

The Humanitarian File

Forced Demographic Change in Syria

A Major Syrian Concern





This report is the second in a series which together constitute the humanitarian file prepared by the Syrian Civic Platform (SCP). Data was collected through consultations held with nearly 3,500 diverse Syrians between October 2017 and May 2018.

Executive Summary:

Evictions and forced displacement constitute a flagrant violation of a wide range of internationally recognized human rights. They also create serious concerns among Syrians regarding their rights as individuals or groups. During the Syrian conflict, the warring parties have consistently used forced displacement as a methodical approach against individuals and population groups who have opposed their opinions and political agendas. The Government of Syria (GoS) -the strongest force on the ground- has used forced displacement regularly.

This report sheds light on the views of the population in the following nine Syrian provinces: Deir Ezzor, Raqqa, Hassakeh, Idlib, Homs, Daraa, Quneitra, Suweida, and Damascus countryside. In addition to Syria's neighboring countries: Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraqi Kurdistan. This information was obtained by conducting 304 community consultation sessions between October 2017 and May 2018. A total of 3,376 people participated in these sessions, 46.6% (1,580) of whom were women. The number of participants representing civil society organizations (CSOs) numbered 705.

It is noteworthy that this report is based mainly on community consultation sessions in which Syrians' perspectives about demographic change were identified. The report outlines the following issues as identified by participants: indicators of demographic change in Syria, the objectives behind this policy/strategy, solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing demographic change, and the role of CSOs regarding demographic change.

From the consultations, the report concluded the following:

- The population in almost all Syrian villages, towns, and cities believe that the dominant forces in different regions are all carrying out forced displacement, and are trying to resettle their loyal residents to serve their long-term goals in areas under their control.

- Many groups in the Syrian population believe that forced displacement does have sectarian or ethnic objectives, particularly in diverse areas with many different national and ethnic groups.

- Demographic change takes several forms, as it begins with the forced displacement of populations from certain areas, changing the names of these areas, and finally the transfer of population groups to these areas.

The following are solutions suggested by the participants to counter the strategy of forced demographic change:

- Serious discussions towards a political solution in Syria should take place, followed by a transparent and orderly political transition.
- International safeguards should be guaranteed to limit inadmissible practices committed by various forces, in addition to binding international mechanisms that allow for the forcibly displaced to return to their homes.
- The certification and documentation of properties and ownerships.
- Heightened monitoring around the practice of granting Syrian nationality to non-Syrians.

Introduction:

Since the onset of the popular movement in 2011, the besieging of cities, perhaps one of the most controversial aspects of the Syrian conflict is the issue of forced demographic change, and it has been one of Syrians' main concerns for years. This act has multiple indicators; *inter alia*, the coerced movement of populations away from their homes in regions that opposed the GoS, as well as Decree No. 10 of 2018 issued by the GoS, which stipulates the conditions by which different areas of Syria are to be reorganized, developed and reconstructed.

Indicators that cause concern among Syrians around this issue are many, and are both obvious and subtle. Some of these indicators are reflected in the transfer of property ownership in ways both legal and illegal, while others are reflected in changing the names of regions and neighborhoods, in addition to the transfer of populations between areas.

The strategy of forced demographic change has been used by the ruling Syrian Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party since long before the current Syrian conflict.

The Syrian Ba'ath Party mainly adopted this strategy in the Kurdish-majority northeast of Syria, where it transferred members of Arab tribes other areas of Syria to areas with a Kurdish majority. These areas were later known as the "Arab Belt" or the "Green Belt", and the transferred population were later known as "Arab al-Ghamir".

International humanitarian law prohibits the act of deportation or forcible transfer of a population from their home or home region, in which they lawfully reside, without justification.

Generally, forced displacements in Syria over the past seven years have been preceded by widespread rights violations, such as the systematic bombing of residential neighborhoods and vital facilities and urban siege. The objective of these initial violations is to achieve control of the targeted areas, create conditions favorable to the party imposing the siege, and to evacuate those areas with an eye to transferring specific demographic segments.

In most cases of forced displacement in Syria, it was GoS forces that imposed sieges and then forcibly displaced the population; the common denominator of all populations forcibly displaced is their political opposition to the GoS. Thus, demographic change in Syria is arguably imposed based on political affiliation. During the Syrian conflict, forced displacement began in the town of Zabadani following a fierce military campaign launched by the GoS and its allies against the town. The population of Zabadani was transferred to Idlib province; the evacuations took place under international supervision and were facilitated by the UN, and were known as the Four Towns Agreement, one of the most important negotiated evacuations since the onset of the popular movement in 2011.

The agreement allowed the evacuation of the following four besieged areas:

- The towns of Zabadani and Madaya, controlled by opposition armed groups and besieged by the GoS forces.
- The towns of Kafriya and al-Fu'ah, controlled by the GoS and besieged by opposition armed groups.

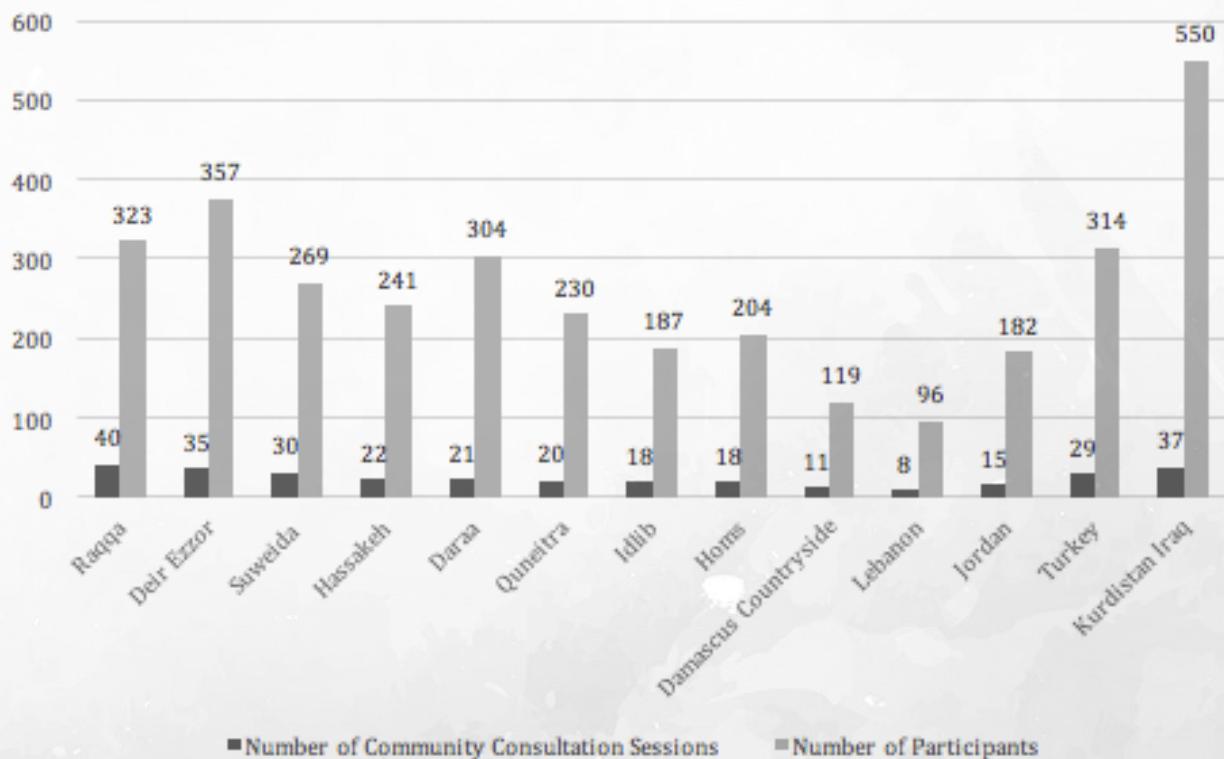
This report, which studies in-depth the use of forced demographic change in Syria, is the second of a series of reports that together constitute the humanitarian file compiled by the SCP, based on community consultation sessions conducted with diverse groups of Syrians between October 2017 and May 2018. The other reports in the series address the following issues:

- Siege
- The Astana de-escalation zones agreement
- Detainees and forcibly disappeared persons
- Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees

Through this report, the SCP attempts to delve into the details of demographic change issue across multiple provinces in Syria, bringing attention to the perspectives of people who live in the affected areas.

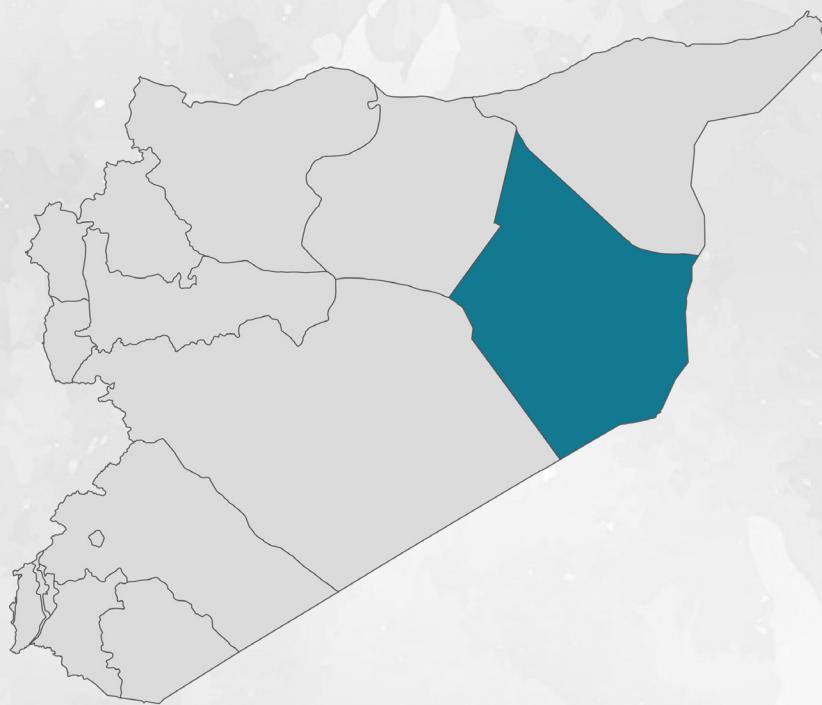
This report was based on 304 community consultation sessions conducted between October 2017 and May 2018, in nine Syrian provinces: Idlib, Hassakeh, Raqqa, Deir Ezzor, Homs, Damascus countryside, Suweida, Daraa,

and Quneitra. Additional sessions were conducted with Syrians seeking asylum in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraqi Kurdistan. A total of 3,376 people participated in the sessions, 1,580 of whom were women, and 705 of whom represented CSOs. The average time for each session was between 4 and 6 hours.



The Syrian provinces

Deir Ezzor province



The Syrian provinces:

I. Deir Ezzor province:

At the present time, GoS forces control the regions south of the Euphrates River (areas from the city of al-Bukamal in the east to the village of Maadan Atek in the west), while the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) control the areas north of the Euphrates River. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) still controls small, isolated parts of the province.

For this report, 35 discussion sessions were held, half of them inside Syria where the residents of Deir Ezzor are located, and the other half in the city of Şanlıurfa, Turkey, with Syrian refugees from the province. The sessions took place between February and April 2018. These consultations included 357 participants, 198 of whom were women. Fifty CSO representatives participated in the sessions.

Demographic Change:

Participants from Deir Ezzor held diverse views on whether or not forced demographic change has taken place, and by whom. A number of participants indicated that in their opinion what happened in Deir Ezzor did not amount to demographic change, while others observed that the political conflict as well as violence committed by all parties have led to the adoption of a demographic change strategy according to current circumstances and dominant powers.

Indicators of forced demographic change:

Participants from Deir Ezzor observed that the signs of demographic change have manifested in the form of various practices of various armed parties, starting with changing the names of villages, towns and cities, displacing their populations, and replacing the displaced population with groups from different ethnic or ideological backgrounds.

In one such example, ISIS changed names of towns and streets in Deir Ezzor, as well as changing name of the province itself to "al-Khiar state". In the wake of ISIS, Shiite militias followed a similar approach; they built the Husseiniyyas - a congregation hall for Shia commemoration ceremonies- and changed the name of the "Omari Mosque" in Deir Ezzor to the "Radwan Mosque".

Furthermore, the SDF has changed the names of some locations since they took control of parts of the province. They also prevented some residents from returning to their homes, as in some towns along the Western Line, under the pretext of continued military operations.

Objectives behind forced demographic change:

According to the participants, the objectives are:

- The consolidation of power on the ground by co-opting and transforming the symbolism of key sites.
- Reinforcing the power of those affiliated with dominant force in the region.
- Subjugating populations with different political orientations.

These objectives often have a basis in sectarian or national motives, as in the case of the displacement of Sunni Arab populations from their homes. Natural resources are another strategic factor that motivate the strategy of forced demographic change.

Parties that have adopted a strategy of forced demographic change:

According to the participants, most of the dominant forces in the province have been involved in forced displacement of the population. The dominant forces were categorized as follows: the GoS, ISIS, Shiite militias, the US-led coalition, and the SDF.

Solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing forced demographic change:

- 1) International agreements that prevent forced demographic change should be reached.
- 2) Cessation of hostility, followed by the re-launch of the political transition process.
- 3) Full documentation of the population's property and real estate ownership, and the names of towns in areas witnessing demographic changes.
- 4) The exit of fighters and the return of the people to their homes or home regions.

5) Restoration of original names for cities, places and facilitates.

The role of civil society:

The majority of participants said that CSOs cannot play a role in combating forced demographic change because of military hegemony. Some respondents suggested that CSOs could document and conduct media campaigns to highlight the ongoing strategy of forced demographic change.

The Syrian provinces

Raqqa province



II. Raqqa province:

Following the expulsion of ISIS from most areas, on October 20, 2017 the SDF took control of most of the province. The GoS now controls the parts of the province south of the Euphrates River.

Forty discussion sessions were held with 323 individuals from Raqqa, 115 of whom were women and 37 of whom were CSO representatives.

Demographic change:

Raqqa Province has been subject to forced demographic change. This is due to two main reasons: How often effective control of the province has changed hands between various groups, and the ethnic diversity of the province, with significant populations of Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmen living in Raqqa.

The participants agreed that all parties have adopted the strategy of forced demographic change, each according to its political objectives.

Indicators of forced demographic change:

- When ISIS controlled Raqqa province, demographic change was reflected by changing the names of some towns and villages, as well as changing the name of the province to the "al-Barakeh State". They also converted the only church in the province to an Islamic headquarters. In addition, ISIS and some other Islamic armed groups displaced the majority of Kurds living in the province and confiscated their properties.
- When the SDF took control of the province, purchases of lands owned by Arabs were actively made by Kurds in the province.
- Arabs have faced baseless and false accusations of affiliation with ISIS and consequently have had their property confiscated. The objective of such accusations is to confiscate their properties.
- The names of cities, squares and streets have been changed, and areas were re-named with Kurdish names or after Kurdish leaders. (Participants noted that almost all ethnic groups in Raqqa has suffered from this phenomenon across different periods, including the Kurds themselves).

- Residents have been prevented from returning to their homes, especially to the villages of Tell Abyad and Ain Issa, even after ISIS had been expelled from the province.

Objectives behind forced demographic change:

According to the participants, the objectives are:

- The establishment of an independent Kurdistan separate from Syria.
- Change to the demographics in Raqqa's northern countryside.
- Laying the groundwork for a Kurdish-majority area in order to influence future elections or referendums.
- Political objectives related to the Kurds' existence.

Parties that have adopted the strategy of forced demographic change:

The participants agreed that all the parties have been involved in demographic change; these parties are the armed opposition groups, then ISIS and finally the SDF.

Solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing forced demographic change:

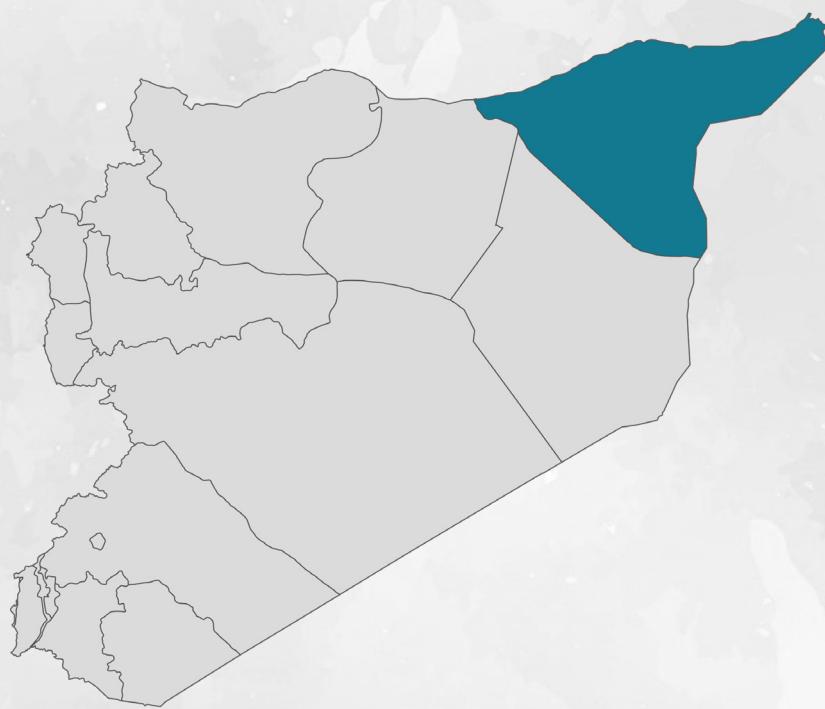
- 1) Given that Raqqa is within the US-led coalition's area of influence, the US-led coalition is responsible for intervening to stop forced displacements as well as forced demographic change.
- 2) Establish an elected local civil administration that represents all of the diverse groups and communities in the province.
- 3) Facilitate the return of IDPs by securing safe and dignified return, as well as providing the basic necessities of life in their areas, especially in Raqqa countryside (from the town of Sabkha to Ma'adan).
- 4) The track for a political solution in Syria should begin on the basis of international resolutions, especially the Geneva Commiqué which ensures a political transition that guarantees a minimum level of security and safety for the displaced population whose areas were seized by the GoS.

The role of civil society:

According to participants, CSOs have facilitated dialogue between local community groups, promoted awareness of pluralism and citizenship, and mobilized and advocated for the voluntary return of IDPs and refugees. However, some suggested that CSOs could document and monitor potential demographic changes, and monitor property transactions that might have demographic implications.

The Syrian provinces

Hassakeh province



III. Hassakeh province

Hassakeh province is under the control of the SDF, with limited deployment of GoS forces in the city center and some other locations.

Twenty-two discussion sessions were held in Hassakeh province with 241 people 142 of whom were women, as well as with 77 CSO representatives. Thirty-seven additional discussion sessions were held in the Kurdistan region of Iraq with 550 Syrian refugees, 210 of whom were women, and 15 of whom were CSO representatives.

Forced demographic change:

The situation in Hassakeh province is quite different from other provinces; participants broadly believe that the province was not subjected to forced demographic change during the current Syrian conflict. However, it was subjected to the largest demographic change by the Syrian Ba'ath Party in 1960s.

Indicators of forced demographic change:

The participants observed that during the current conflict in Syria there have been no significant demographic changes in the province, except for the displacement of the Assyrian inhabitants of the al-Khabur area by ISIS.

However, the major demographic change took place in the 1960s when, under the Agrarian Reform Law, the GoS seized agricultural lands owned by Kurds, and resettled the Kurdish-owned lands with Arabs from Raqqa within the so-called the Arab Belt.

Demographic change has taken several forms in Hassakeh, most notably:

- In the past, the GoS changed the names of the Kurdish villages and towns in Hassakeh to Arabic names. Today, the Kurdish self-administration is trying to completely change the identity of the province once more.
- The Kurdish self-administration has issued a law under which it can seize the properties of migrant persons as well as IDPs.
- Some participants indicated that the Kurdish self-administration, through imposing its own ideology in the region as well as imposing forced conscription,

has contributed to the displacement of the Kurdish and non-Kurdish population and youth from the areas under their control. These displacements are clearly of a political nature.

The participants pointed out that the latest developments in the town of Afrin (in Aleppo province), following the entry of the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army on January 20, 2018, have led to substantial concerns among Kurds, particularly after the residents of rural Damascus and Homs were forcibly displaced and transferred to the town of Afrin. These concerns have been reinforced by the policy of seizing homes, properties and lands under various pretenses, as well as granting Turkish identity cards to residents present in the area, regardless of whether they are residents of Afrin or not.

Parties that have adopted the strategy of forced demographic change:

As mentioned earlier, the Syrian Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party is the primary party responsible for the major demographic change that took place in the province during the 1960s. In recent years, this strategy has been adopted by ISIS and then the SDF.

Solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing forced demographic change:

- 1) The abolition of laws that caused the displacement of the population (forced conscription, especially for women, seizure of properties and education-related problems)
- 2) Review and re-address the previous lingering issues regarding the Arab Belt, as well as Arab al-Ghamir, by finding fair compensation for those classified as Arab al-Ghamir and the original landowners. One of the participants believed that a solution could be to return the Arabs to their home regions, as well as to allow for restitution of properties that were once taken from the Kurdish population.
- 3) Establishing a new social contract based on respect for all segments of Syrian society, irrespective of their intellectual, political, ethnic and religious differences.
- 4) Consolidate the concept of citizenship in the region.

- 5) Restore the original names of villages, towns and cities.
- 6) Exert pressure to reach international conventions on the protection of national ownership.
- 7) A resolution should be issued requiring all dominant parties to facilitate the return of IDPs and refugees to their homes or home regions.
- 8) Improve the economic environment and ensure freedom of expression.
- 9) Facilitate the entry of international observers.

A political solution at the national level in Geneva is the basis for reaching solutions in the region, particularly with regards to democratic governance that preserves the rights of all segments of Syrian society and guarantees the return of IDPs and refugees. Some participants believe that stability and reform will be ensured by establishing a federal state.

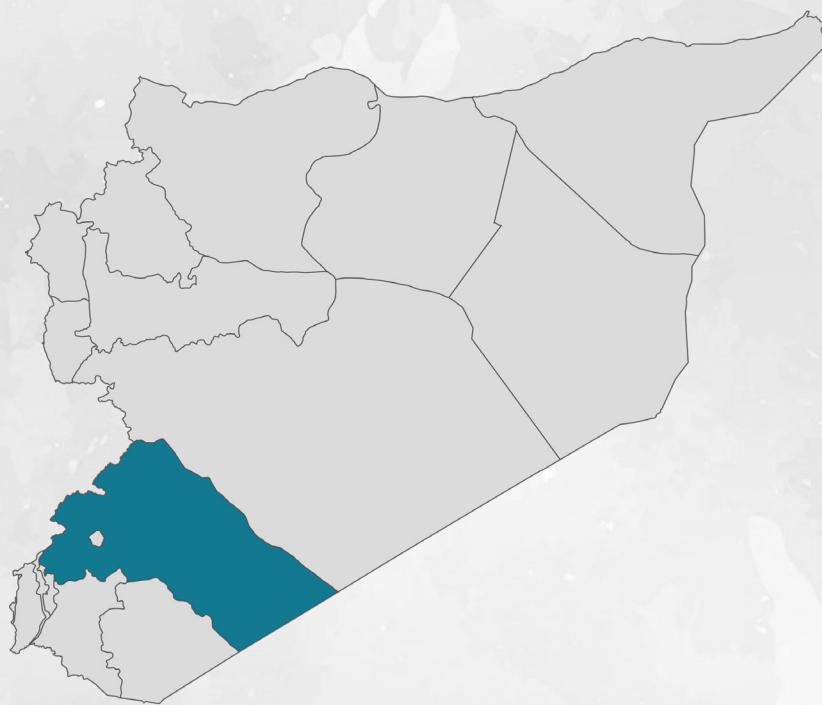
The role of civil society:

According to participants, CSOs have taken the following steps regarding forced demographic change:

- Advocating on behalf of the principles of tolerance and co-existence among the different segments of Syrian society; implementing projects that guarantee freedom of opinion and respect for privacy away from sectarianism and ethnicity; and disseminating a culture of equality.
- Property documentation as well as monitoring cases of demographic change,
- A number of participants believed that CSOs would be unable to do anything; they considered demographic change to be something sponsored and approved by regional and international countries.

The Syrian provinces

The province of Damascus Countryside



IV. The province of Damascus Countryside:

Over the past two years, the province of Damascus Countryside has witnessed forced displacement of all the populations living in areas beyond GoS control; these areas were then fully controlled by the GoS in the first half of 2018.

Eleven discussion sessions were held with the participation of 119 people, including 70 women. The number of CSO representatives who participated in these sessions was 45. In addition, 8 meetings were held in Lebanon with 96 Syrians, 48 of whom were women, in addition to 60 CSO representatives.

Forced demographic change:

Participants were divided about demographic change in the province of Damascus Countryside; some have claimed forced demographic changes did not take place, and the current changes in the population are merely one of the war's unintended consequences. On the other hand, there are participants who believed that systematic demographic changes, on a sectarian basis, were under way by Iranian militias in cooperation with the GoS to protect the Syrian capital, Damascus.

Indicators of forced demographic change:

- The participants suggested that the strategy of forced demographic change is one being pursued by most of the various armed forces operating across Syria. As previously mentioned, the first instance of these demographic changes in the Syrian war was documented in the town of Zabadani, whose population was displaced to the north of Syria. Demographic changes were also enforced in the neighborhoods of Darayya, Qaboun, and Barzeh, and also in the areas of Qalamun, Dumair, and Eastern Ghouta. The factors behind displacements in all of these areas are often political, in the sense that all opponents of the GoS must leave, or be allowed to remain under its authority without guarantees of protection.

- The participants also pointed out that forced demographic change taking place in both Damascus and its countryside is closely linked to Iran, as they reported the following cases:

- o The Shia doctrine and ideology are propagated in some neighborhoods in the historic city center of Damascus.

- o- One participant stated that in the area of Darayya, in the suburb of Damascus, a large number of lands had been purchased for Iran.
 - o- Russia has been granted permission to reconstruct the al-Razi area in Damascus and to resettle Shiites in it. In addition, there is a systematic destruction of slums to make way for later investment by certain parties.
 - o- In the Sayeda Zeinab area, south of Damascus, most of the Sunni population has been displaced, and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah has provided significant support to the Alawite and Shi'a IDPs to stay in this area.
 - o- On the other hand, one of the participants reported that IDPs had returned to the Muadamiyat al-Sham area, south of Damascus.
 - o- In the town of Assal al-Ward, one participant reported that the residents had received a significant number of IDPs from Aleppo, al-Jazeera, Homs and Ghouta.
 - o- The difficulty in distinguishing forced demographic change from the reality of conflict is demonstrated through personal story of one participant, relayed here: "I am from Darayya, and I left the area since the outbreak of violence, but my family stayed and they later went to shelters - voluntary displacement – in Al-Kuswa and no one forced them to leave. This cannot be considered an incident that confirms demographic change."
- Other practices mentioned by the participants, which are related in one way or another to demographic change, are forged documents (power of attorney letters, real estate deeds) which have been largely done in agreement with real estate offices to transfer ownership to new owners.

Objectives behind forced demographic change:

- Reduce the proportion of Sunnis who may pose a threat to GoS rule as well as Iran's influence, and repopulate majority-Sunni areas with foreign and/or native Shiites – alongside Iranian efforts to pursue its broader agenda: that is, conversions to Shiite Islam among the wider population;
- Ensure the region's loyalty to the GoS;
- The protection of some minorities and their holy places, as well as the interests of certain countries;
- Obtaining land for use as bargaining chips in future negotiations.

Parties that have adopted the strategy of forced demographic change:

The GoS along with the Iranian militias and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

Solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing forced demographic change:

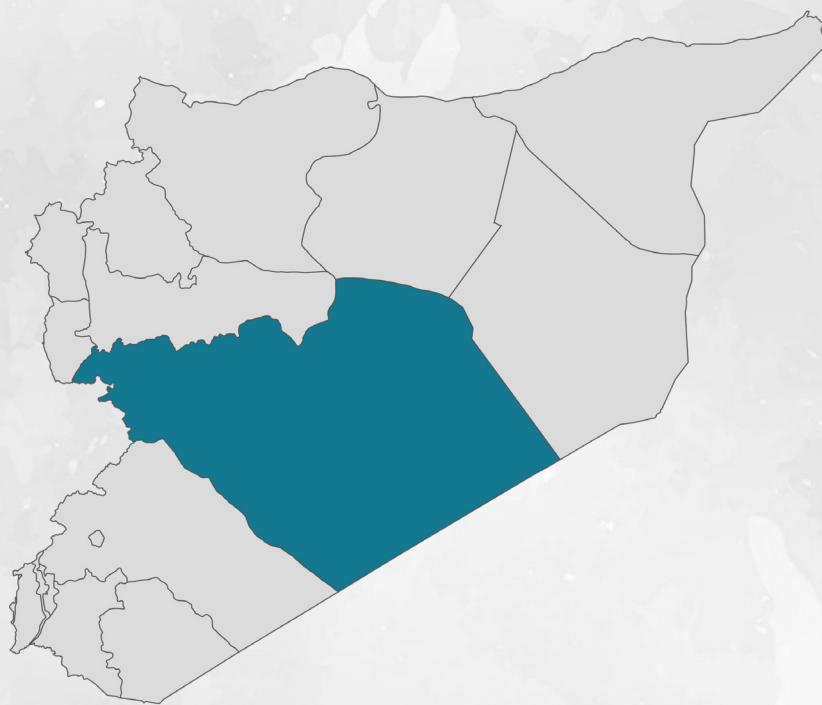
- 1) The track for a political solution in Syria should be re-started, including a ceasefire agreement; cessation of all hostilities and arrests; the creation of conditions that ensure the safe return of IDPs and refugees; and reconstruction of the devastated areas;
- 2) The withdrawal of foreign militias and the return of indigenous people to their areas;
- 3) Find solutions for young people in terms of compulsory military service, both regular and reserve;
- 4) Activate and strengthen state institutions;
- 5) Activate the role of civil society in efforts to achieve reconciliations;
- 6) Ensure property rights are respected, as it is one of the most urgent challenges with regard to ensuring a truly multi-ethnic society.

The role of civil society:

According to the participants, CSOs have been engaged in some actions to address forced demographic change, such as finding a mechanism to document property ownership of populations who have no official documents or ownership papers; conducting campaigns against demographic change; communicating with local committees to prove property ownership, communicating to decision makers to deliver people's voices; raising awareness of the dangers of forced demographic change. This role must be intensified and continued on a wider scale.

The Syrian provinces

Homs province



V. Homs province:

Over the course of the Syrian crisis, Homs province has been under the control of many different forces. However, on May 2018, a deal was reached in Homs northern countryside, the last opposition-controlled area of Homs. The deal provided for an evacuation of rebel fighters and their families from the area which includes the towns of Hula, Rastan and Talbiseh, with GoS forces to take control of former opposition strongholds. The deal came after the GoS forces threatened to launch a massive military campaign to break into the area.

The community consultations sessions on which the Humanitarian File is based were conducted before these recent developments in the province. The number of sessions held was 18, with the participation of 204 people, includin80 women. Seventy-six participants were representatives of CSOs.

Forced demographic change:

Homs is the first province in which discussions about a large-scale demographic change took place. The sectarian conflict was evident in the province, and was confirmed by the participants. They pointed out entire populations were displaced from their neighborhoods, and Iranian militias, in addition to soldiers affiliated with the GoS, were re-settled there.

Indicators of forced demographic change:

Participants reported that demographic changes are ongoing in the province. Entire populations of villages and neighborhoods have been forcibly displaced, such as in the neighborhoods of al-Qusair, Karm al-Zaytoun, Tadmur, Bayadah, Ghouta, Tal Kalakh, Baba Amr and Bab Sbaa. These Sunni neighborhoods have been resettled by sectarian militias affiliated with GoS.

Furthermore, the customs, traditions and rites of these newly settled communities have begun to appear, and the names of these villages and neighborhoods were replaced with names associated with Iranian militias.

Some participants observed that forced demographic change was evident in both provinces of Homs and Damascus countryside through the forced displacement of their populations. In some cases, evacuations of the populations were carried out under international auspices and as a result of side

agreements (sponsored by the UN). There was a near consensus among all participants that the GoS, Iran and its militias, led by Hezbollah, were responsible for the displacement of the populations.

Objectives behind forced demographic change:

In general, the objective is to change the population structure and replace it with populations that might have more pro-GoS sectarian leanings, and to give these groups privileges and real estate in strategic areas. Participants mentioned examples such as the displacement of people from the Darayya area due to its proximity to Al-Mazza military airport; the seizure of lands and properties in the areas of Deir Maker and Kanaker by the GoS because of their strategically valuable locations; the displacement of the population of the Qusayral town because it is situated in a mountainous area overlooking Syria's border with Lebanon.

Resettling groups that are more loyal to the government is also seen as a means by which they can be mobilized militarily if required in the future. It also serves to bolster the siege of civilian areas beyond GoS control and secure overland supply routes.

Participants also suggested that the aim was to reduce and weaken Sunni populations, who are perceived to pose a threat to the GoS and to the influence of Iran. These practices serve to divide the region.

Parties that have adopted the strategy of forced demographic change:

The GoS and allied militias, as well as its Iranian ally and Hezbollah.

Solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing forced demographic change:

- 1) Support opposition armed groups protecting the area, which will enable them to stop any agenda by the GoS to change the population structure.
- 2) Ensure the validity of the existing truce.
- 3) The track for a political solution in Syria should be re-started, including the cessation of all hostilities and arrests; creating conditions that ensure the safe

return of IDPs and refugees; and the expulsion of all Iranian and Russian forces and militias from Syria.

4) Issue a binding UN resolution that prevents forced demographic change.

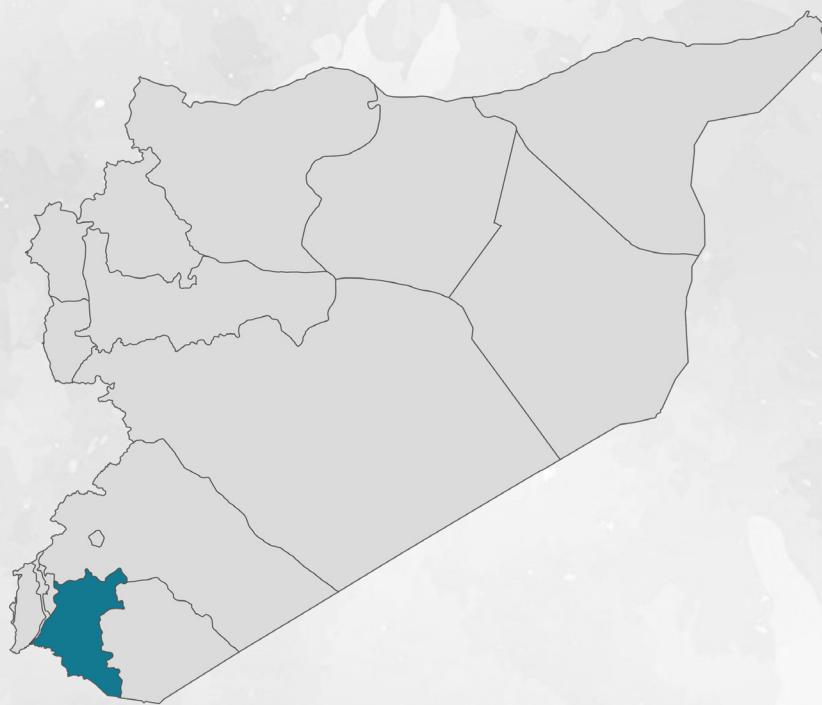
5) Create jobs that accommodate young labor.

The role of civil society:

According to participants' perspectives, CSOs have conveyed the voices of IDPs as well as refugees to the global public. They have also raised the issue of forced demographic change in international forums and have highlighted its dangers.

The Syrian provinces

Daraa province



VI. Daraa province:

Note: It is important to mention that the situation in Daraa has changed significantly since 18 June 2018 with the rapid GoS offensive to overtake the area, resulting in GoS control of the majority of the province. The information below was gathered before this offensive.

Daraa is controlled both by opposition armed groups and the GoS, while ISIS controls some areas in the Yarmouk Basin, and along the borders with the occupied Golan Heights and Jordan.

Twenty-one discussion sessions were held in Daraa with the participation of 304 people, 159 of whom were women and 147 of whom were representatives of CSOs. An additional 15 consultation sessions were held in Jordan with the participation of 182 Syrian refugees from Daraa, 70 of whom were women.

Indicators and objectives of forced demographic change:

The participants observed that there was no forced demographic change in Daraa province, except in the city of Busra. However, the Shiite residents of the city were not forced to leave. They left the city on their own for fear of retaliation as a result of their involvement in hostilities during the GoS' control over the city, and many subsequently returned to their homes.

In Daraa, a number of families loyal to the Assad government left their homes or home region after opposition armed groups took control of the province, resulting in conflict-influenced demographic changes.

According to the participants, the objectives of forced demographic change are political, as well as aimed at reducing the proportion of Sunnis who may pose a threat to the GoS's rule and Iran's influence, and to repopulate majority-Sunni areas with foreign and/or native-born Shiites. This policy is designed to change beliefs, manipulate history and minimize certain aspects of the region's cultural heritage.

Solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing forced demographic change:

- 1) The track for a political solution in Syria should be re-started, including the

cessation of all hostilities and arrests, and the creation of conditions that ensure the safe return of IDPs and refugees.

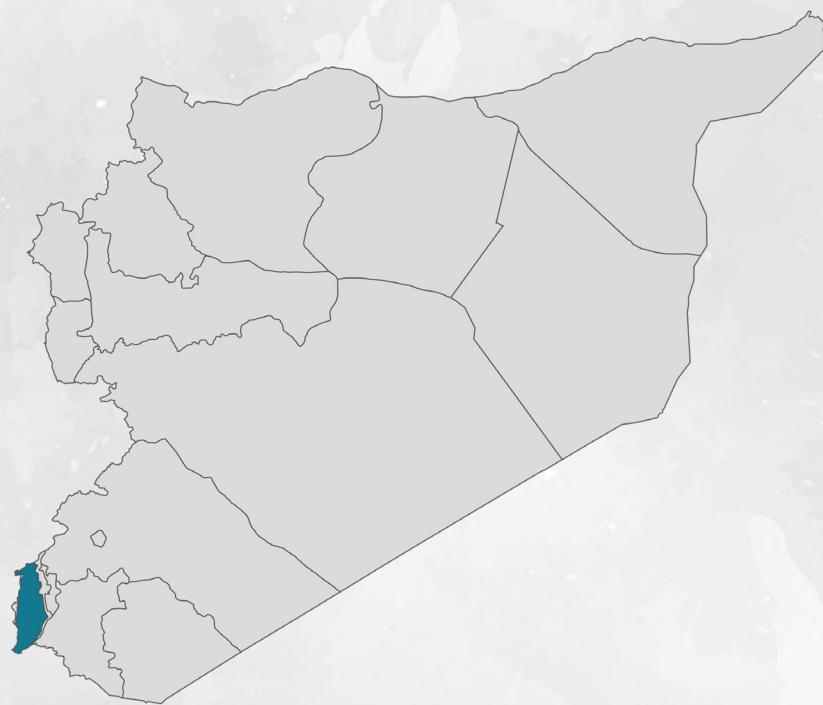
- 2) Reach solutions at the national level, and move away from partial agreements between specific regions and the GoS.
- 3) The exit of sectarian militias from Syria in order to enhance security.
- 4) Documentation of real estate and civil records.
- 5) Issue international resolutions that ensure the safe return to their homes of forcibly displaced persons.
- 6) Suspending recent decisions regarding the granting of citizenship.
- 7) Strengthen the population's resilience through support and by raising awareness of the dangers of leaving their lands and homes.

The role of civil society:

The majority of participants reported that the role of CSOs was limited. Some organizations provided humanitarian and relief support; helped the population to obtain civil documents; documented violations; and ensured productive projects in areas subject to demographic change In order to encourage the population to stay in their areas.

The Syrian provinces

Quneitra province



VII. Quneitra province

It is important to mention that the situation in Quneitra has changed significantly since 18 June 2018 with the rapid GoS offensive to overtake the area, resulting in GoS control of the majority of the province. The information below was gathered before this offensive.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) and opposition armed groups control most of Quneitra province, while the GoS controls only the city center and some other areas. The provinces of Quneitra and Daraa neighbor one another, making the two provinces strategically linked.

Twenty discussion sessions were held in Quneitra with the participation of 230 people, 62 of whom were women and 27 of whom were representatives of CSOs.

Indicators of forced demographic change:

Participants reported that there have been demographic changes in areas controlled by the GoS and its allied militias. They referred to the displacement of the population from the al-Fawar Spring area, which was resettled with groups and families affiliated with the Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

At the beginning of the popular movement in 2011, it was reported that the population of Syrian Circassians in the area had left their homes after the FSA took control of the area.

Objectives behind forced demographic change:

According to some participants, the FSA and opposition armed groups have no objectives behind the displacements. The reason that pushed the residents of the area to leave is the fear of what might happen; given that the majority of the population in these villages are ethnic and religious minorities.

As for the GoS, it had the objectives of changing the demographics of the population, and imposing a new reality through resettling groups affiliated with Hezbollah and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Parties that have adopted the strategy of forced demographic change:

Participants reported that GoS forces, supported by the Iranians and Russians,

were primarily involved in forced demographic change.

The participants also mentioned that the entry of the FSA was one of the reasons behind displacements due to the population's fear of military action.

Solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing forced demographic change:

- 1) The cessation of all military acts and the pursuit of a political solution.
- 2) The UN and the Security Council should intervene to stop forced demographic change.
- 3) Increased support for the FSA which is controlling the area.
- 4) Agreements that would preserve the demographic structure of the region should be reached.
- 5) The expulsion of sectarian and foreign militias.

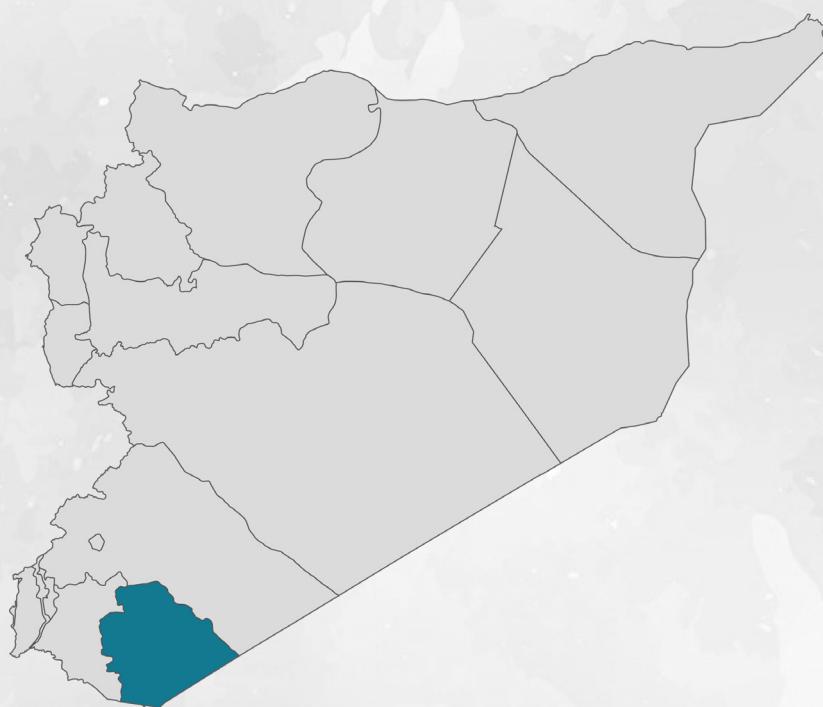
The role of civil society:

According to some of the participants CSOs have only a media-related role, in addition to documenting demographic changes, informing the UN and human rights organizations about it, and raising awareness of the dangers of forced demographic change.

However, a number of participants emphasized the important role of CSOs in maintaining civil peace and promoting peaceful coexistence. CSOs also play a key role in raising awareness of the dangers of forced demographic change and communicating with stakeholders to stop it.

The Syrian provinces

Suweida province



VIII. Suweida province:

Suweida province is under the full control of the GoS. The province plays host to a high concentration of IDPs from Daraa and other areas. Thirty discussion sessions were held in Suweida with the participation of 269 people, 172 of whom were women and 48 of whom were representatives of CSOs.

Indicators of forced demographic change:

Some participants reported that Suweida province did not clearly witness any demographic changes. However, others indicated their suspicion that such changes are coming, as lands and apartments are being sold to people from outside the province with the help of local brokers and traders working with Iranian-affiliated parties.

One participant pointed out that there has been demographic change in the villages of al-Duwaira and al-Mujammer, where people from outside the province invested in large agricultural projects.

Objectives behind forced demographic change:

According to participants, the objectives are to change the social structure and resettle population groups linked to regional, political and religious projects.

Parties that have adopted the strategy of forced demographic change:

Since the participants did not confirm clear demographic changes in the province, no parties were identified in their own right. However, the GoS, its militias, and its Iranian ally were often referred to as involved.

Solutions and favorable conditions for preventing or curbing forced demographic change:

- 1) Efforts should be intensified to raise awareness about the ongoing demographic changes and their risks.
- 2) Support for the political solution and the political transition that will achieve stability, establish a civilian state and achieve transitional justice, should be increased.
- 3) Reconstruction of destroyed areas and reactivation of services.

4) Economic development.

The role of civil society:

The participants agreed that there is no effective role for CSOs to deal with the strategy of forced demographic change. This is because the GoS fights any work done by these organizations. If CSOs have managed to operate, their role has thus far been insignificant and limited to expressing their opinions through meetings and social media.

Some participants reported that CSOs play a role in documenting cases of displacement and what is happening on the ground; delivering people's voices to the international community; and educating the population about the dangers of forced demographic change.

Legal and political analysis of the use of forced demographic change as a strategy in Syria:

Deportation or forcible transfer of population is considered a crime against humanity by the Rome Statute of 17 July 1998, as stated in Article (7); paragraph 1:

" 'Crime against humanity' means any of the following acts when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack directed against any civilian population, with knowledge of the attack:

- a. Murder;
- b. Extermination;
- c. Enslavement;
- d. Deportation or forcible transfer of population;
- e. Imprisonment or other severe deprivation of physical liberty in violation of fundamental rules of international law;
- f. Torture;
- g. Rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity;
- h. Persecution against any identifiable group or collectivity on political, racial, national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gender as defined in paragraph 3, or other grounds that are universally recognized as impermissible under international law, in connection with any act referred to in this paragraph or any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court;
- i. Enforced disappearance of persons;
- j. The crime of apartheid;
- k. Other inhumane acts of a similar character intentionally causing great suffering, or serious injury to body or to mental or physical health.

For the purpose of paragraph 1:

- a. 'Attack directed against any civilian population' means a course of conduct involving the multiple commission of acts referred to in paragraph 1 against any civilian population, pursuant to or in furtherance of a State or organizational policy to commit such attack;
- b. 'Extermination' includes the intentional infliction of conditions of life, inter alia the deprivation of access to food and medicine, calculated to bring about the destruction of part of a population;

- c. 'Enslavement' means the exercise of any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership over a person and includes the exercise of such power in the course of trafficking in persons, in particular women and children;
- d. 'Deportation or forcible transfer of population' means forced displacement of the persons concerned by expulsion or other coercive acts from the area in which they are lawfully present, without grounds permitted under international law;
- e. 'Torture' means the intentional infliction of severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, upon a person in the custody or under the control of the accused; except that torture shall not include pain or suffering arising only from, inherent in or incidental to, lawful sanctions;
- f. 'Persecution' means the intentional and severe deprivation of fundamental rights contrary to international law by reason of the identity of the group or collectivity;

Additionally, forced evictions are flagrant violations of a wide range of internationally recognized human rights, including the right to adequate housing, food, water, health, education, work, human security, home security, in addition to the basic human right that no one should be subject to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment.

From the political analysis perspective, it is possible to say that forced displacements and demographic changes in Syria are classified as politically-based practices, rather than ethnic, religious or sectarian.

1- The GoS strategy towards Syrian territory is to exclude opponents; this is what Syrian President Bashar al-Assad pointed out in one of his speeches in 2017, when he said that the loss of certain lives and properties has led to a "more homogenous society", and that it had facilitated a "purge" throughout Syria of opponents. This has been carried out on three levels:

- o First: the GoS has launched military operations against areas beyond its control, followed by the besieging of these areas and targeting their vital and civilian centers. The GoS has also followed a scorched earth policy. All these practices have enabled the GoS to extend its control over these areas and displace their populations.

- o Second: Specific individuals themselves have been targeted, as the Syrian security apparatus often worked to arrest and neutralize many of its opponents, prompting the rest to flee outside Syria or to safer areas inside the country.
- o Third: At the legal level, decrees and laws passed by the government threaten to extend their negative effects well into the long-run. Property seizure has been repeatedly executed through the courts, which have demanded the confiscation of movable and immovable properties on the part of defendants, as well as through the Syrian security apparatus;

- In September 2012, President Al-Assad signed legislative decree (66/2012) to "redevelop areas of unauthorized housing and informal settlements [slums]". Decree 66 allowed the government to "redesign unauthorized or illegal housing areas" and replace them with "modern" real estate projects with quality services.

The possible expansion of Decree 66 could have important consequences on the reconstruction process and the consolidation of the political and economic power of the Assad government through its cronies, while providing foreign allies with a share of the market to reward them for their assistance. Initially the decree promulgated by President Al-Assad allowed the Damascus governorate to expel the populations of two large areas in Damascus, including Basatin al-Razi, in the district of Mazzeh—a residential area near the presidential palace and Kafr Soussa. The second area includes Qanawat, Basatin, Daraya, and Qadam¹. The decree targeted two areas that were bastions of opposition support, while areas inhabited by government supporters, with similar housing conditions, were left intact.

- The legislative Decree (63/ 2012) also enabled the Ministry of Finance to seize the assets and properties of persons subject to the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2012, and transfer their ownership to the GoS. The 2012 Anti-Terrorism Act provides a broad interpretation of terrorism and unfairly criminalizes a large segment of the population without granting them any right to defend themselves or to undergo fair trials².

1 - <https://bit.ly/2JSHzIE>

2- <https://bit.ly/2A9yD1X>

- The new property law (10/2018), passed by the GoS on April 2, 2018, empowers the GoS to create redevelopment zones across Syria, dedicated to reconstruction. Human Rights Watch said in response to this law: "The Syrian government is preparing to confiscate people's properties as well as to reconstruct without due process or compensation under the new property law- Law No. 10 of 2018. This law, promoted by the Syrian government as a law of urban regulation, will create a major obstacle to the return of IDPs and refugees to their homes³."

2- On the other hand, the armed opposition groups have displaced their political opponents, whether they are loyal to the GoS, or opposed to the military groups themselves. In addition, when opposition armed groups seize areas with different ethnic and religious groups, these groups often move to safer areas. It should be noted that particular cases in this vein need further research, as they are suspected to be a forced demographic change based on ethnic, sectarian or religious factors.

The SDF has followed the same practices against its opponents, whether Arabs or Kurds, as well as towards people who have abandoned their homes following the outbreak of military conflict.

Conclusion:

1- The population in almost all Syrian villages, towns and cities believe that the dominant forces are carrying out forced displacement under various pretexts, and are trying to resettle their loyal residents to serve their long-term goals in areas under their control.

2- Many groups in the Syrian population believe that forced displacements do have sectarian or ethnic objectives, particularly in areas which contain different national and ethnic groups.

3- Forced demographic change takes several forms, beginning with the forced displacement of populations from certain areas, changing the names of these areas, and ultimately, the transfer of population groups to these areas.

3- <https://bit.ly/2A9yD1X>

General Recommendations:

- 1) A political solution in accordance with the Geneva Conventions must be strengthened; the cessation of all hostilities and arrests is the best solution to stop the forcible displacement of civilian populations from their areas.
- 2) Reach solutions at the national level, and move away from partial agreements between specific armed groups and the GoS.
- 3) Issue international resolutions allowing forcibly displaced persons to return to their homes and suspending recent decisions regarding the granting of citizenship.
- 4) Enforce international conventions and resolutions relating to the protection of civilians in conflict areas.
- 5) Full documentation of property and real estate ownership in various Syrian regions.
- 6) Facilitate the return of IDPs and refugees by securing safe and dignified return, as well as providing the basic necessities of life in their areas, especially in the Raqqa countryside (from the town of Sabkha to Ma'adan).
- 7) The abolition of laws that have caused the displacement of the population (forced conscription especially for women, seizure of property, and education-related barriers).
- 8) Establish a new social contract based on respect for all segments of the Syrian society, regardless of their intellectual, political, ethnic and religious differences.

The practices of forced displacement and demographic manipulation followed in all Syrian regions and by all the dominant military forces require more in-depth research. It is also of paramount importance that all similar practices be highlighted, even when relatively limited, because if left undiscussed these issues are likely to complicate any future path to a sustainable, community-led, peace process for Syria.