

Longitudinal Analysis of Movement Intentions and Outcomes among Internally Displaced People (IDPs) in displacement sites in Syria

February 2026 | Syria

This report draws on a longitudinal household survey of internally displaced persons (IDPs) residing across different displacement site types in eight governorates in Syria. It analyses the relationship between stated movement intentions and realised mobility outcomes, while examining the structural barriers and enabling factors that shape these trajectories. The study aims to assess the extent to which expressed intentions are associated with subsequent movement behaviour, and how both aspirations and constraints evolve over time.

Context

While the political landscape shifted significantly following changes in late 2024, the material impacts of protracted conflict on Syria's displacement landscape remain acute and complex. As of December 2025, an estimated 7.4 million people nationwide were internally displaced (IDPs), including over 1.5 million living in tents, unfinished buildings, or overcrowded collective centres never intended for long-term use.¹ Northwest Syria alone hosted nearly 2 million IDPs across more than 1,150 camps and informal settlements in December 2025.² Additionally, since December 2024, approximately 1.26 million individuals who had been displaced outside Syria reportedly returned, many to damaged, looted, or structurally unsafe homes.³ Displacement dynamics continue to evolve within a fragile socio-economic and security environment, while projections indicate that returns will likely continue across the country in 2026.⁴

This assessment builds on a Syria Camp Coordination and Camp Management (CCCM) Cluster and REACH-led study conducted in September 2025,⁵ which examined the return intentions of IDP households across different displacement site types throughout Syria. By linking baseline intentions to longitudinally observed behaviour, the present assessment explores how initial intentions translated into actual movement outcomes, providing insight into the dynamics of displacement, secondary movement, and return, as well as the structural, social, and emotional dimensions influencing mobility decisions. For more details, please refer to the Annex A at the end of this factsheet.

Key Findings

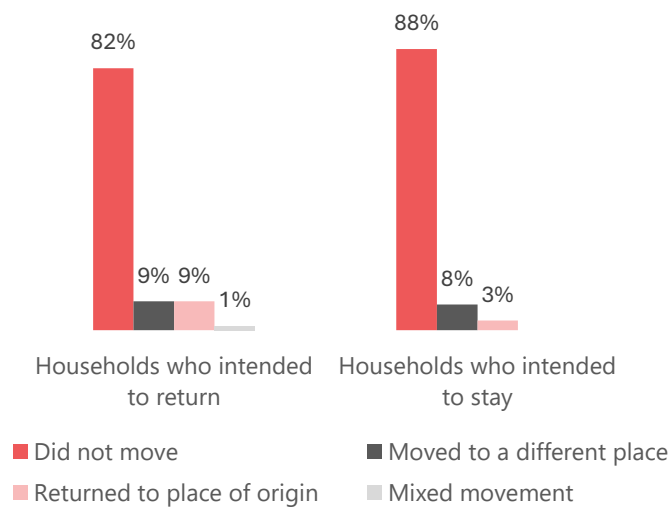
- **Return remained limited across the sample and did not constitute the dominant mobility pathway, even among households who initially expressed an intention to return home.** When movement occurred, it more often took the form of secondary relocation rather than durable return. Baseline intentions appeared less predictive of whether households moved and more indicative of the type and distance of movement when it occurred.
- **Movement patterns were strongly shaped by the type of site where households were initially located.** More precarious settings, such as collective centres, were associated with higher rates of secondary movement, while more stable displacement sites supported greater household stability and returns.
- Return decisions were contingent not only on enabling conditions at areas of origin, including social, emotional, and security factors, but also on the relative stability and constraints of the displacement site itself.
- **Mobility that did not result in return was largely driven by coercive or adverse conditions, particularly eviction and inadequate housing.** Structural characteristics of the initial displacement site shaped both the likelihood of movement and the pressures prompting relocation.
- **Household mobility aspirations were found to change across time,** mirroring evolving contextual and household-level conditions, even in the absence of actual movement.
- Across all groups, **return-related themes consistently emerged when households reflected on their situation, including among those who did not move.** This suggests that return functioned as a persistent cognitive horizon rather than an immediate plan. The gap between expressed return-related considerations and actual return indicates that, while the idea of return remained salient, short-term intentions were constrained by structural conditions.

Movement Aspirations and Outcomes

Overall **mobility during the two-month callback period remained limited, with movement reported by only a minority of households.** Among all unique households successfully reached in at least one callback round, **15%** reported some form of movement, while **85%** remained in their original place of interview.

When movement outcomes are examined in relation to baseline intentions stated in September 2025, a clear pattern emerges. **Households that initially intended to stay generally acted in line with that preference,** with most remaining in place and only a small share relocating; and when they did move, they rarely returned to their area of origin. In contrast, **for households that initially intended to move or return home, initial intentions were less predictive of movement outcomes, though they did influence the type and scale of movement when it occurred.**

Figure 1: Distribution of households by movement outcome over the study period, by baseline intention



Across the sample, non-return movements were typically limited in frequency. Among households that moved within Syria without returning home, **58%** reported moving once during the recall period, **26%** moved twice, and **6%** moved three times. This pattern was consistent across intention groups: **58%** of households that initially intended to return and **57%** of those that initially intended to stay reported only a single movement event. While repeated displacement occurred, it remained comparatively limited in scale.

The distance and geographic scope of non-return movements differed by initial intention. Households that initially reported an intention to return were more likely to undertake longer-distance relocations, including inter-

governorate or inter-district movements, compared to households that initially intended to stay. Specifically, **29%** of households in the initial intention-to-return group reported at least one inter-governorate movement, compared to **16%** among those in the initial intention-to-stay group. Conversely, intra-community movements were more common among households that initially intended to stay (**52%**) than among those that initially intended to return (**31%**). This suggests that while return intention may not strongly predict whether households move, it may be associated with the scale and geographic reach of mobility when it occurs.

Finally, **movement patterns appear to be influenced by the type of site where households were initially located, indicating that the displacement setting may shape both the likelihood and type of mobility** (Table 1).

Findings suggest that collective centres are associated with greater instability, prompting more frequent secondary movement or unplanned relocation. In comparison, formal camps and informal sites appear to provide more stable settlement conditions, enabling households to remain in place and, in some cases, facilitating return.

Table 1: Distribution of households by movement outcome over the study period, by baseline displacement site type.

	Collective centre (N=181)	Informal site (N=276)	Formal camp (N=264)	Total (N=721)
Did not move	76%	90%	87%	85%
Moved to a different place	24%	3%	3%	8%
Returned to area of origin	1%	6%	8%	6%
Mixed movement	0%	1%	1%	1%
Relocated to another camp	0%	0%	1%	0%

Overall, the findings indicate that return remains limited across the sample and is not the dominant mobility pathway, even among households that initially expressed a desire to return home. When movement occurred, it more frequently took the form of secondary relocation rather than durable return. At the same time, baseline intentions appear to shape the distance and type of relocation, even if they do not fully determine whether movement occurs at all. These patterns are further influenced by the type of site where households were initially located, with more precarious settings associated with higher rates of secondary movement, while more stable settings seem to support greater stability for households priorities.

Barriers to earlier movement

Across both movement types, households relocating from camps to other locations within Syria and those returning to their place of origin, the profile of reported barriers to earlier return is largely consistent.

By a substantial margin, the most frequently cited barrier was related to housing, land and property (HLP) concerns, including destruction, damage, inaccessibility, occupation, or uninhabitability. This was reported by **74%** of households who moved elsewhere within Syria and by **85%** of households who returned home.

The fact that many households who did return to their area of origin still reported housing and security barriers suggests that return may occur despite unresolved structural constraints, potentially increasing exposure to protection risks or inadequate living conditions.

These findings are consistent with a nationwide housing damage assessment conducted by REACH in December 2025,⁶ which identified widespread housing destruction as a major structural barrier to safe and dignified return. However, that assessment also found that return decisions are not determined solely by the physical condition of

housing. Ownership status appeared to play a critical role, suggesting that households with secure tenure may choose to return even when housing is damaged or only partially habitable. In other words, **while housing damage constitutes a significant constraint, it does not automatically prevent return**; rather, return outcomes seem to depend on the interaction between housing conditions, tenure security, security, and other contextual or household-level factors, including emotions.

The second and third most reported barriers to earlier return were also consistent across both groups: lack of security in the area of origin, and lack of financial means to return.

Taken together, these findings indicate that structural constraints, particularly housing destruction, HLP challenges, security concerns, and financial limitations, remain the primary obstacles to return, regardless of whether households ultimately return or relocate elsewhere. The similarity in reported barriers across groups suggests that **differences in movement pathways are less about divergent motivations and more about different push and pull factors**, including different security conditions, differences in households' capacity to absorb risk, leverage ownership claims, or mobilize resources.

Households Experiencing Secondary Displacement

Overall, among households that reported at least one movement within Syria without returning to their place of origin, the most frequently cited driver was forced eviction. This pattern holds across initial intention groups, albeit with some variation in magnitude (*Table 2*). Notably, the desire to return home and family reunification were among the least frequently reported drivers of movement across both intention groups.

Table 2: Most frequently cited driver of secondary movement within Syria across the longitudinal period, by baseline intention and among all households who relocated.

	Households who intended to return (N=31)	Households who intended to stay (N=35)	Overall (N=66)
Eviction/forced to leave	58%	74%	67%
Shelter conditions	39%	34%	36%
Work/livelihoods	26%	26%	26%
Access to healthcare	6%	20%	14%
Administrative pressure	32%	17%	24%
Access to education	16%	14%	15%
Lack of services or access	26%	14%	20%
Community/social networks	10%	9%	9%
Access to assistance	10%	6%	8%
Insecurity/conflict	16%	3%	9%
Family reunification	6%	3%	5%
Desire to return home	3%	3%	3%

Eviction was not only the most common reason at the household level, but also the most frequently repeated driver across secondary movement events. Across all recorded non-return movements during the recall period (N=107 secondary movement events), eviction was cited in **70%** of cases. **This indicates that households experiencing multiple movements often reported eviction repeatedly as the primary trigger.** In fact, **86%** of households that relocated more than once cited eviction as a reason at least once, reinforcing its central role in driving repeated displacement. This is further confirmed by the fact that **90%** of all recorded non-return movements were reported to be unexpected and unplanned.

As previously noted, the type of initial displacement site appears to have shaped the primary driver of secondary movement. Households residing in collective centres, the most precarious site typology, most frequently reported eviction as the main reason for relocation (**79%**). In contrast, among households displaced in informal sites, secondary movement was predominantly attributed to poor shelter conditions (**89%**), while in formal camps the leading driver was the lack of livelihood opportunities (**100%**).

Overall, findings suggest that mobility within Syria that does not result in return is reported as primarily driven by coercive or adverse conditions, particularly eviction and inadequate housing, with the characteristics of the initial displacement site shaping both the likelihood of movement and the pressures prompting relocation.

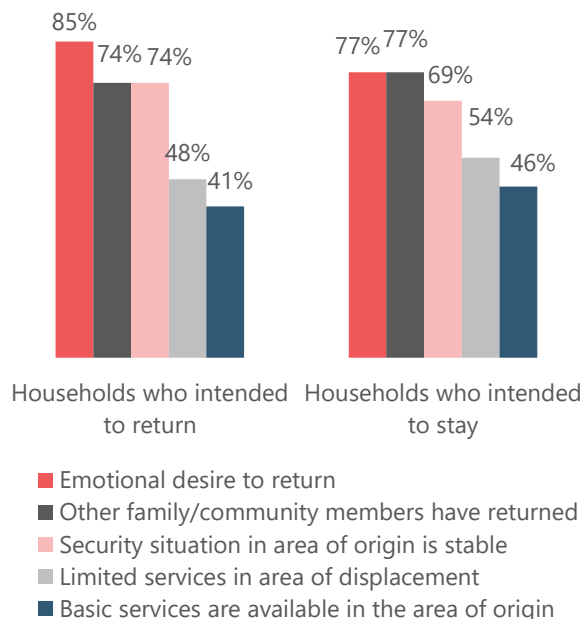
Returnees

Return to areas of origin among surveyed households was limited, but when it did occur, it tended to be stable. Only **6%** of households in the full sample ultimately reported returning to their area of origin. Among these, **95%** remained settled after returning, indicating that return was generally durable rather than temporary.

Among households that returned, **68%** had initially reported an intention to move, while **32%** had stated they intended to stay in their place of interview. This shows that **the majority of households who returned had anticipated this outcome at baseline**, with only a minority exhibiting a discrepancy between initial intention and eventual movement.

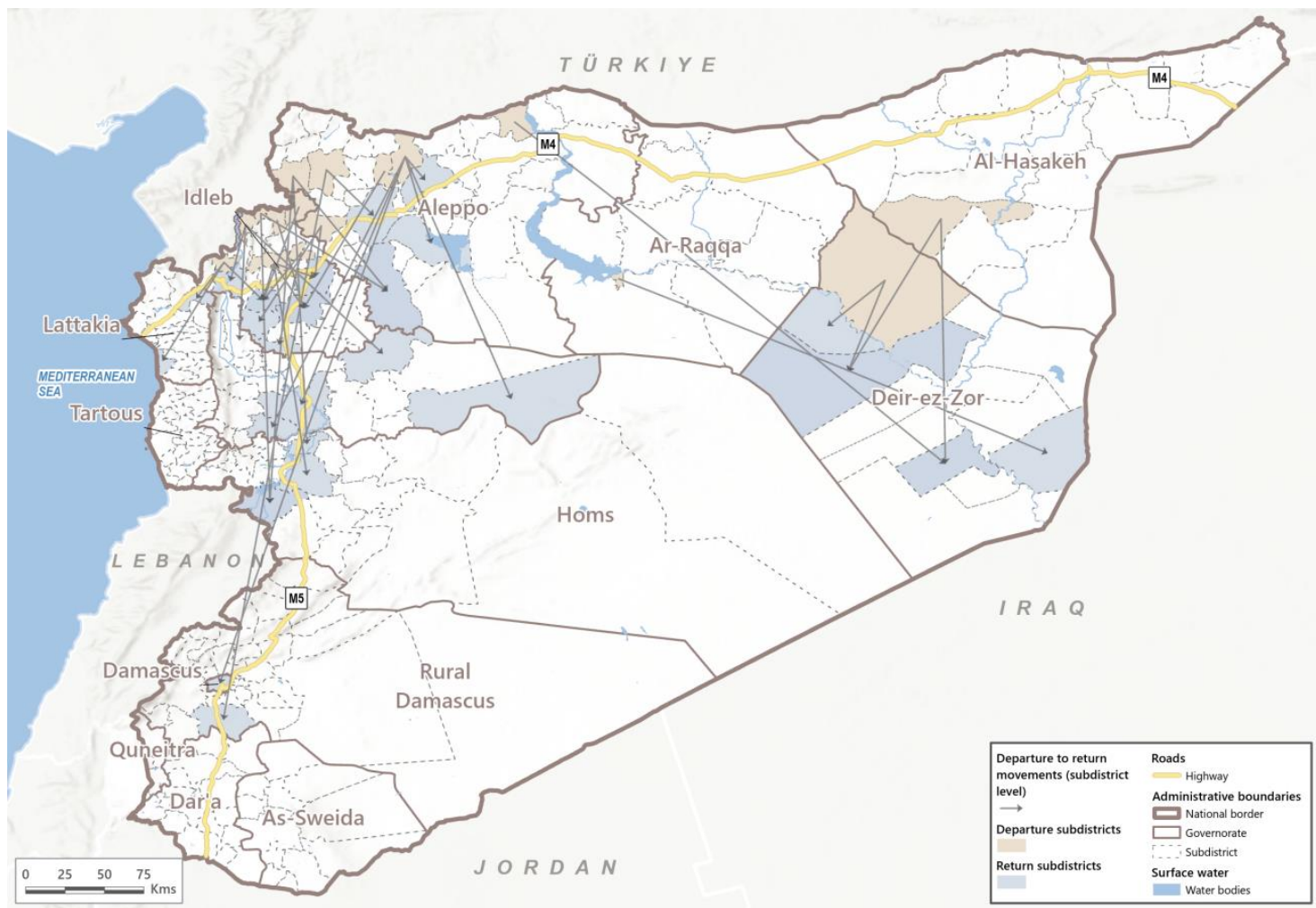
Return movements also appear qualitatively distinct from other forms of mobility. Unlike non-return movements, which are often reactive and driven by coercive or adverse conditions, **returns were primarily shaped by voluntary and intention-driven factors**, reflecting confidence in safety, social cohesion, and the presence of community networks (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Most frequently reported reasons for return to area of origin, by household baseline intention group



These findings indicate that durable return may require less emphasis on mitigating eviction or other pressures in displacement sites, and more focus on improving security, restoring essential services, and reinforcing social and community networks in areas of origin.

Map 1: Movement trajectories from sub-district of displacement to sub-district of return among households who returned to their area of origin during the study period



Households Remaining in Place

Among households that did not move at any point during the recall period, movement aspirations nonetheless evolved over time and, in some cases, diverged from their original stated intentions.

Out of all households that remained in the same location throughout the recall period, **99%** reported at least once an aspiration to return to their area of origin. However, **17%** of these households also reported, at least once during the recall rounds, that they no longer aspired to move and instead intended to remain in the original place of interview.

When examining aspiration trends over time among households that did not move, there is a clear increase in reported intentions to stay in the place of interview.

Although the sample size decreased across rounds due to cumulative attrition, the share of households expressing a desire to stay rose from **0%** two weeks following the baseline study, to **30%** after ten weeks (Table 3).

Table 3: Share of households that did not move during the study period, by reported movement aspiration across consecutive call rounds (1–5)

	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4	Round 5
Return to my area of origin	82%	86%	82%	83%	68%
Don't want to move	0%	2%	14%	13%	30%
Don't know	11%	4%	2%	3%	1%
Somewhere else inside Syria but outside of a camp/collective center	3%	4%	2%	0%	1%
Different camp/collective center in Syria	1%	2%	0%	0%	0%
Different country outside Syria	2%	1%	0%	0%	0%
Sample size	607	492	473	453	432

This trend is observed across both baseline intention groups, though to different extents. Among households that initially reported an intention to stay, the share expressing an aspiration to remain increased from **0%** in round 1 to **22%** in round 5, corresponding with a decline in expressed aspirations to return home. Among households that initially reported an intention to return, the share expressing a desire to stay increased more modestly, from **0%** in round 1 to **8%** in round 5.

Changes in aspirations may be associated to observed evolving perceptions of feasibility and shifting household priorities. The pattern of reported barriers among households that remained in place was found to also evolve over time, possibly influencing households' priorities and aspirations.

In fact, while the primary reported obstacle to return remained constant throughout the study, this being the lack of adequate housing and/or housing, land and property (HLP) concerns, the relative importance of other constraints changed over time. In round 1, lack of basic services was the second most frequently cited reason for not moving, reported by **45%** of households. By round 5, this share had declined to **29%**, dropping to fourth place. In contrast, lack of financial means increased substantially over the recall period, rising from **38%** in round 1 to **67%** in round 5, becoming the second most frequently cited barrier.

These shifts may help explain the observed increase in aspirations to remain in the place of interview over time. As financial pressures grew relative to other constraints, households' stated intentions appear to have shifted, with return likely increasingly perceived as economically unfeasible. Together, these patterns suggest that **mobility intentions are dynamic and responsive to shifting economic and structural realities, rather than fixed expressions of long-term preference.**

Sentiment

When examined alongside the broader mobility findings, the sentiment analysis provided important explanatory depth to observed movement patterns. While the survey showed that return remained limited, secondary displacement was often reactive, and immobility did not necessarily reflect preference alignment, the affective data suggested that mobility outcomes were not driven by indecision or emotional volatility. High reported confidence across groups, including among non-movers and those experiencing repeated displacement, suggested that many respondents perceived their decisions as deliberate and reasoned, even when circumstances were constrained.

Emotional variation across movement pathways did not translate into decisional fragility; rather, perceptions appeared structured around material thresholds,

particularly security and housing feasibility, that shaped both the sense of possibility and the recalibration of intentions over time.

The analysis also revealed the persistent emergence of the theme of return. Return remained cognitively salient across groups, but aspirations shifted in response to changing economic and structural conditions, reinforcing the distinction between long-term orientation and short-term feasibility.

The findings suggest a mobility system in which emotional orientations toward return remained durable and cognitively salient, but the translation of those orientations into action was structured by security and housing feasibility. Decisions were therefore not sentimentally volatile, but neither were they affectively neutral.

Confidence in settlement conditions and mobility decisions

Across the different movement outcome groups, households exhibited consistently high levels of cognitive confidence despite differentiated emotional experiences. Over 80% across all pathways outcomes reported being somewhat or very confident in their decision throughout the study period, and open-ended explanations suggested that this confidence was primarily anchored in perceived security conditions. Safety and stability were frequently invoked when justifying decisions, even in coercive decision-making situations, suggesting that confidence is conditional rather than abstract, grounded in protection considerations rather than optimism alone. Economic factors were mentioned less frequently in confidence framing, which may suggest that safety functioned as a foundational threshold in how households assessed their situation.

Feelings towards settlement conditions and mobility decisions

Emotional tone varied by movement outcome, but this variation did not appear to undermine decisional stability. Households who returned tended to report more predominantly positive feelings, whereas those who experienced secondary displacement more often described mixed or negative affect. Households who did not move appeared more evenly divided between positive and mixed feelings. However, satisfaction levels remained broadly high across groups. Open-ended responses suggest that **these evaluations were structured less around emotional states and more around material conditions, particularly housing.** Shelter quality, adequacy, and stability were the most consistently cited determinants of both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the settlement condition or movement outcome. Even when feelings were mixed, they were commonly explained through housing constraints rather than regret or emotional distress.

Reported Urgency in settlement conditions and mobility decisions

Urgency appeared to provide the clearest differentiation between the different mobility pathways and may help explain the coexistence of high confidence and limited movement. Households who returned reported

comparatively higher urgency, including immediate or short-term priorities, while those who remained in place or experienced secondary displacement predominantly indicated no urgency or indefinite timelines. **Qualitative responses suggested that urgency reflected perceived feasibility of movement rather than dissatisfaction with current conditions.** Explanations frequently centred on housing availability and financial constraints, which may indicate that **low urgency among household who did not move or who moved to another location likely reflects structural immobility rather than comfort.**

Return

Across all dimensions, confidence, satisfaction, urgency, and forward-looking reflection, **a notable share of households consistently mentioned return-related themes when explaining how they felt about their situation, even among those who did not move.**

This pattern suggested that return functioned as a persistent cognitive horizon rather than an immediate plan. The relatively limited incidence of actual return, compared to the frequency of these return-related themes, suggests that while the idea of return remained salient across groups, households' short-term intentions shifted over time, constrained by structural conditions. This highlights the distinction between enduring cognitive orientation toward return and short-term feasibility of movement.

Explicit emotional distress, uncertainty, or expressions of having "no choice" appeared comparatively limited across responses. Households tended to frame their reasoning in terms of safety, shelter, and material feasibility rather than emotional volatility. Livelihood concerns were present, particularly in discussions of urgency, but were less dominant in confidence and satisfaction narratives.

Overall, the findings suggested that displacement decision-making was largely elaborated with pragmatic and materially-oriented narratives, even in constraining situations. Security appeared to operate as a baseline condition, housing as the central determinant of settlement stability and movement feasibility, and return as a durable cognitive reference point. While emotional responses varied by movement pathway, decisions themselves were generally described as deliberate and reasoned, rather than reactive or unstable.

Endnotes

- 1) UNHCR (December 2025), "[Operational Data Portal - Syria](#)".
- 2) Global Shelter Cluster (October 2025), "[Syria Overview](#)".
- 3) UNHCR (December 2025), "[Operational Data Portal - Syria](#)".
- 4) UNHCR (2026), "[Syria Global Appeal 2026 situation overview](#)".
- 5) REACH, Syria CCCM Cluster (November 2025), "[IDP Movement Intentions Survey – Syria](#)".
- 6) REACH (January 2026), "[Syria Nationwide Housing Damage Assessment](#)".

Annex A – Methodology

This assessment builds on a CCCM- and REACH-led study conducted in September 2025, which examined the return intentions of IDP households across different displacement site types in Syria. The sampling, methodology, and analytical approach were designed to ensure continuity and comparability between the baseline dataset and the longitudinal findings. A mixed-methods approach was adopted, combining secondary data review, a quantitative longitudinal phone-based household survey, and a qualitative sentiment and thematic analysis.

Geographical scope

The survey was implemented across IDPs sites including community centers, informal settlements and formal camps across eight governorates: Idlib, Aleppo, Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Rural Damascus, As-Suwayda, and Daraa. All the targeted displacement sites match the sample frame of the movement intentions assessment (*Map 2*).

Quantitative data collection

The longitudinal panel was drawn from households interviewed during the CCCM Intentions Survey baseline, conducted between 7 and 26 September 2025. Out of 4,663 households across 505 IDP sites nationwide, a target panel of at least 600 households was established for the longitudinal study, which comprised six bi-weekly rounds of call-back surveys conducted between 6 October and 28 December 2025.

Panel selection followed multiple criteria and was stratified by baseline-stated intention, specifically distinguishing:

- Households who reported an intention to return to their area of origin
- Households who intended to stay at the location of interview.

Findings from this longitudinal panel should be considered indicative and interpreted as trend-based insights among the subset of households successfully reached for repeated phone follow-up, rather than as statistically representative estimates of all IDP households across the assessed sites.

While proportionality between the two groups was sought to support comparability, practical constraints inherent to longitudinal follow-ups required a blanket targeting

approach. Thus, all households within these two intention categories who had agreed to be contacted again by phone were included in the initial target panel.

Overall, 721 households were reached at least once during the follow-up rounds, of which 388 households participated in all six rounds, yielding an overall attrition rate of 46%. As a result, findings from later rounds are based on a reduced and potentially less representative sample; trends over time should therefore be interpreted with caution, particularly where differences may reflect sample composition changes rather than substantive shifts in household conditions.

For analytical purposes, households were classified according to their baseline intentions wherever feasible, allowing for stratified analysis of movement outcomes and associated factors.

Table 4: Sample dimension and panel retention by baseline intention across call-back rounds

Date of data collection	Call round	Strata	Households
6-12 October 2025	1	Return group	317
21-28 October 2025	2	Return group	289
9-13 November 2025	3	Return group	273
20-25 November 2025	4	Return group	246
9-16 December 2025	5	Return group	246
21-28 December 2025	6	Return group	138
6-12 October 2025	1	Stay group	404
21-28 October 2025	2	Stay group	300
9-13 November 2025	3	Stay group	291
20-25 November 2025	4	Stay group	291
9-16 December 2025	5	Stay group	261
21-28 December 2025	6	Stay group	250

Qualitative data collection

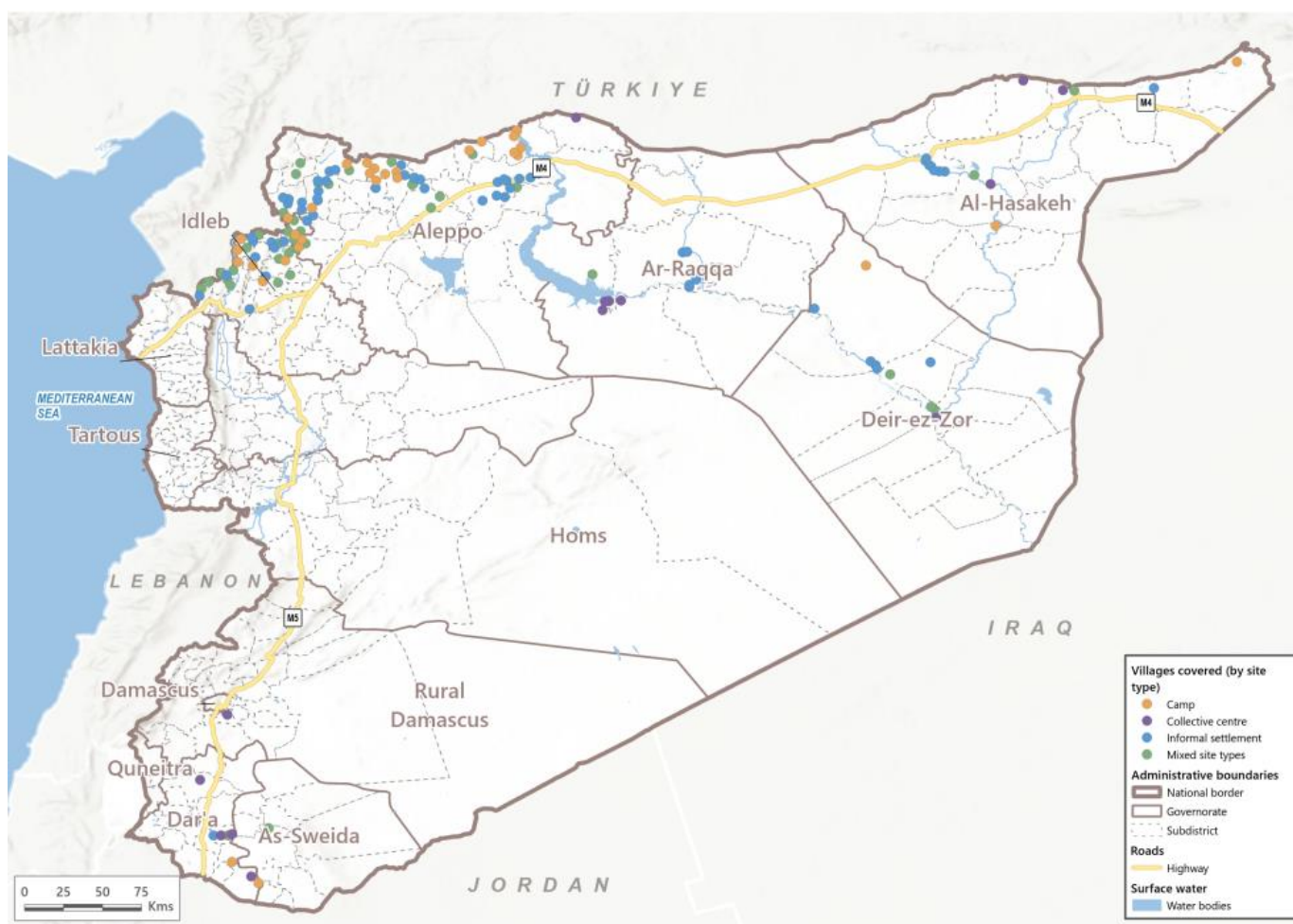
This assessment also incorporated a sentiment analysis methodology aimed at identifying, classifying, and interpreting the emotional tone expressed in textual data. The approach combined structured and qualitative components. Likert-scale questions provided standardised measures of sentiment, including confidence, satisfaction, urgency, and overall feeling, while follow-up open-ended responses enabled a deeper exploration of how households articulated and contextualised these positions. Through a mixed-method inductive sentiment and thematic analysis, qualitative responses were systematically coded to assess whether expressed attitudes reflected positive, negative, mixed, or neutral orientations, and to capture recurring

themes underlying these emotional framings. This integrated approach allowed for the examination of both the intensity and direction of sentiment, as well as the material and structural considerations shaping households' perceptions of their displacement decisions.

Challenges and limitations

- **Attrition and panel retention:** A proportion of households interviewed at baseline were not reached in all follow-up rounds, resulting in household drop-out. This attrition may have affected the representativeness of the sample and introduced potential bias in trend estimates. Blanket sampling and consistent re-contact procedures (call-backs and updated contact tracking) helped mitigate this risk by preserving sample size and improving follow-up response rates.
- **Invalid or inactive contact information:** A subset of baseline phone numbers was incorrect, out of service, or otherwise unreachable, which reduced the pool of potential respondents and complicated longitudinal follow-up.
- **Short observation window:** The study covered a two-month follow-up period. Given that displacement decisions often evolve over longer time horizons, the relatively brief observation window may have limited the capture of longer-term mobility dynamics and delayed or unfolding decision-making processes.

Map 2: Coverage Map – Locations targeted for the longitudinal study, by displacement site type assessed in each location



ABOUT REACH

REACH Initiative facilitates the development of information tools and products that enhance the capacity of aid actors to make evidence-based decisions in emergency, recovery and development contexts. The methodologies used by REACH include primary data collection and in-depth analysis, and all activities are conducted through inter-agency aid coordination mechanisms. REACH is a joint initiative of IMPACT Initiatives, ACTED and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research - Operational Satellite Applications Programme (UNITAR-UNOSAT).