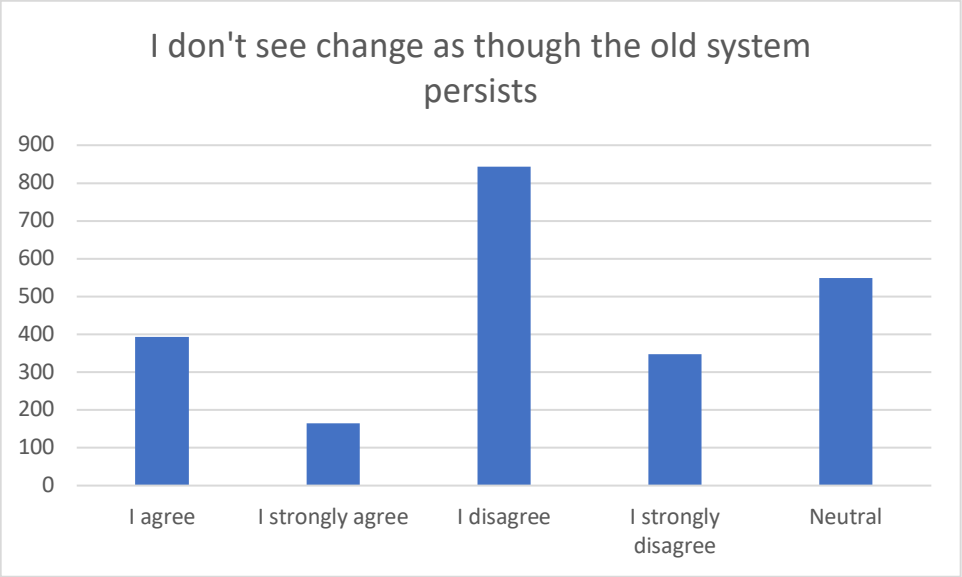


Chart (40)

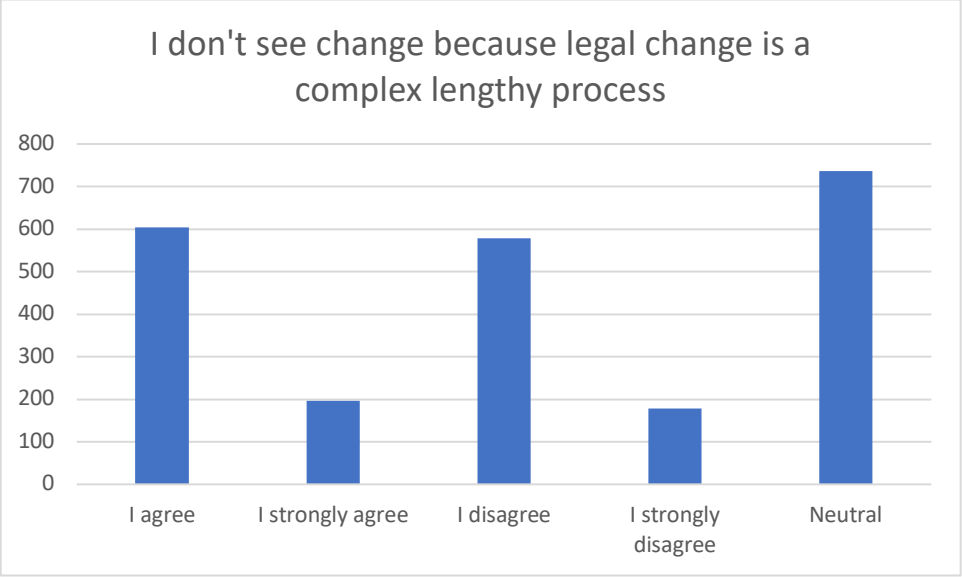


Chart (41)

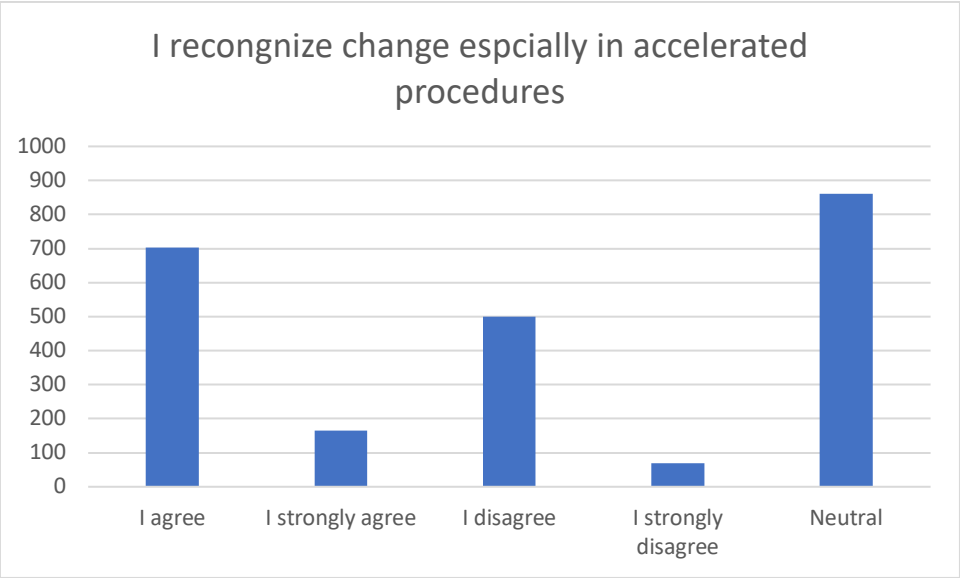


Chart (42)

**In terms of transparency of the state and its institutions, 45% of the sample recognize this but taking intersectionality into consideration, this parameter declines**. **This satisfaction parameter is more visible** in Damascus, Lattakia, Tartous and Hama. It is less so in Suweida, Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor, where there is multiple authorities or weak institutions.

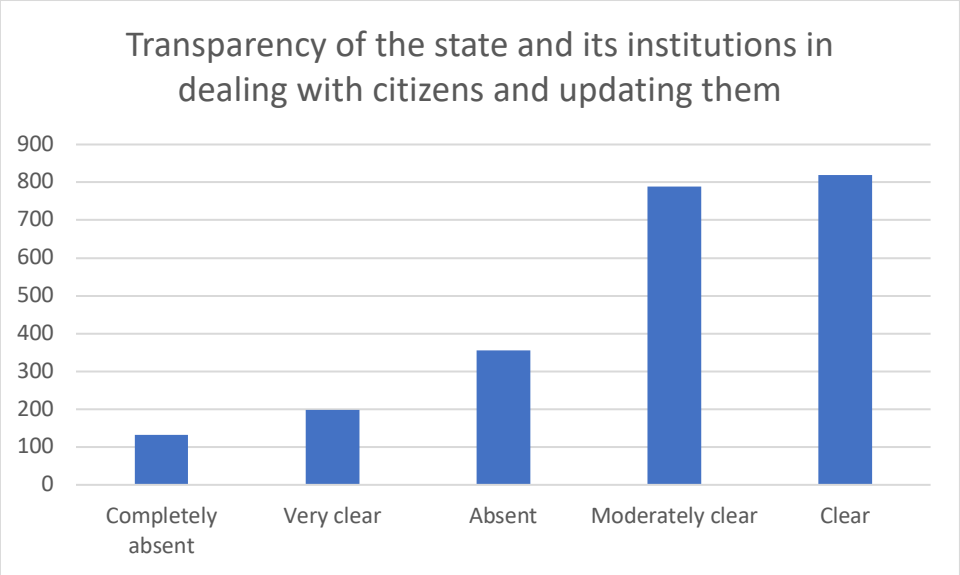


Chart (43)

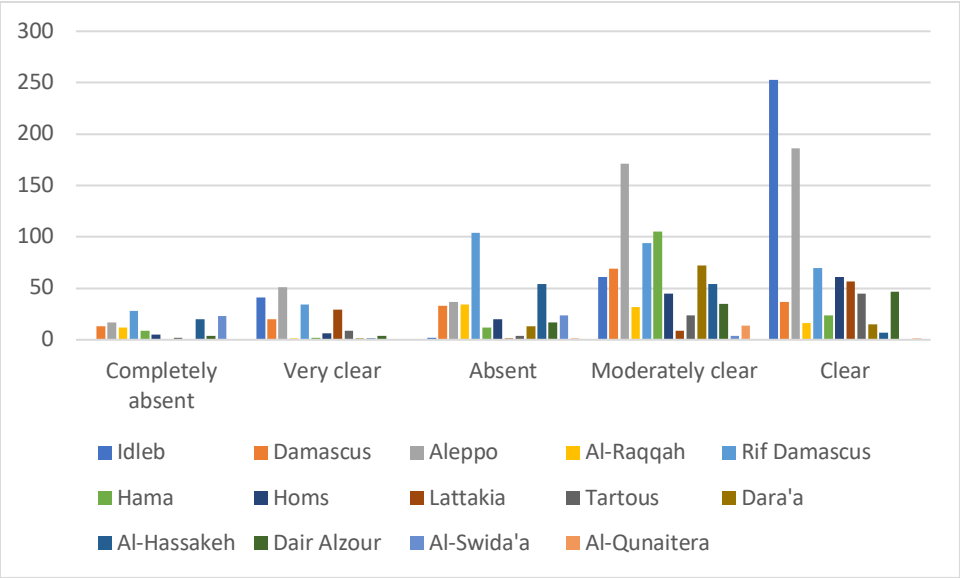


Chart (44)

To various degrees, around 71% of the sample agree that restructuring institutions would have a significant impact on reality and that it requires gradual plans. In terms of the legal and political environment and safeguarding rights, around three quarters of the sample are satisfied while one quarter is not.

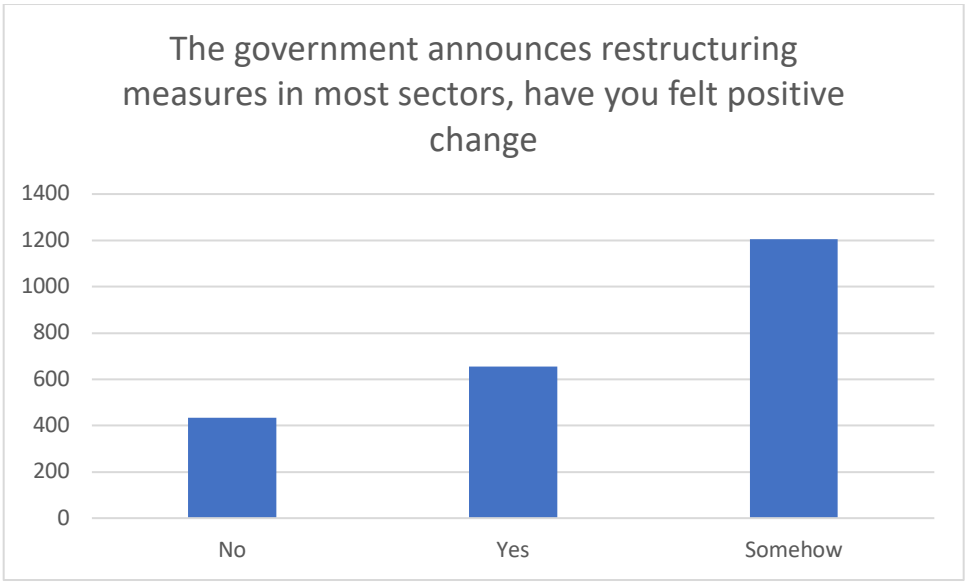


Chart (45)

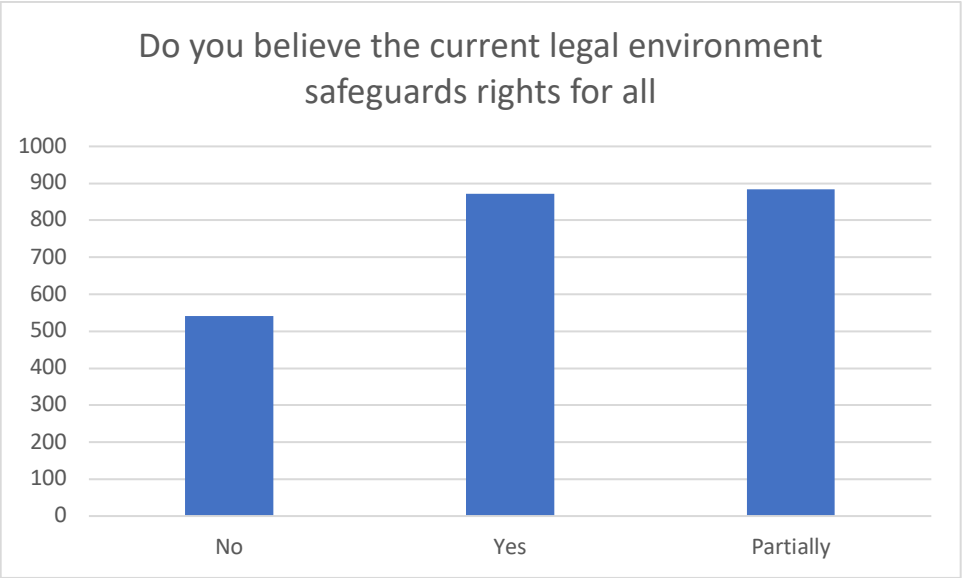


Chart (46)

Based on residence status, 50% of the returnees stated that the legal environment safeguard rights. Satisfaction is also visible among IDPs, while around quarter the residents do not believe this environment safeguards rights. This statement may be interpreted by a psychological rejection of all objective causes for not returning with the growing feeling that return is necessary.

**Clearer differences appear when the sample is stratified by religion showing significant percentages revealing lack of trust in legal guarantees: Sunnis 42%, Alawites 44%, Christians 56%, Druze 64%.**

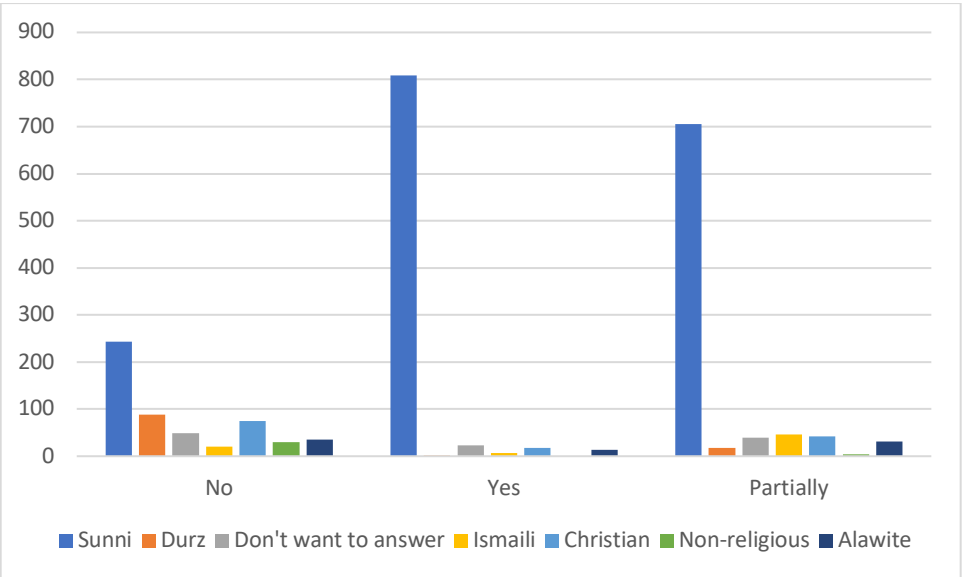


Chart (47)

**Findings indicate a clear division in the attitude towards security forces and their level of professionalism and neutrality. Around half the sample believe they are professional and impartial while the rest believe they are disorganized and politicized.**

**The attitude of stable residents indicates development in the system although it is slow. They are in direct contact and have a comparative perspective. Around 75% of them believe it is acceptable.**

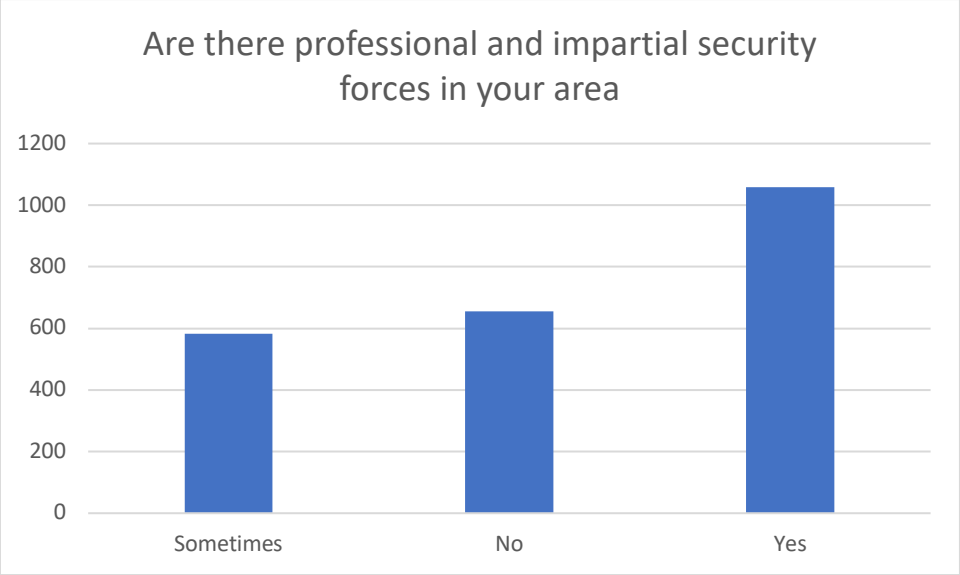


Chart (48)

So, in general, 44% of the sample believed political participation in Syria after the fall of the regime relatively acceptable, while 29% believe it must be regulated including through passing a set of conducive laws. A small percentage of the sample believe we have a reproduction of tyranny/ single power mindset.

Stratified by religious affiliation, the sample shows the clearest discrepancy. While most Sunnis are relatively satisfied, the Druze (65%), Alawites (42%) and to a similar degree the Christians believe political participation is exclusive to one affiliation reinforcing the general impression that the political landscape requires management and inclusion of diversity.

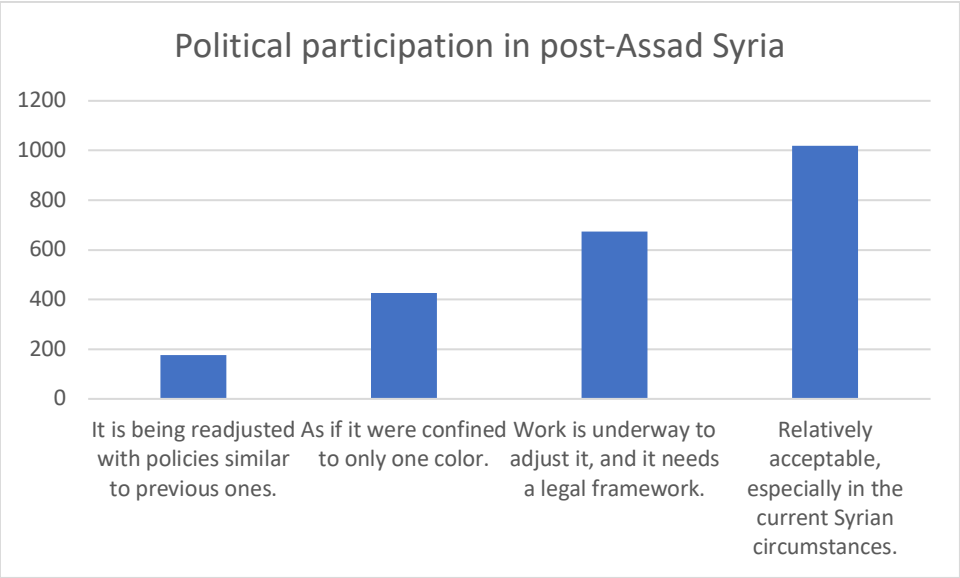


Chart (48)

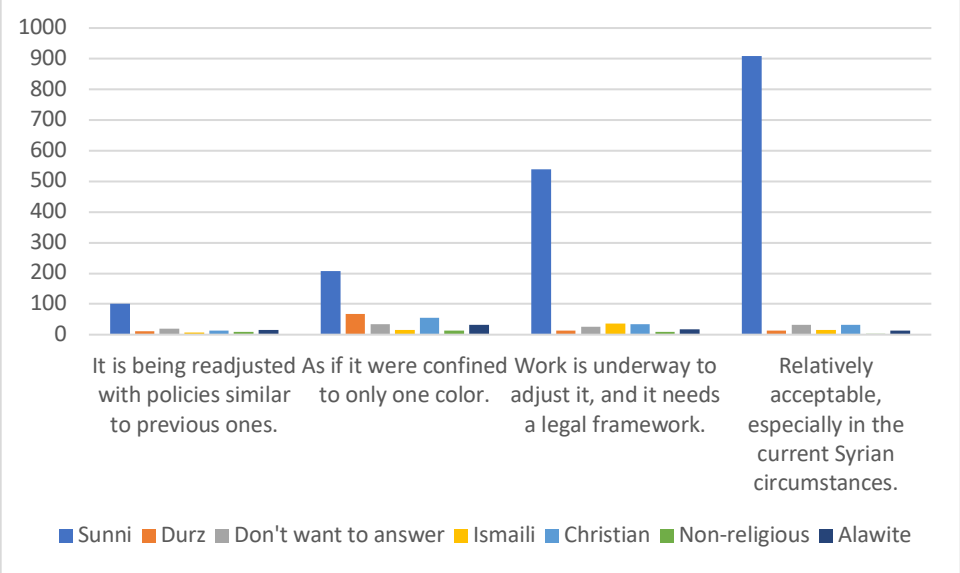


Chart (49)

In terms of societal acceptance of diversity and integration, around one third of the sample believe there is acceptance of diversity but mostly ‘partial or conditional’.

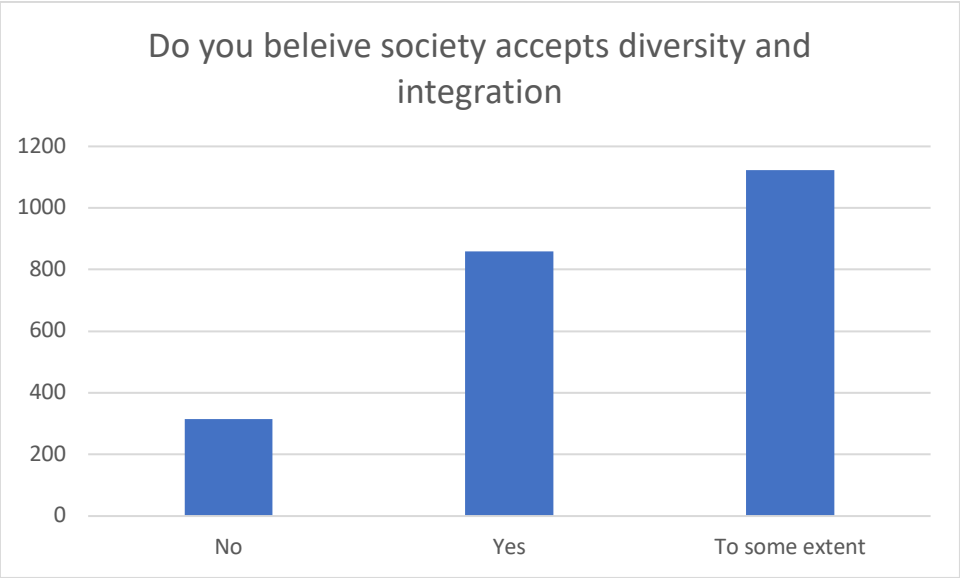


Chart (50)

This explains recognition of:

1- Fragility and degradation in society despite at various levels (57%) which indicates that despite the conflict society has not entirely disintegrated in the consciousness of the people.

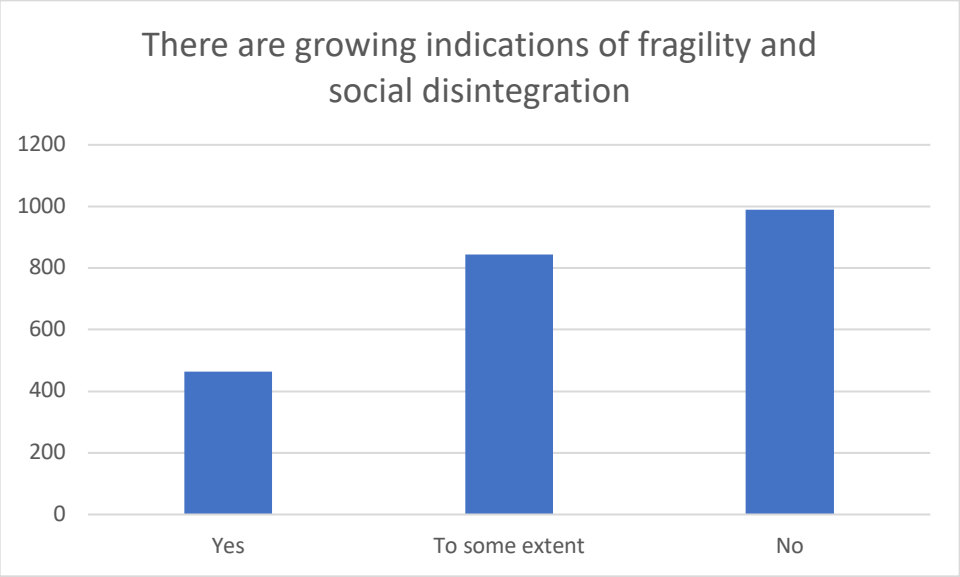


Chart (51)

2- Absence of social justice policies as around 63% of the sample acknowledged that and attributed it to several factors especially economic factors and difference in services among regions.

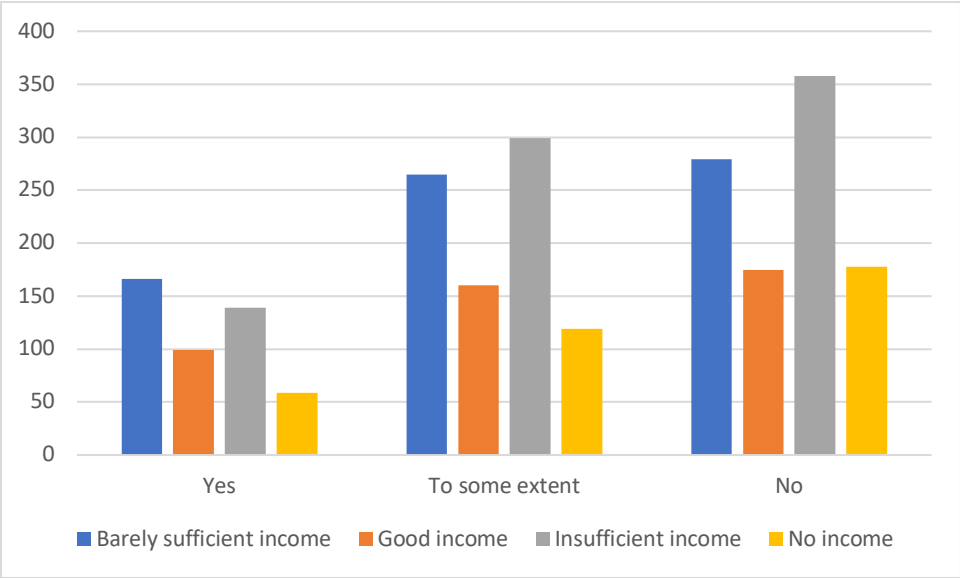


Chart (52)

3- The state is not interested in inviting citizens to engage. Around 73% have not attended any state events, so there is no chance to inform society of the challenges and situation of the state. In other words, **the state's communication with society is very weak**. Civil society, despite limitations, is much more visibly present on the ground.

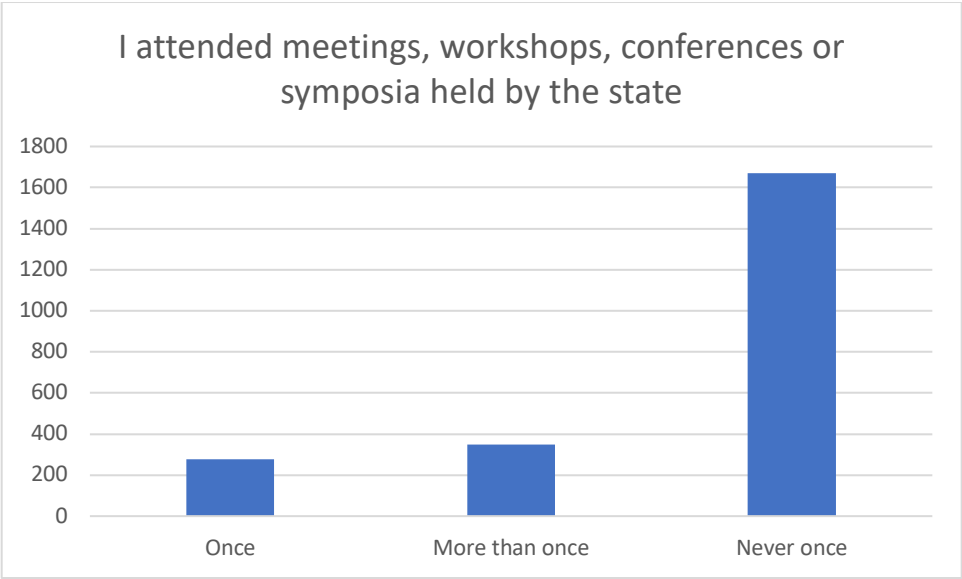


Chart (53)

# Imperatives of safe and neutral environment: factors of success of national obligations

Reforming security agencies received around 45% followed by the independence of the judiciary, voluntary and dignified return of IDPs and refugees and ensuring rights of Syrian components by 44%. Implementation of transitional justice by 43%, followed by participation in decision making (especially engaging youth and women) by 37% and then separation of religion and state by 26%.

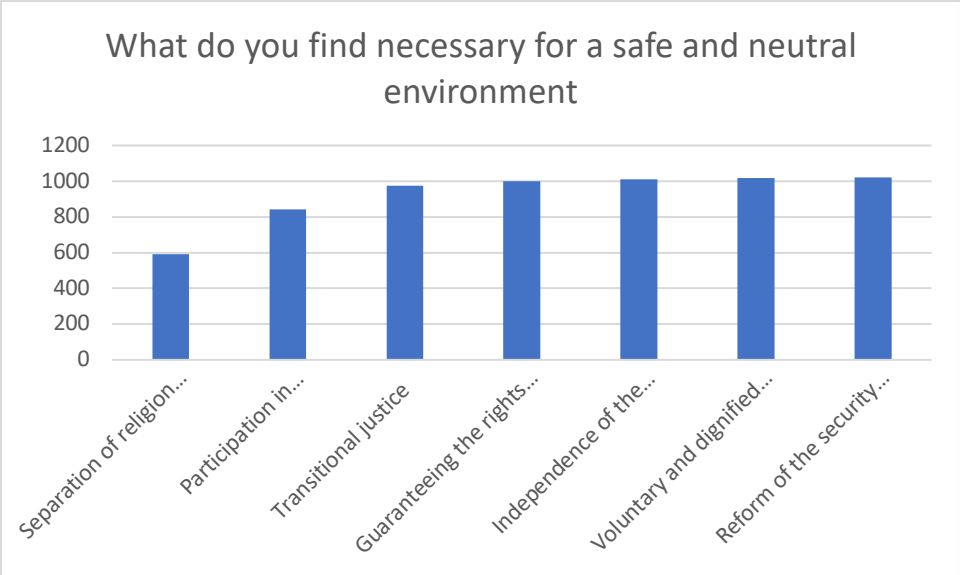


Chart (54)

The high percentage citing reforming security agencies in the responses indicates the legacy that those agencies left since the former regime's era making their reform the utmost priority for respondents as they viewed it as the most important prerequisite for a safe and neutral environment. Other factors related to constitutional/ legal / social dimensions including guarantees of rights of components, independence of the judiciary, transitional justice, as well as IDP and refugee dignified return as they constitute more than half the Syrian people, have all received almost the same rating in terms of prioritization.

Stratified by gender, most options received similar percentages with women focusing more on issues related to guarantees of the rights of components and participation in decision making.

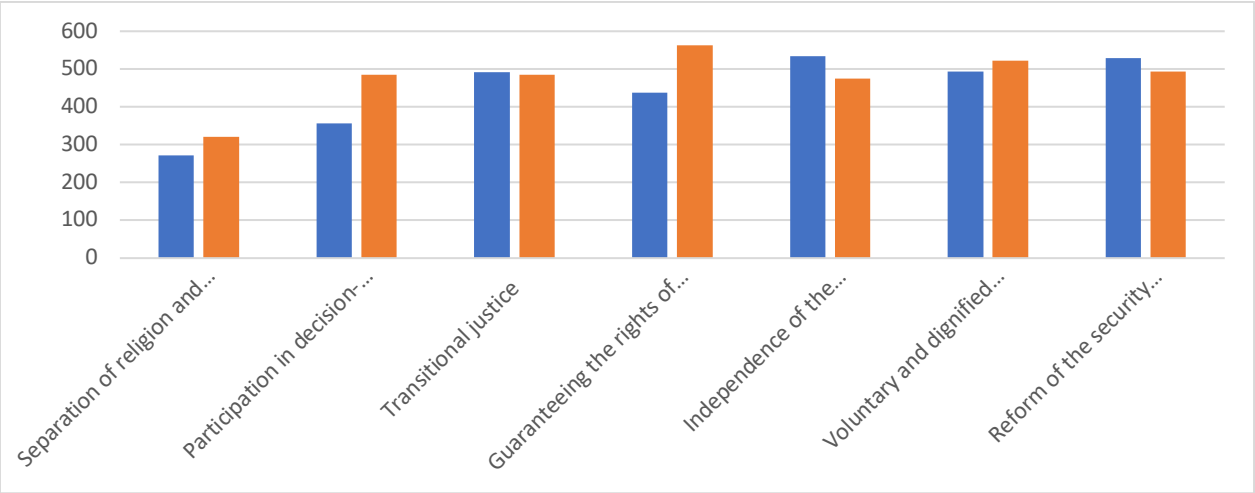


Chart (55)

Stratified by region, governorates varied in their priorities. In governorates which have witnessed more factionalism and spread of arms and bombardment causing massive displacement (e.g. Idlib, Aleppo, Damascus countryside and Daraa) priority was given to reforming security agencies, return of refugees and transitional justice given the massive injustice. Governorates with more diversity or more stability focused more on ensuring the rights of components and independence of the judiciary.

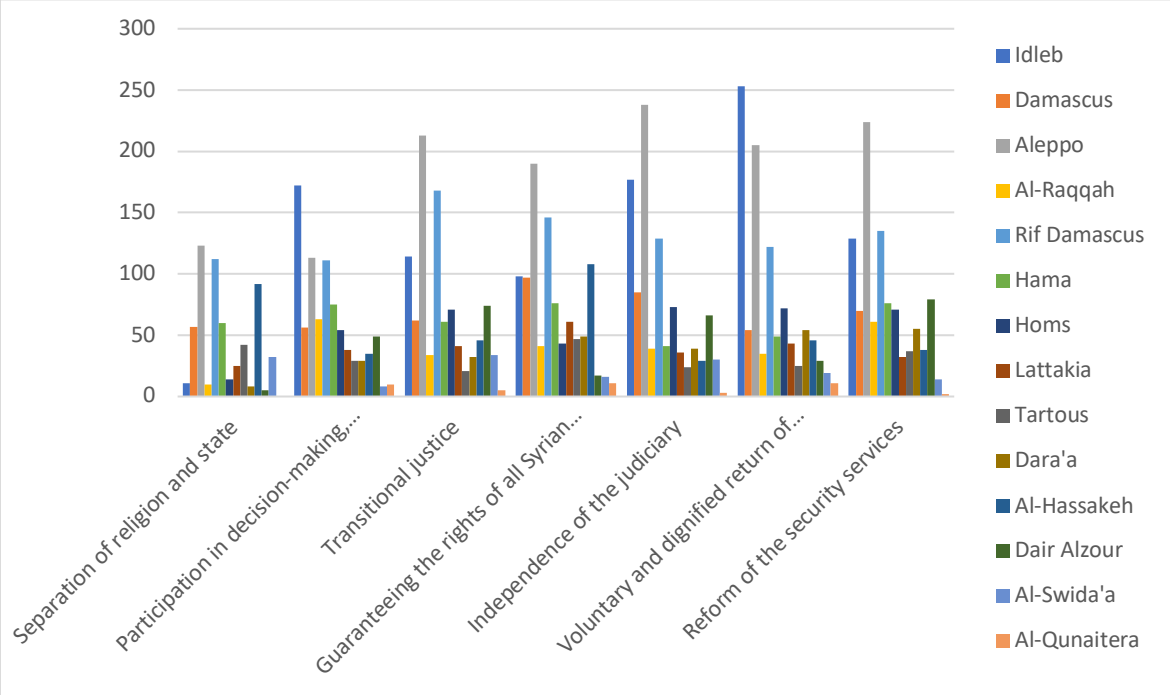


Chart (56)

On the question of whether those pathways seem feasible soon, 55% of respondents thought they were partially feasible, while 21% believed they were already underway. 14% thought they were not feasible in the near future and 10% were undetermined. This discrepancy indicates the ambiguity of attitude towards steps taken in that direction which requires more clarity.

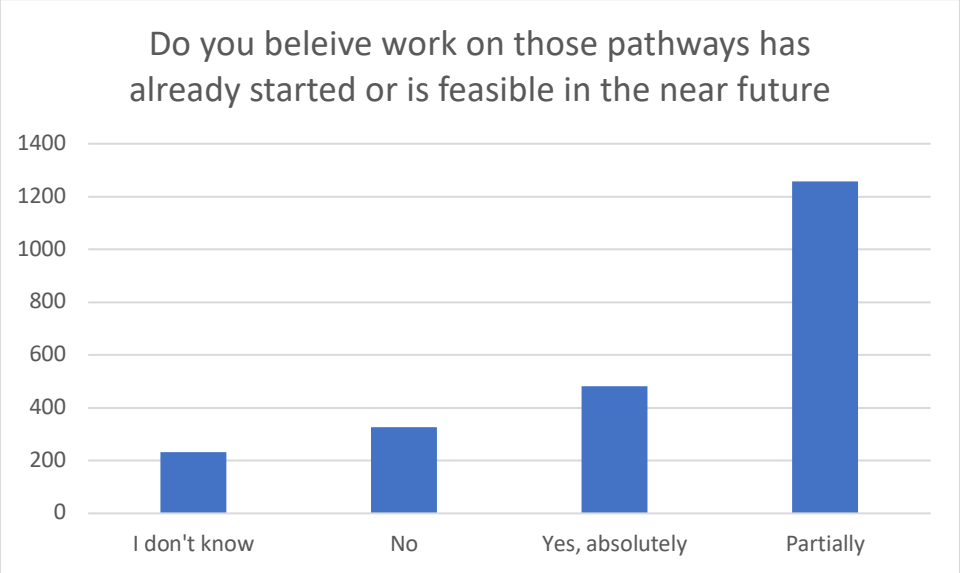


Chart (57)

On the most important challenges to safe and neutral environment, the massive destruction and war remnants received 50% of the responses followed by irregulated arms and difficulty controlling security by 47% then the difficulty of coexistence after violations by 40% and then 30% to leniency in accountability, 27% to weak political awareness, 22% to the legal environment that is not ready, and 21% to the weakness of civil society.

These percentages indicate the high priority for security and economic aspects followed by issues of justice and social coexistence and then legal, political and governance issues.

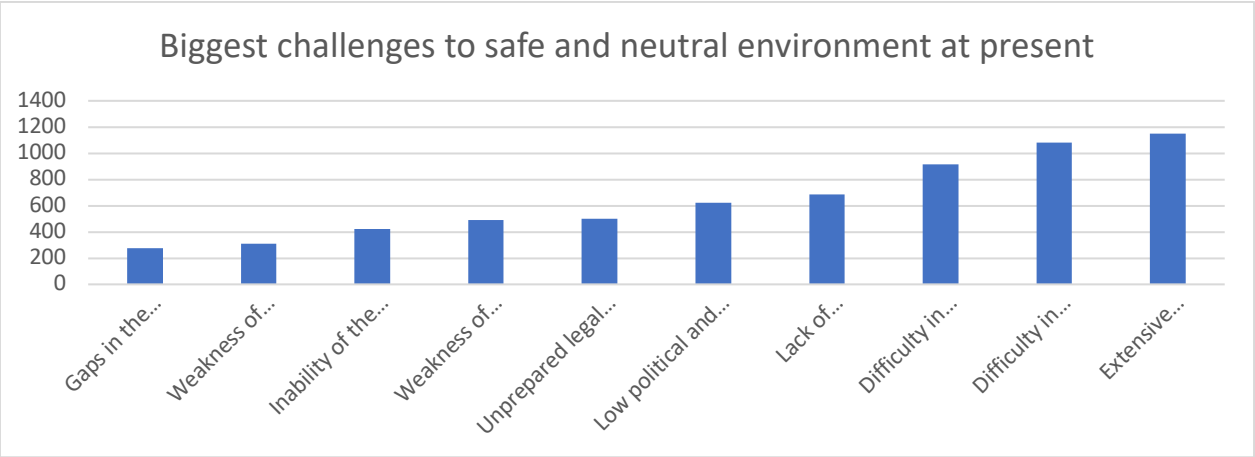


Chart (58)

Stratified by region, differences between governorates become manifest according to the current situation in the governorate. In governorates where more destruction took place such as Raqqa, Aleppo, Deir Ez-Zor and Damascus countryside, the massive destruction and spread of arms were identified as the biggest obstacles in the view of locals which indicates the priority of security and reconstruction I those governorates. More stable governorates, however, focused on political issues, power and social coexistence.

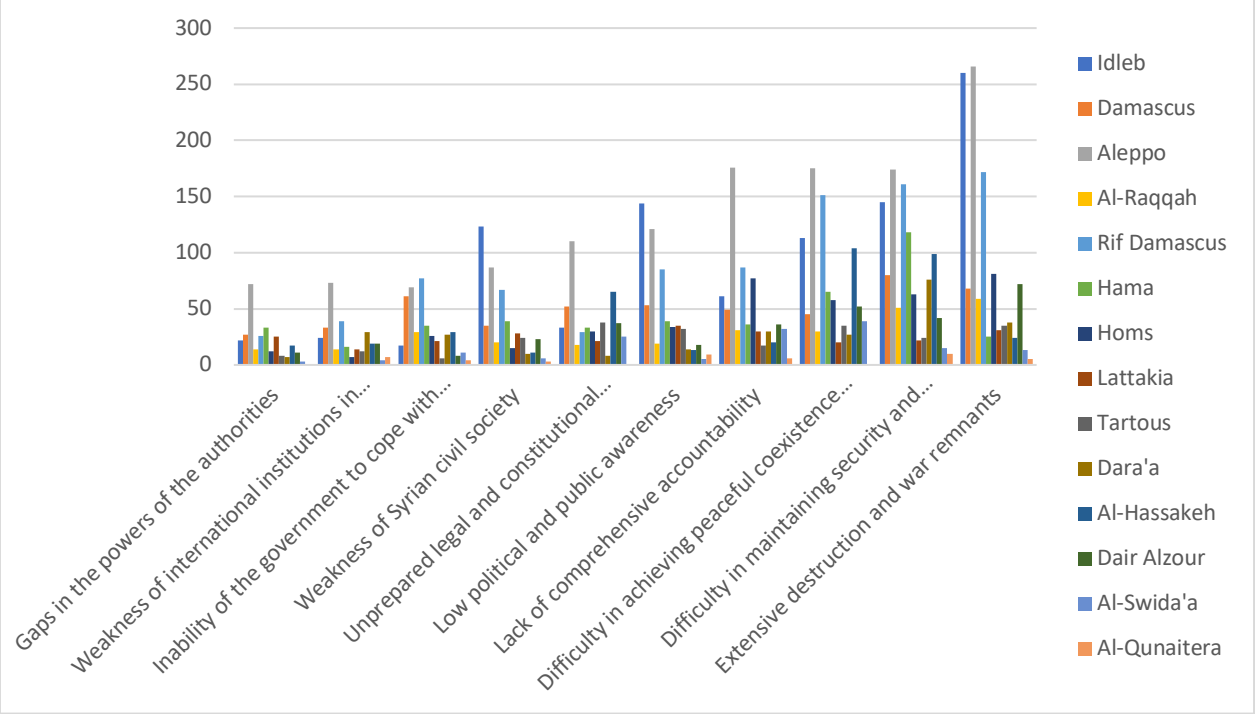


Chart (59)

As for decentralization and the future of Syria, 44% of the sample thought it would lead to fragmentation and relapse to conflict while 36% thought administrative decentralization was an important factor for the establishment of a safe environment and 20% affirmed it would be an important driver to promote a safe environment. The diversity of views reflects a conceptualization issue and the unclear differences between types of decentralization for many respondents in addition to confusing decentralization with other concepts.

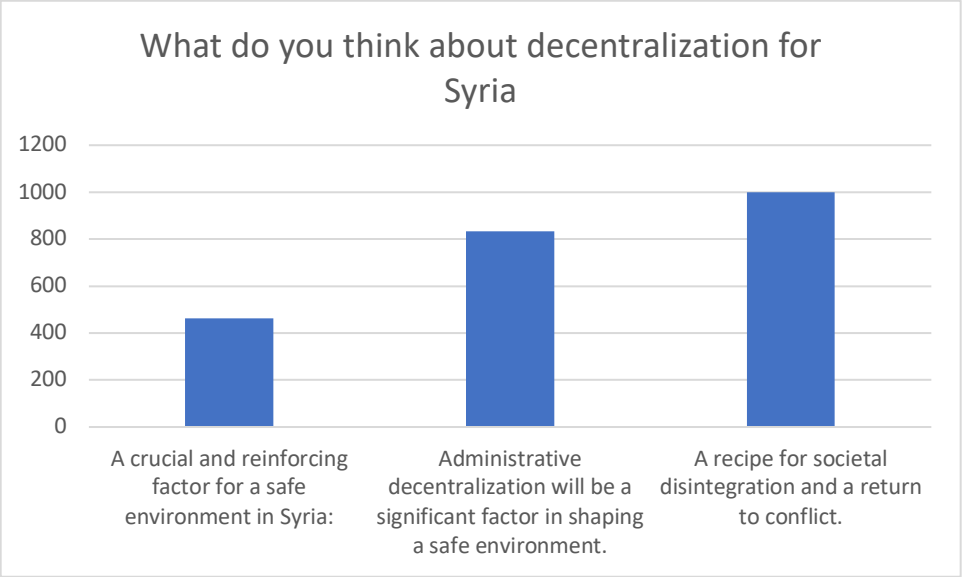


Chart (60)

Stratified by region, Aleppo was clearly inclined to administrative decentralization which reflects a desire to decrease the centralism in Damascus on the one hand and also reflects acceptance of decentralization in areas that used to be under governance models that are further from the center before the fall of the regime such as the countryside of Aleppo and Idlib. Nonetheless, many in less diverse governorates such as Hama and Idlib or where the situation is very sensitive like Homs continued to be concerned that decentralization would reflect on society. Hasakeh, on the other hand, showed tendency towards decentralization as a factor that would promote a safe environment. While Raqqa and Deir Ez-Zor disagreed considering decentralization a cause for social disintegration. This could be attributed to their experience with the “SDF decentralization” slogan, a model they believe did not reflect their local specificity although those areas are in need of development that could be offered through decentralization.

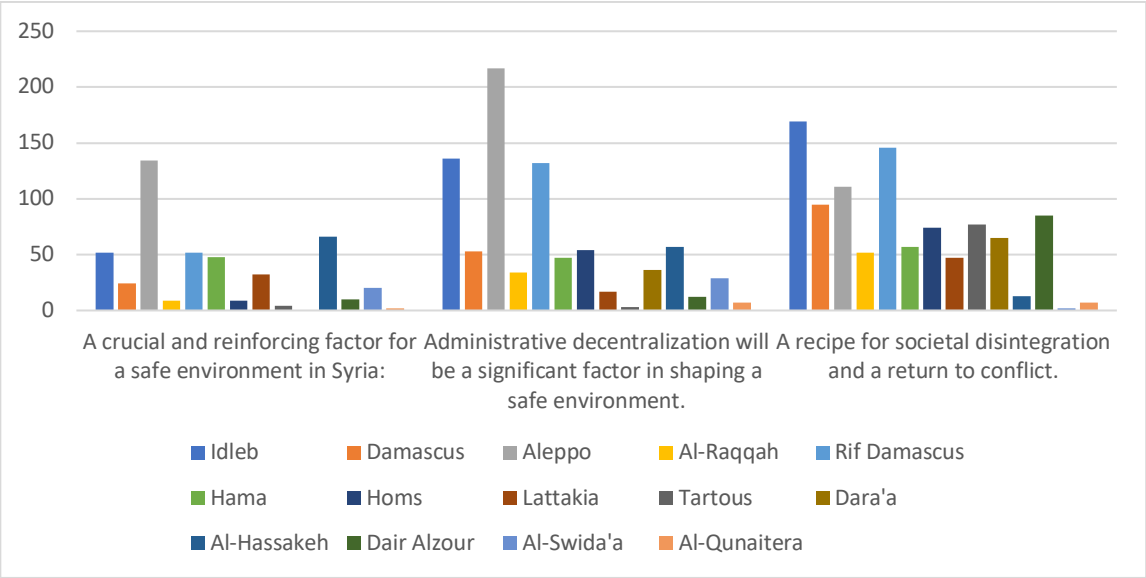


Chart (61)

Ethnically, Arabs were divided in their position towards decentralization as most of them were concerned it would lead to social disintegration while some supported administrative decentralization. Most Kurdish respondents believed it would be a driver for a safe environment (83 out of 156 respondents) 61 of them agreed that administrative decentralization would play a role in a safe environment while 12 Kurdish respondents believed it would cause a relapse to conflict.

10 of 19 Turkmen respondents believed it would be a driver for social disintegration while 8 thought administrative decentralization would be a driver for a safe environment. 15 of 30 Assyrian and Syriac respondents were in favor of administrative decentralization. So the percentages vary between respondents from other social components and those who did not disclose their ethnicity.

It is noted that administrative decentralization has received reasonable agreement for reasons associated with concerns of social disintegration, local development and the ability to accommodate the demands of all components to reflect their specificity.

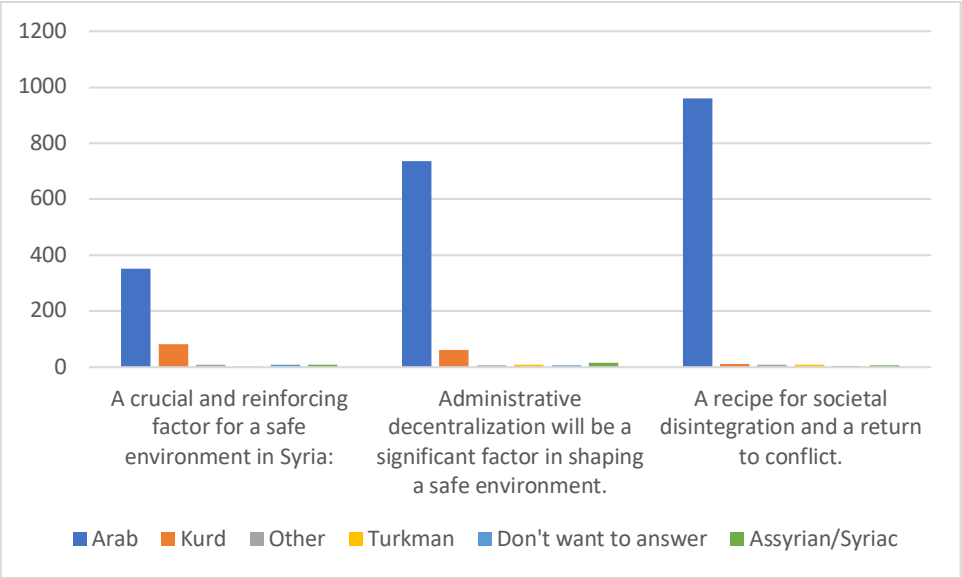


Chart (62)

As for the extent to which respondents believed **a safe and neutral environment conducive for holding local elections** was in place, 43% of the sample thought the environment was suitable while 30% believed it was still underway. 27% thought there was no safe and neutral environment conducive for local elections at present. This means most of the sample sees an opportunity for elections even if this requires more work which constitutes an important opportunity for an elections experience that starts from the local level to secure a broader representation, greater social satisfaction and increase trust.

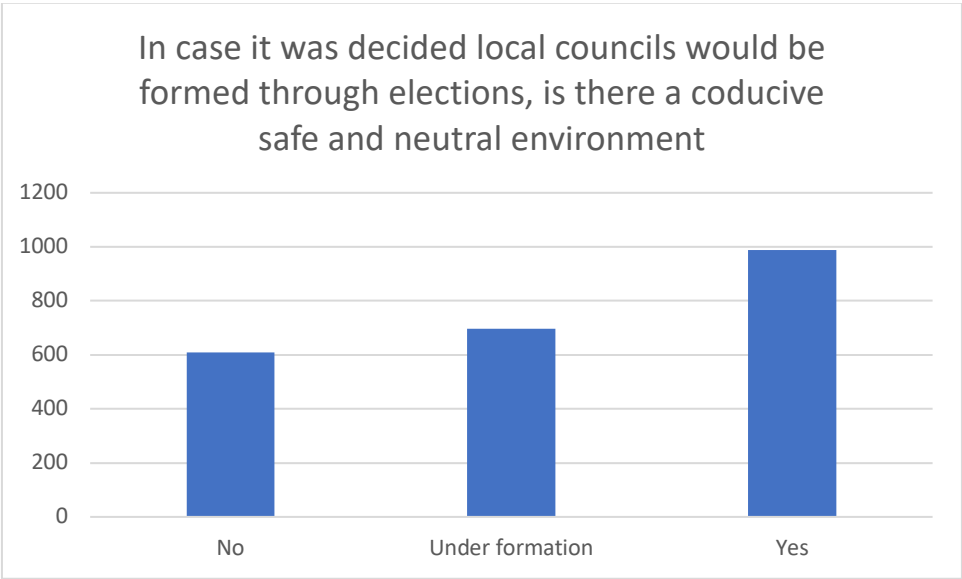


Chart (63)

Stratified by region, the sample shows discrepancy resulting from the varying levels of political and security stability in different governorates. Idlib and Aleppo governorates were the most inclined to believe that the environment is conducive for elections or is underway. This could be explained by the fact that these areas have already held local elections under more difficult conditions. Suweida, Hasakeh and Raqqa mostly thought the environment was unsuitable. This is attributed to the political disagreement with the Syrian government which the locals believe would reflect on local elections.

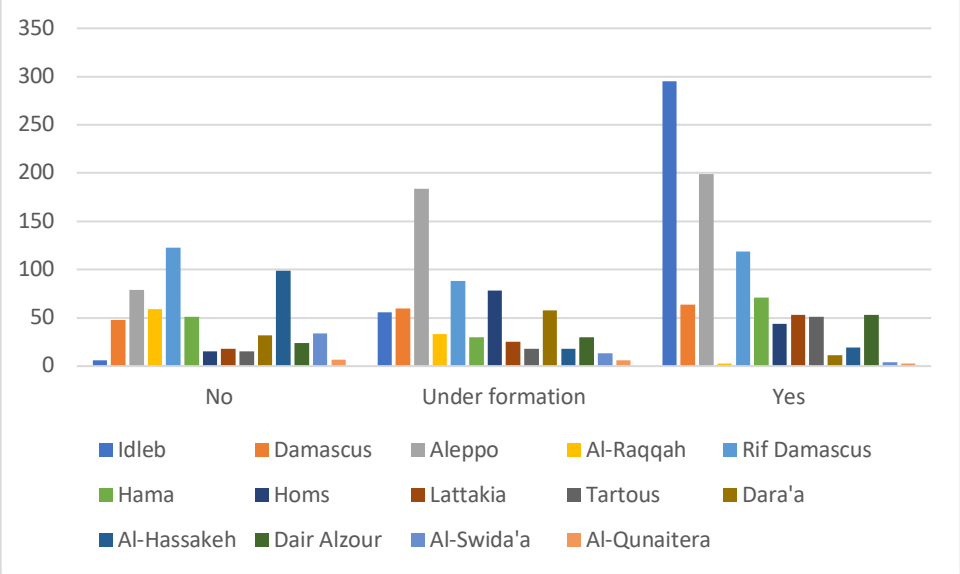


Chart (64)

It is noted that stable residents differed in their views of the possibility of holding local elections. This is attributable to the discrepancy between their areas of residence. However, they were more inclined to believe the environment was conducive or underway. Remarkably, a higher number of IDPs and displaced were optimistic about the possibility of holding elections and the availability of a conducive environment -despite their own instability- than those who thought the environment was not conducive.

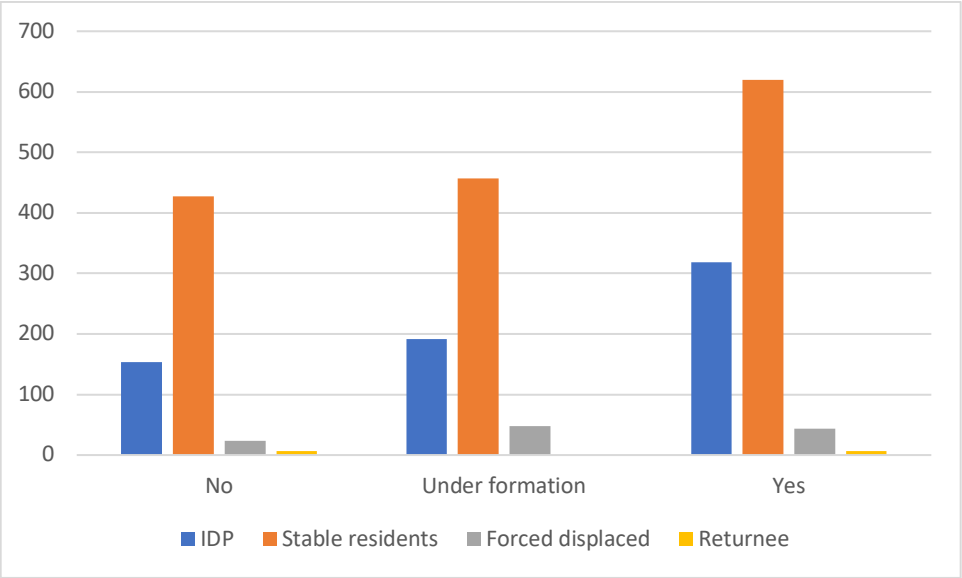


Chart (65)

On the extent to which a **safe environment would contribute to stabilization**, 51% of the sample believe there is direct connection between a safe environment and stabilization while 39% believed there is partial connection while other factors are also involved. 4% of the sample thought a safe environment was not connected to stabilization and 6% were uncertain about that contribution.

The high percentage of respondents associating safe environment with stabilization -fully or partially- indicates the importance of seeking to promote a safe environment as a point of entry for social, political and economic stability.

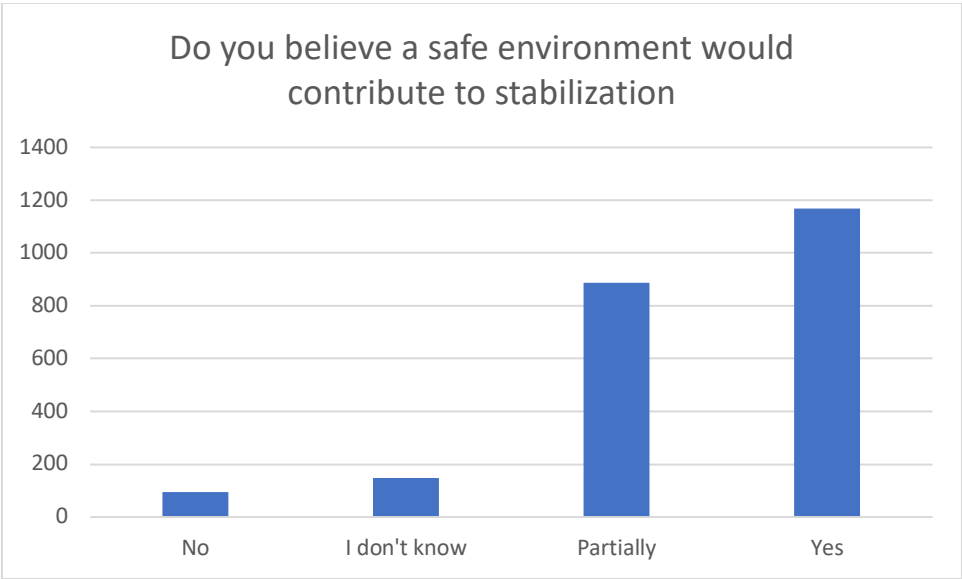

Chart (66)

With regards to feelings of belonging to the “new Syria” if a safe environment is achieved, 51% of the sample expressed a sense of belonging to a large degree if a safe environment is in place. 35% expressed moderate sense of belonging even if that environment is achieved while 10% showed a low sense of belonging and 4% said they did not have any sense of belonging. These percentages reflect significant association between feelings of national belonging and the availability of stability and security factors.

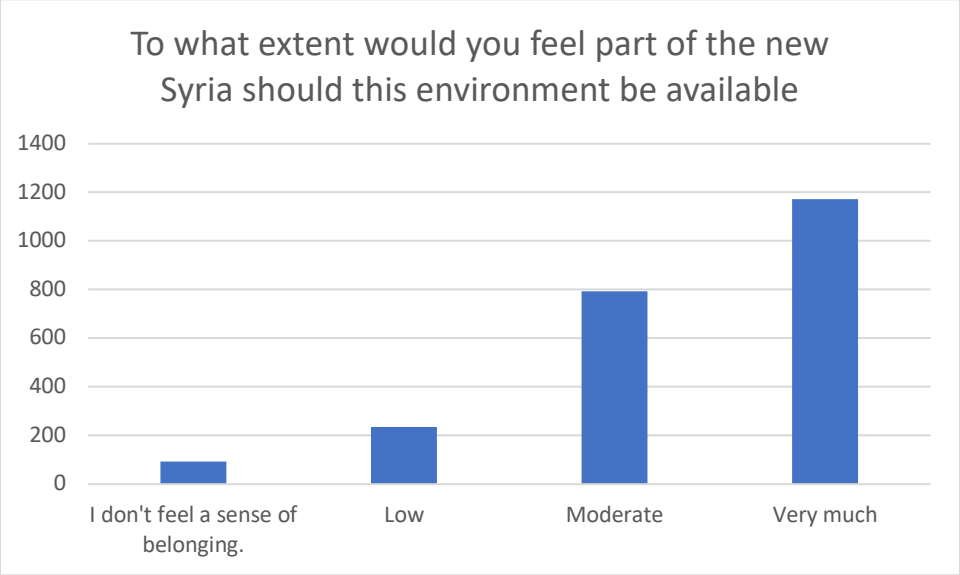


Chart (67)

Stratified by age, it is noted that those between 25-34 years old were closer to a sense of belonging to a large or moderate degree. This is because this age group was engaged in the developments over the last decade. This is followed by the younger category between 18 and 24. This indicates the importance of working on the youth to improve their sense of national belonging which is largely linked to the availability of a safe environment.

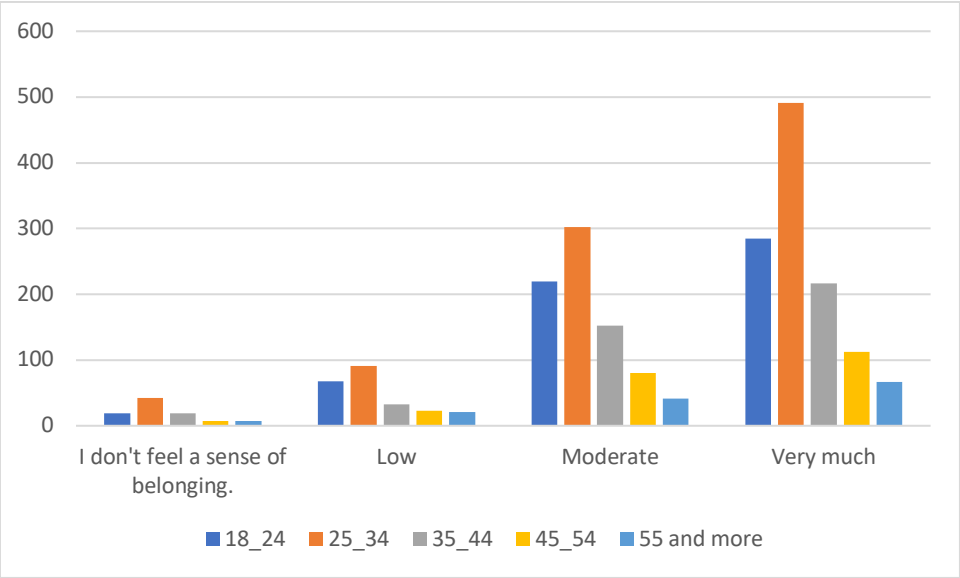


Chart (68)

On the association between the sense of belonging and the economic situation, contrary to what may be expected, the sample showed no direct connection as most respondents with limited or insufficient income and even those with no stable income expressed their sense of belonging to a large and moderate degree in case requirement for a safe environment are available. The low or no sense of belonging, on the other hand, were so much lower among these categories. Those with good income were closer to a high to moderate degree of belonging although some did have little or no sense of belonging even if a safe environment is available.

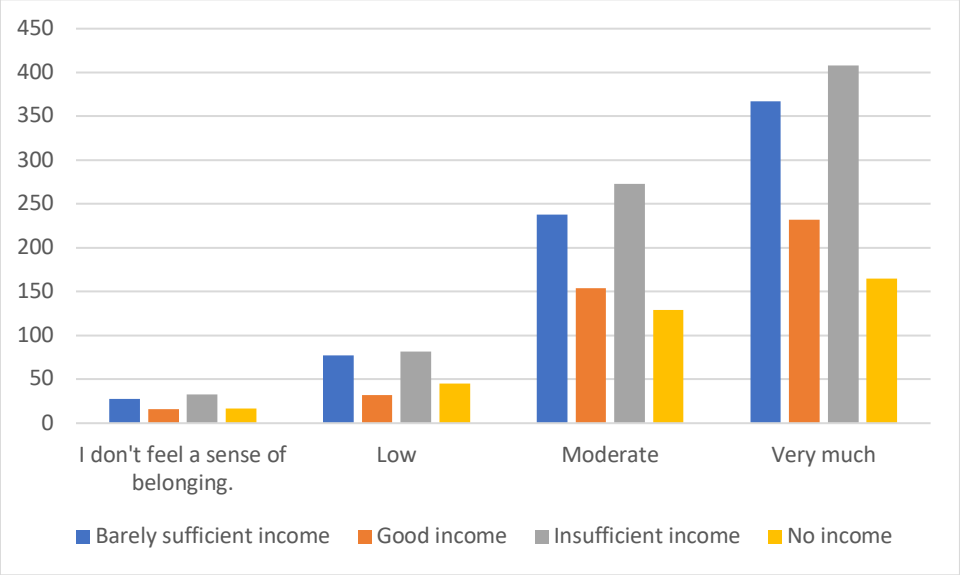


Chart (69)

As for perception of Syria as a safe and neutral environment in the future, 46% of the sample said Syria could be a safe and neutral environment in the future while 28% said the likelihood was moderate and 6% said it was low. 20% expressed their future concerns about Syria. These percentages indicate a high inclination in the sample for optimism and careful optimism with concerns that require serious remedies.

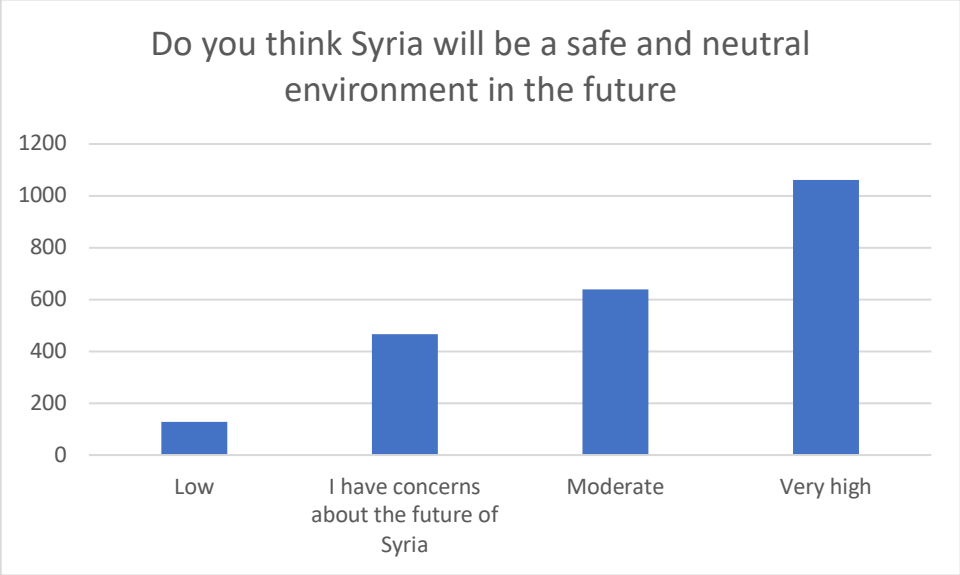


Chart (70)

Gender analysis shows that male and female respondents had similar attitudes towards the future of Syria. Women have more concerns which is attributable to the unstable security situation and concerns about the legal environment and the level of women participation in public and political life and concerns related to personal freedoms.

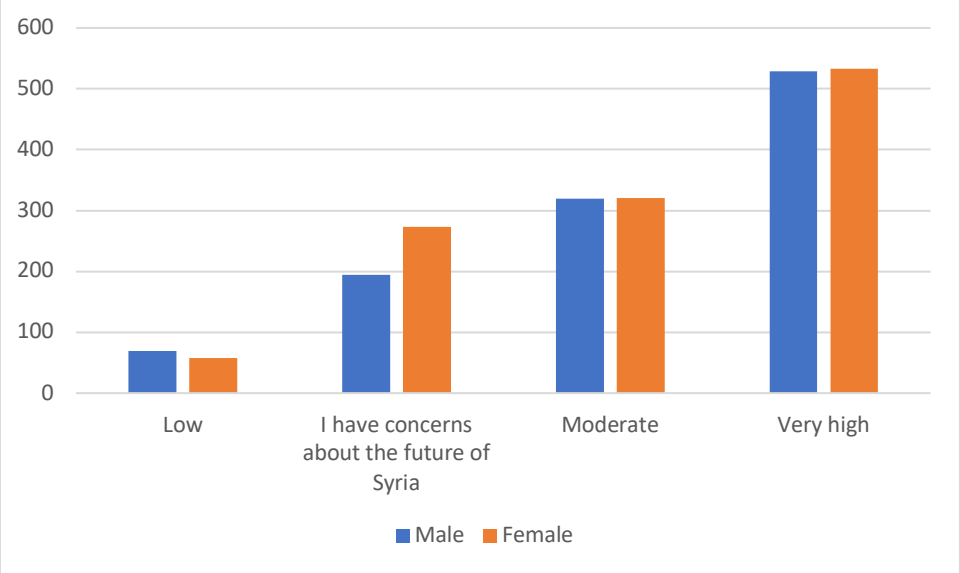

Chart (71)

From a religious/sectarian perspective, it is noted that opinions of the Sunnis varied around the possibility of a safe and neutral environment in Syria in the future. Most respondents believe it is highly possible (55%), possible (28%), less likely (4%) with 13% expressing concerns. Concerns are higher among other components: 37% of the Christians, 35% of the Alawites, 74% of the Druze. The same applies to agnostic respondents and these who did not want to disclose religious affiliation. This indicates the need to work seriously on reassuring components in constitutional, legal and practical terms. It also shows the importance of recognizing the social impact of the violations which occurred in the coast and Suweida which have largely decreased trust in the likelihood of having a safe and neutral environment and increased concerns to a large extent. Only 3% of the Druze respondents said there was a high chance for a safe and neutral environment in the future, while 14% of the Christian respondents believed it was highly likely and 38% moderately likely. 22% of Alawite respondents believed it is highly likely in the future while 33% said it was moderately likely.

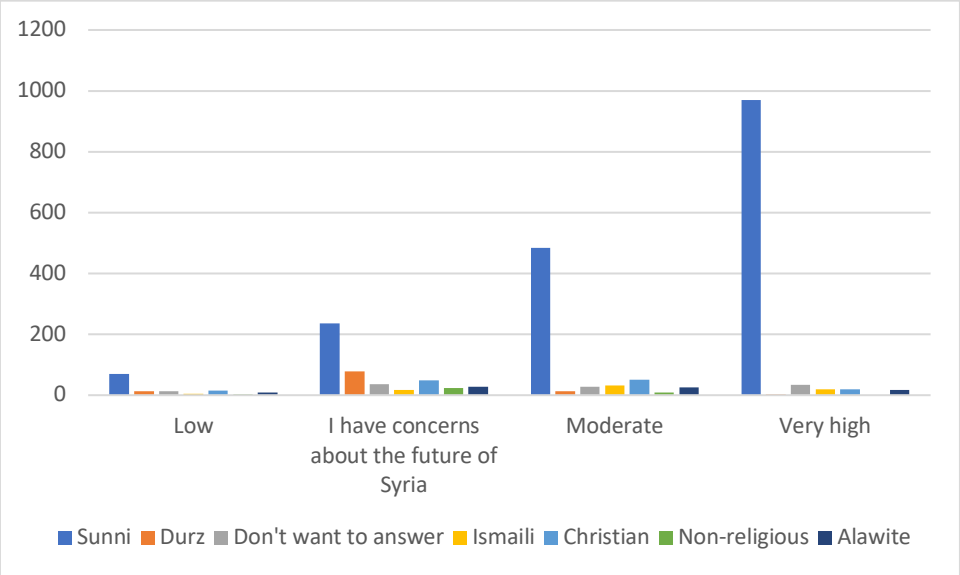


Chart (72)

| | Ismaeli | Druze | Sunni | Alawite | Not disclosed | Agnostic | Christian | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Low likelihood | 5 | 13 | 69 | 8 | 14 | 3 | 15 | 127 |
| Concerned about Syria's future | 18 | 78 | 235 | 28 | 36 | 23 | 49 | 467 |
| Moderately likely | 32 | 12 | 483 | 26 | 28 | 8 | 51 | 640 |
| Highly likely | 19 | 3 | 970 | 18 | 33 | | 19 | 1062 |
| **Total** | **74** | **106** | **1757** | **80** | **111** | **34** | **134** | **2296** |

Table (2)

# Social approach to safe and neutral environment: beyond the conventional security approach

The findings of the study indicate that, in Syrian societal consciousness, the concept of a 'safe and neutral environment' is no longer associated exclusively with the conventional security dimension based on controlling violence and eliminating threats. Rather, it has come to be understood as a complex social-institutional system where elements of protection, services, justice, recognition, political participation, legal guarantees and national belonging are interwoven. This conceptual transformation appears to be a direct product of a decade of conflict and geographical, institutional and social fragmentation with all associated displacement experiences and accumulated loss of trust.

It could be said that the Syrian society after the fall of the regime has developed its own conceptualization of a safe environment based more on direct life experience than on legal frameworks or elitist political discourse. Security in the social consciousness is no longer an abstract value or institutional procedure. Rather, it has come to be associated with the individual's ability to live in dignity within a system of services and stable social relations in the presence of institutions that are capable of providing protection without discrimination, ensuring justice and accountability, enabling participation and securing conditions for return.

**First: Centrality of the local perspective in building a safe environment**

The societal approach reveals a decisive transition from the centralized security model to the local/community-based security model. The people have come to regard safe environment from the perspective of access to effective protection within their direct community rather than through a further central authority. This is attributable to: dismantling previous security agencies, local patterns and the people's reliance on community-based protection networks.

This transformation has made safe environment a phenomenon which varies between difference places. It ranges between relative stability in the coast and Damascus to security and social fragility in Suweida, Raqqa, Deir Ez-Zor and Idlib. The society no longer speaks of 'national security', rather of 'security of regions' and 'security of communities' which reflects a redefinition of security affiliation from the level of the state to the level of local community.

**Second: Justice and equality as prerequisites for security**

Military or police protection is not enough to deem the environment safe in the societal consciousness. Data shows that equitable access to protection and services is a central parameter. The locals associate a safe environment with the neutrality of institutions, non-discrimination on political, regional or sectarian grounds, and the ability of the judiciary to hold influential people to account in addition to fair dispute resolution mechanisms.

This association explains why a large percentage of the people believe the absence of social justice and accountability constitute a threat equal to or greater than direct security threats. Societal security – in this view- can only be achieved when individuals feel equal in value and rights before institutions.

**Third: Economy and services as a foundation for stability**

The findings clearly show that the economic and services dimension constitute a structural pillar for a safe environment especially for IDPs, the poor and returnees. A safe return is not merely a geographical one but a return to decent housing, health and educational services, job opportunities and infrastructure. This approach affirms that social security goes beyond the absence of violence to include ability to rebuild one's life. Therefore, a safe environment is -socially- a comprehensive system of living not mere security and legal arrangements.

**Fourth: Institutional trust as a foundation for legitimacy**

One of the most prominent outcome of the societal approach is that a safe environment is measured by trust in the nascent institutions. The Syrian society, after years of losing trust in the state, judges a safe environment by the transparency of institutions, their political impartiality, capacity to provide services, being subject to accountability and the independence of the judiciary. Findings reveal that institutional trust is a regional phenomenon par excellence so it increases in areas that are more stable politically and in service provision and decreases in areas or persisting disputes and weak administration. This means that the legitimacy of the future state would be fragmented unless it achieves some regional balance in justice and service provision.

**Fifth: Coexistence and mutual recognition**

Society believes a safe environment is associated with the ability of Syrian components to coexist free of fear and based on mutual recognition, ensuring collective rights and free of revenge. This dimension appears clearly with religious and ethnic minorities who express high levels of anxiety towards Syria's future after the fall of the regime. This makes safe environment for them founded on political and identity guarantees unlike other groups who focused on services or reconstruction.

**Sixth: Transitional security and transitional justice**

The findings show that a safe environment -according to the community- is not a final state. Rather, it is a transitional period conditional upon the start of security sector reforms, institutional restructuring, transitional justice, remedying violations and accountability. Absence of these pathways would mean the continuation of the root causes of the conflict making a safe environment only a temporary truce that could collapse.

**Seventh: Belonging and future**

The societal perspective shows that a safe environment is not only a prerequisite for IDP return, but also a prerequisite for the restoration of a sense of national affiliation. Feelings of belonging to the "new Syria" are associated with the realization of justice, participation, recognition and social security and absence of exclusion. This explains optimism among many categories and the rise of fear among minorities who feel the absence of guarantees.

**Hence, a safe environment is not a technical security state but rather a new social contract based on equal protection, active justice, sustainable services, impartial institutions, political and identity guarantees, and social participation. This contract is not guaranteed by the authorities alone but is built through balance between local forces, institutional legitimacy, mutual trust, and the community's ability to reproduce its internal bonds.**

# Concluding Recommendations

The findings reveal limited sings of satisfaction with some variable with the persistence of some essential gaps related to transparency, ensuring rights, social justice, societal integration, political participation and the roles of the state and civil society.

When it comes to promoting legal transparency, the need for transparency is based on building relations of trust between institutions and society especially with categories that have a history of mistrust. Hence, this study recommends:

- Developing an official platform to publish legislation including: publishing draft laws before their ratification, announcing legislative amendments in a simplified manner and providing legal explanation in comprehensible terms.
- Establishing legal community liaison units in municipalities, service centers and universities.
- Enabling civil society organizations to monitor the legislative process through providing periodical transparency reports and allowing access to legislative discussion sessions.

As for guarantees of legal rights, the findings have shown correlation between legal security, sense of belonging and social fragility. The study hence recommends:

- The necessity of having a commission with local branches responsible for guaranteeing rights through powers related to receiving complaints, investigating violations and referral to the judiciary.
- Simplifying legal procedures related to civil registration, extracting documents and certifying ownership. It must be noted that costs of such transactions must also be reduced.

- Launching a legal protection program for vulnerable groups such as IDPs, women and people with no legal documents.

**As for improving security performance**: the findings confirm a tangible gap in the general performance from a community perspective. This gap can be explained by the direct security experience in relation to identity and geographical area. So the study recommends:

- Forming a training plan for security forces on concepts of neutrality, conflict management and human rights.
- Forming community police units which would embark on mediation, civil communication and resolving local disputes.
- Establishing a clear and protected mechanism to receive complaints about security forces whereby protection is accorded and legal follow-up is pursued.

**In terms of promoting political participation**, it means accelerating the onset of civil and political life and its laws. It must be based on the idea of participation. Any electoral law concerned with the local councils must give the councils administrative, oversight and development powers. Also, the participation of women and youth in this space through launching political training programs and local leadership platforms.

**As for promoting social integration**, it is important to launch social dialogue programs involving schools, youth centers and local councils. It is also important to support joint initiatives involving social components in cultural activities, volunteering projects, youth initiatives in addition to providing psychosocial support for returnees and IDPs.

**In order to mitigate social vulnerability**, economic programs for the support of small enterprises, support livelihoods, vocational training must be developed and prioritized in addition to promoting social protection nets.

**As for promoting the role of civil society**, it is important to expand the reach of civil society organizations to include even rural areas. In addition, trust must be built between CSOs, society and CSOs and the state.

**The philosophy of the recommendations was built on the findings which indicated much social potential which could be invested if legal transparency, right guarantees, security reforms, equitable political participation, social integration and balanced civil and institutional structures were in place to create a realistic feasible pathway to support building a safe, neutral and sustainable environment in post-Assad Syria.**

**To conclude, the approach goes beyond the legal concept of security to encompass a complex social framework that combines physical, social, economic, legal, political and identity security. It must also be based on the collective capacity of society as a whole to build a fair and stable**

**environment that is inclusive and conducive to return and sense of belonging. Thus, a safe environment -from a societal perspective- is not an end by itself but a fundamental condition for building the future state.**