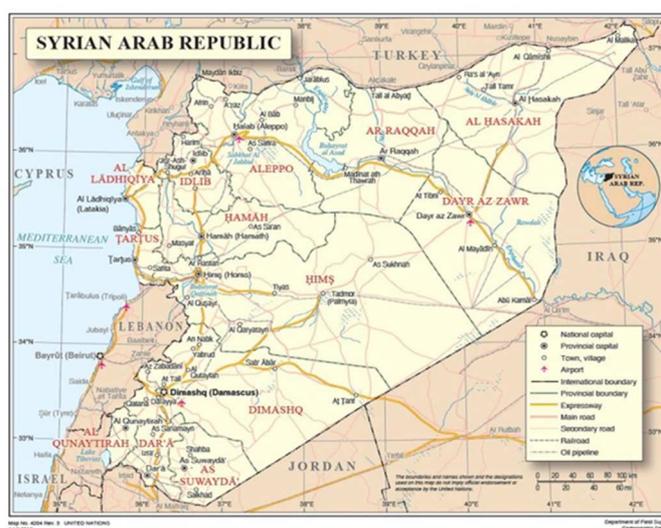


Syria

Security clearance and status settlement for returnees



Ministry of Immigration
and Integration

The Danish
Immigration Service

This brief report is not, and does not purport to be, a detailed or comprehensive survey of all aspects or the issues addressed in the brief report. It should thus be weighed against other country of origin information available on the topic.

The brief report at hand does not include any policy recommendations or analysis. The information in the brief report does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Danish Immigration Service.

Furthermore, this brief report is not conclusive as to the determination or merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Terminology used should not be regarded as indicative of a particular legal position.

December 2020

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Introduction

This brief report aims to provide information about the return procedures for Syrian citizens who live outside Syria.

The report is a follow-up to the two fact finding mission reports: '[SYRIA: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019](#)', by the Danish Immigration Service (DIS) and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC); and '[Syria: Military Service, May 2020](#)', by DIS.

The return procedures examined in the report include two procedures: *Security clearance/security approval* (موافقة أمنية [muwafaka amniya]) and *status settlement* (تسوية وضع [taswiyat Wada']).

Syrians may have to go through these procedures for other issues than return from abroad.¹ A security clearance is required of Syrian citizens who want to, for example, move to a new area; rent, buy, rebuild or reconstruct a house; open a shop; apply for a job etc.² A status settlement is, for example, required of Syrian citizens living in Syria who want to resolve their outstanding issues as they are wanted by the GoS.³

However, although internally displaced persons may be required to obtain security clearance or to settle their outstanding issues with the Government of Syria (GoS) in order to return to their home areas, this report will mainly focus on providing information on these procedures in connection with the return of Syrian citizens who live outside Syria.

The report is based on information from written sources and four Skype and phone meetings, which were conducted in the period from September to November 2020, with carefully selected sources in London, Jordan and Turkey. The minutes of the meetings have been approved (with the possibility to amend, comment or correct the statements) by the sources and are included in Appendix 1.

The sources interviewed were briefed about the purpose of the meetings and informed that their statements would be included in a publicly available report in accordance with their preferred referencing. For the sake of reader-friendliness, transparency and accuracy, paragraphs in the meeting minutes in Appendix 1 have been given consecutive numbers which are used in the report when referring to the statements of the sources.

The report was peer reviewed by the Norwegian Landinfo and the Swedish Migration Agency. The research and editing of this report was finalised on 17 December 2020.

The report can be accessed from the website of [DIS](#) and is thus available to all stakeholders in the refugee status determination process as well as to the general public.

Clarification of concepts

In this report, the terms '*security clearance*' and '*status settlement*' should be understood as follows:

¹ European Institute of Peace (EIP), *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 26, 32, 47, 49; Landinfo, *Temanotat, Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 7; EASO, *Syria: Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility*, April 2020, [url](#), pp. 30-32; EASO, *Syria: Targeting of individuals*, March 2020, [url](#) p. 26, 27

² For more information, see section 1.1. of this report

³ For more information, see section 1.2. of this report

- ‘Security clearance’ (موافقة أمنية [muwafaka amniya]) is a process through which the GoS authorities crosscheck whether a person is on a wanted list and is to be considered a security threat.⁴
- ‘Status settlement’⁵ (تسوية وضع [taswiyat Wada]) is a process through which a person who is wanted by the GoS applies to settle his/her issues with the GoS. If the GoS agrees to settle the person’s outstanding issues, the person’s name will be deleted from wanted lists and he/she will not be wanted anymore.⁶

⁴ Al-Ghazi, S: 1

⁵ English sources refer to this procedure as *reconciling one’s affairs, legalising status, regulating status, resolving status* or *sorting out one’s outstanding issues*. European Institute of Peace (EIP), *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#); Landinfo, Temanotat, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#); EASO, *Syria: Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility*, April 2020, [url](#); EASO, *Syria: Targeting of individuals*, March 2020, [url](#); International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#); DIS, *Syria: Military Service - Report based on a fact-finding mission to Istanbul and Beirut (17-25 February 2020)*, May 2020, [url](#)

⁶ Al-Ghazi, S: 1, 2; Syria Direct: 2; International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State’s Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

1. Return procedures

During Syria's nine years of ongoing conflict, more than 13 million people have been displaced within and outside the country.⁷ People fled their home areas to escape from the intensive violence, and/or to avoid prosecution or military service.⁸ Since the GoS retook control over southern and central Syria in the summer of 2018, many refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) have returned to the government-controlled areas voluntarily or by force.⁹ At the end of 2018, the UNHCR estimated that 1.4 million IDPs had returned to their home areas during 2018, while 135,718 refugees had returned to Syria from Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq and Egypt (since September 2015). However, due to its lack of access to Syria, the UN has been unable to monitor returns and collect accurate data on the number of refugee and IDP returns.¹⁰

Refugees and IDPs may have to go through return procedures in order to be able to return to the government-controlled areas in Syria, namely *security clearance/approval (muwafaqa amniya)* and *status settlement (taswiyat wada')*.¹¹

1.1. Security clearance

1.1.1. Background

The requirement for security clearance pre-dates the outbreak of the civil war.¹² Syrian citizens, regardless of religion or ethnicity, need to obtain a security clearance from the security services in order to be allowed to complete different everyday life issues. For instance, a person needs a security clearance when he/she wants to register a marriage,¹³ move to a new area; rent, buy, rebuild or reconstruct a house; open a shop; apply for a job etc.¹⁴

1.1.2. Who needs a security clearance?

In a meeting with DIS on 21 November 2018, General Naji Numeir, Chief of Immigration and Passports Department stated that Syrians who wished to return back to Syria had to apply for return at the nearest Syrian representation, i.e. embassy or consulate, in the foreign country in which they were residing. The

⁷ European Institute of Peace (EIP), *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

⁸ Landinfo, Temanotat, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 6

⁹ European Institute of Peace (EIP), *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 4

¹⁰ European Institute of Peace (EIP), *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), pp. 18, 19

¹¹ European Institute of Peace (EIP), *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#), p. 4 ; Landinfo, Temanotat, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 7; EASO, *Syria: Internally displaced persons, returnees and internal mobility*, April 2020, [url](#), pp. 30-32 ; EASO, *Syria: Targeting of individuals*, March 2020, [url](#), p. 26-28

¹² Finnish Migration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56

¹³ Security clearance is required if a Syrian is getting married to a foreign national, or if the man who is getting married is in the conscription age or is serving in the armed forces (Landinfo, Report, *Syria: Marriage legislation and traditions*, 22 August 2018, [url](#), p. 9

¹⁴ Syria Direct: 4; Al-Ghazi, S: 1; Jusoor for Studies: 1; Finnish Migration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56

Syrian authorities would then conduct security checks of applicants and also verify their identities as Syrian nationals.¹⁵

However, the empirical evidence provided by the written sources to substantiate their statements about the security clearance requirement are mainly limited to returns from Lebanon. Additionally, DIS could not find any information about such requirement on the websites of Syrian embassies in Europe, e.g. the website of the Syrian embassy in Stockholm and Paris.

Moreover, the information provided by the oral sources in the interviews conducted during the period September-November 2020 contradicts the written sources' statements on the issue of the security clearance requirement. Suhail Al-Ghazi, non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, as well as Syria Direct and Rami Abdulrahman from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) informed DIS that Syrian citizens, who live outside Syria and who are not wanted by the GoS, are not required to obtain a security clearance in order to return to Syria.¹⁶ Syria Direct stated that an exception in this regard is Syrian citizens living in Lebanon who return to Syria through organised group returns. They are required to obtain a security clearance in order to be allowed to enter Syria.¹⁷

1.1.3. Procedure

With regard to the application for a security clearance, the applicant is asked different questions about himself/herself and his/her family members when undergoing the security clearance procedure.¹⁸ The Syrian authorities crosscheck the person's name with names on wanted lists of the security services.¹⁹ In relation to the security clearances that Syrian refugees from Lebanon had to obtain in 2018 in order to return to Syria, COAR Global stated that people's Facebook profiles and other social media activities were also checked during security screenings.²⁰ According to Maha Yahya from Carnegie Middle East Center, it is currently Syria's National Security Bureau, which is responsible for coordinating the work of Syria's intelligence agencies, which carries out security clearances and approves the return of refugees and IDPs.²¹

When the GoS has crosschecked that the applicant is not on a wanted list [or is not otherwise considered a security threat, *red.*], the person will be issued a document by which he can return to Syria.²²

The security clearance document is a stamped document that one needs to show at checkpoints in government-controlled areas in Syria.²³ According to a report by the Finnish Migration Service published in

¹⁵ DIS & DRC, *SYRIA: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 36

¹⁶ Syria Direct: 1, 2; Al-Ghazi, S: 4; SOHR: 1

¹⁷ Syria Direct: 2. Both Al-Ghazi, S and Syria Direct stated that IDPs (who are not on wanted lists) are required to obtain a security clearance if they want to return. Syria direct: 3; Al-Ghazi, S: 3

¹⁸ Suhail: 2, 6; Finnish Migration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56;

¹⁹ Syria Direct: 2; Al-Ghazi, S: 1

²⁰ DIS & DRC, *SYRIA: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 23

²¹ Yahya, M., Carnegie Middle East Center, *Into the fire*, 17 September 2019, [url](#)

²² Al-Ghazi, S: 1

²³ Syria Direct: 3

December 2018, a security clearance document is valid for three months. A person needs to apply for a new security clearance if it has expired, and he/she needs a security clearance for other purposes.²⁴

1.1.4. Who obtains security clearance?

According to a source interviewed by the Finnish Migration Service in 2018, the authorities also check whether family members of the person in question are wanted. Thus, a security clearance will only be given to the applicant if he/she and his/her family members are not wanted.²⁵ According to Jusoor for Studies, people who are in family (first and second degree) with persons, who are wanted in cases related to terrorism, will face difficulties in getting a security clearance.²⁶

There are cases of persons who did not obtain a security clearance because they had family members who were wanted by the GoS. However, this is not a systematic practice by the GoS. Many persons have been able to get a security clearance despite having family members who were wanted. For example, Suhail Al-Ghazi knew of persons who had left for Idlib, and who had family members who were wanted by the GoS, but who were nevertheless able to obtain a security clearance and return to the government-controlled areas. According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, in general, whether a person is able to obtain a security clearance depends on the (type of) security issue that his/her family members are wanted for.²⁷

Moreover, a person who wants to return may also be denied a security clearance for other reasons than having a family member who is wanted. For instance, in cases where the authorities find that the area in Syria, to which the person wants to return, is destroyed to an extent that it is impossible to live there, the person will be denied a security clearance. This happened to some Syrians who wanted to return from Lebanon to Syria.²⁸

Jusoor for Studies stated that persons who are regarded by the GoS as pro-government will obtain a security clearance quickly.²⁹ According to the Finnish Immigration Service report published in 2018, Sunnis from specific areas, such as Homs, Deraa and Raqqa, may have to wait longer to obtain a security clearance compared to, for example, Alawites from al-Zahra in Homs.³⁰

²⁴ Finnish Migration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56

²⁵ Finnish Migration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 56.

²⁶ Jusoor for Studies: 2

²⁷ Al-Ghazi, S: 3

²⁸ DIS & DRC, *SYRIA: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria*, February 2019, [url](#), p. 24. Similarly, citizens inside Syria who apply for a security clearance to return to areas that are restricted for access may not get a permission if the houses in the area are destroyed, even if they are not wanted by the GoS (DIS, *Syria: Security and Socio-Economic Situation in the Governorates of Damascus and Rural Damascus*, October 2020, [url](#), pp.21-23)

²⁹ Jusoor for Studies: 2

³⁰ Finnish Migration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 57

1.2. Status settlement

1.2.1. Background

The term *status settlement* appeared during the war in Syria to denote a procedure whereby all anti-government activities carried out by Syrian citizens living in Syria are “forgiven” by the GoS. These acts include political activity against the GoS ranging from anti-government demonstrations and participation in relief work in opposition-held areas to carrying weapons and fighting against the GoS.³¹

The Chief of Immigration and Passport Department, General Naji Numeir, informed DIS in a meeting in Damascus in November 2018 that Syrians who wished to return to Syria and who had criminal charges against them, would face problems upon return unless they settled their issues with the Syrian government before returning to the country.³²

In general, a person who is wanted by the GoS needs to apply for settling his situation in order to have his name removed from wanted lists. If this person’s application is approved, it officially means that he is not wanted anymore and will thus not be prosecuted by the GoS.³³

The pace of status settlements has increased in recent years with the beginning of the truces conducted between the GoS and opposition-controlled areas. Thousands of people have been able to settle their status and obtain a document guaranteeing them the freedom to move within the government-controlled areas without prosecution.³⁴ Persons who lived in former opposition-controlled areas and who entered the reconciliation agreements³⁵ had to apply for a status settlement in order to be allowed to stay in or return to their area after the GoS retook control. Currently, persons who reside in opposition-controlled areas such as Idlib, and who are wanted by the GoS, have to apply for the same procedure to be allowed to return without facing prosecution.³⁶

At the end of 2017, the possibility of status settlement was extended to include those residing outside of Syria.³⁷ The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates has stated that Syrian citizens who want to return to Syria, but who have left the country illegally due to the conflict, or who have outstanding military and security issues, can settle their issues with the GoS.³⁸

³¹ Aljazeera, كابوس جديد يورق سكان محيط دمشق [Status settlement...a new nightmare haunts the residents of the surroundings of Damascus], 17 June 2018, [url](#)

³² DIS & DRC, SYRIA: Security Situation in Damascus Province and Issues Regarding Return to Syria, February 2019, [url](#), pp. 20-21

³³ Syria Direct: 5; Al-Ghazi, S: 5

³⁴ Aljazeera, كابوس جديد يورق سكان محيط دمشق [Status settlement...a new nightmare haunts the residents of the surroundings of Damascus], 17 June 2018, [url](#)

³⁵ The GoS concluded reconciliation agreements with opposition groups that controlled areas besieged by the GoS and its allies. The reconciliation processes vary from one area to another. For more information about reconciliation agreements see: Syria Studies, Vol 9 No 2 (2017): *The Day After: Post-Uprising Realities & Challenges*: Raymond Hinnibusch and Omar Imady, *Syria’s Reconciliation Agreements*, [url](#)

³⁶ Jusoor for studies: 3. For more information about the procedure of status settlement for persons residing inside Syria, see: European Institute of Peace (EIP), *Refugees Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity*, July 2019, [url](#)

³⁷ Enab Baladi, النظام يطالب من غادر سوريا بطريقة “غير مشروعة” بمراجعة السفارات [The regime demands those who left Syria “illegally” to contact embassies], 4 October 2017, [url](#)

³⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, خدمات أخرى [Other services], [url](#)

1.2.2. Who needs a status settlement?

Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS), who live abroad and want to return to Syria, are required to apply for a status settlement for a number of issues, including illegal exit, security issues and payment of exemption fee by draft evaders.³⁹

According to Syria Direct, an outstanding security issue includes anti-government activities such as participating in demonstrations, stating anti-government slogans, carrying weapons against the GoS, evading and deserting from reserve and obligatory military service (in which a status settlement means that the person will not be prosecuted for evasion but he will have to do his service after returning to Syria).⁴⁰

A man who wants to be exempted from military service by paying an exemption fee, but has exited Syria illegally or has outstanding security issues, must apply for a status settlement to be allowed to pay the exemption fee.⁴¹

Sometimes, people are unsure whether they are wanted by the GoS. Therefore, they might have it clarified before they approach a Syrian representation abroad and return to Syria. Syrians often have acquaintances in Syria, or sometimes even abroad (e.g. in Jordan or Lebanon), who have connections within the Syrian security apparatus, and who in return for payment can provide information on whether someone is wanted by the GoS.⁴² Syria Direct knows Syrians in Jordan who did this type of check before visiting or returning to areas in Rural Damascus, including East Ghouta.⁴³

The consular section of the Syrian embassy in Stockholm informed Landinfo in a phone interview on 7 December 2020 that the embassy encouraged all Syrians, who wished to return to Syria, to get clarified whether they had any outstanding issues with the GoS prior to their return. This could also be done by a relative in Syria. In the event it turns out that they do have an outstanding issue, they can apply for a status settlement at the embassy.⁴⁴

According to Rami Abdulrahman (SOHR), many Syrians do not trust the Syrian authorities and therefore, they would not settle their outstanding security issues through the Syrian embassies or consulates. Many Syrians prefer to bribe an employee in the specific security branch, which they are wanted by, to have their names removed from a wanted list.⁴⁵

³⁹ Syria Direct: 5; Al-Ghazi, S: 5; Jusoor for Studies: 4. With regard to military service, the Syrian Ministry of Defence created an electronic system in September 2020 through which people can check their military service status and thereby check whether they are wanted for the reserve or the obligatory military service (Enab Baladi, *موقع "الدفاع" يتيح الاطلاع على أسماء المدعوين للخدمة العسكرية*, [The "Defence" website provides access to the names of those who are called in for military service], 26 September 2020, [url](#)). The electronic system for obligatory military service: Syrian Ministry of Defence, *نظام البحث للمطوبين إلى الخدمة الإلزامية*, [url](#); The electronic system for the reserve: Syrian Ministry of Defence, *نظام البحث للمطوبين إلى الخدمة الاحتياطية*, [url](#).

⁴⁰ Syria Direct: 5

⁴¹ DIS, *Syria: Military Service* - Report based on a fact-finding mission to Istanbul and Beirut (17-25 February 2020), May 2020, [url](#) pp. 26, 27

⁴² Syria Direct: 6; Al-Ghazi, S: 20; Finnish Migration Service, *SYRIA: FACT-FINDING MISSION TO BEIRUT AND DAMASCUS, APRIL 2018, Syrian pro-government armed groups and issues related to freedom of movement, reconciliation processes and return to original place of residence in areas controlled by the Syrian government*, 14 December 2018, [url](#), p. 87

⁴³ Syria Direct: 6

⁴⁴ Landinfo, Temanotat, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#) p. 8

⁴⁵ SOHR: 5

1.2.3. Procedure

A Syrian refugee who needs to settle his outstanding issues will have to apply for it at the nearest Syrian representation (embassy or consulate).⁴⁶ In the event the person lives in a country where there is no Syrian embassy, the status settlement can be conducted by a close relative in Syria. The relative must submit the applicant's CV (*sira thatiyya*) and inform the authorities about the date the applicant exited Syria (legal as well as illegal exit), the border used and the applicant's address abroad.⁴⁷

When applying for status settlement at the embassy, the person must first prove that he is a Syrian national by showing a Syrian ID or a Syrian passport. After registration, the applicant is given a special application form for status settlement that he/she must fill in.⁴⁸ The form, which consists of two to three pages, contains a number of detailed questions about the applicant, including whether the applicant has been involved – or knows someone inside or outside Syria who is involved - in armed opposition against the GoS. In addition, the individual will be asked about when and how he left Syria, where he has stayed outside Syria, and what he has done during his stay abroad. In the form, the applicant is also asked to provide information about his close family members, including parents, sisters, brothers, children and spouse.⁴⁹ He will have to give information about their names, work and place of residence, whether they are wanted, and whether they were active against the GoS. When the form is filled in, the person in charge at the consulate may - based on the information provided in the form ask the applicant to give more information in writing on some of the questions in the form.⁵⁰

In Syria, the application will be processed by with the involvement of central and local security officers. They will check the submitted information and decide whether to settle the person's issues or, in other words, whether to agree to delete the person's name from wanted lists.⁵¹

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, sometimes, the security services in Syria may ask for more information on some issues. In that case, the consulate or embassy will contact the person and ask him/her to provide (in writing) the information requested. If there is someone in the applicant's family or among his/her relatives

⁴⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, خدمات أخرى [Other services], [url](#); Syria Direct: 7; Al-Ghazi, S: 6, 7; Jusoor for Studies: 5; Landinfo, Temanotat, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 7. According to Landinfo, persons who want to return from the neighbouring countries, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, can apply for a status settlement after they return to Syria. In this case, they will have to apply within three to six months. Landinfo, Temanotat, *Syria: Retur fra utlandet [Syria: Return from abroad]*, 16 December 2020, [url](#), p. 7

⁴⁷ Syria, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, إعلان بخصوص إمكانية القيام بمعاملة تسوية الوضع في سورية للمغتربين المقيمين في دول لا يوجد فيها تمثيل دبلوماسي للجمهورية العربية السورية [Announcement regarding the possibility of undertaking regular status treatment in Syria for expatriates residing in countries where there is no diplomatic representation of the Syrian Arab Republic], [url](#)

⁴⁸ On the website of the Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, it is mentioned that the fee for applying for status settlement is 50 Euro. Syrian Embassy in Stockholm, الرسوم القنصلية [Consular fees], [url](#)

⁴⁹ Syria Direct: 7; Al-Ghazi, S: 6, 7; Jusoor for Studies: 5. International Crisis Group uses the terms “resolving status” or “reconciling status” referring to the procedure that previous opposition activists inside Syria (such as participants in protests, relief workers in rebel-held areas or fighters with the opposition) go through in order to get on good terms with the GoS. International Crisis Group describes the status settlement procedure for those living inside Syria as follows: A person will be asked to answer 12 questions about his or her activities and relations with the opposition since 2011. The person is also required to sign a ‘pledge document’ in which he or she ‘vows not to carry out any activities that harm the internal or the external security of the Syrian Arab Republic’. After a few days, the person will obtain a form signed and stamped by the head of the Military Intelligence Directorate (MID). The form is to indicate that one's name has been removed from wanted lists and one is supposed to move through checkpoints without being harassed or arrested. International Crisis Group, *Lessons from the Syrian State's Return to the South*, 25 February 2019, [url](#), p. 2

⁵⁰ Al-Ghazi, S: 6, 7

⁵¹ Syria Direct: 7; Al-Ghazi, S: 8

who is affiliated with the armed opposition, the applicant will be asked to provide detailed information about the person in question, his/her activities and whereabouts.⁵²

In case the authorities in Syria approve the status settlement application, the person will be informed about this through the consulate or embassy. When the person's application for status settlement is approved, his/her name will be deleted from wanted list.⁵³

When an application for status settlement is approved and the person's name is removed from a wanted list, the person will receive a stamped document indicating that he/she can return to Syria.⁵⁴

The person will be asked to contact the security branch, which is mentioned on the status settlement document, upon return to Syria for further investigation.⁵⁵ When the person returns and reports to the security service in question, the person will mainly be asked about his family members and about people from his area who joined the rebels or who are residing outside Syria. In addition, the person will be asked about what he/she did during the anti-government protests and the early years of the uprising.⁵⁶

Suhail Al-Ghazi stated that if the application for status settlement is not approved, the case will be put on hold and the applicant will not receive any response from Syria confirming that he cannot return.⁵⁷

Settling evasion to pay the exemption fee

Men in the military service age (18-42) who want to settle their evasion and pay the exemption fee should, in addition to the application form mentioned above, also fill in a separate form about their military service status and an application form for paying the exemption fee. This will be sent to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates and to the security services in Syria together with the status settlement application.⁵⁸

It is not until after the application for status settlement has been approved that draft evaders, who want to be exempted by paying the exemption fee, can pay the fee and be exempted from military service.⁵⁹ Upon paying the exemption fee, the person will receive a stamp in his military service book, which will indicate that his is exempted from military service.⁶⁰ Syria Direct added that he would also receive a receipt that he has paid the exemption fee – a receipt that he will have to show at the Recruitment Division in Syria in case of return.⁶¹

Unlike persons who settle their illegal exit and outstanding security issues, men who settle their evasion and pay the exemption fee will not be asked to report their return to the security services.⁶²

⁵² Al-Ghazi, S: 11

⁵³ Syria Direct: 7; Al-Ghazi, S: 8, 12, 13

⁵⁴ Syria Direct: 7; Al-Ghazi, S: 8, 12, 13

⁵⁵ Al-Ghazi, S: 13; Jusoor for Studies: 10

⁵⁶ Suhail A-Ghazi: 13, 14

⁵⁷ Al-Ghazi, S: 15

⁵⁸ Al-Ghazi, S: 10

⁵⁹ Syria Direct: 7; Al-Ghazi, S: 12; Jusoor for Studies: 4

⁶⁰ Syria Direct: 9; Al-Ghazi, S: 14

⁶¹ Syria Direct: 9

⁶² Suhail A-Ghazi: 13, 14

1.2.4. Treatment upon return

Most applications for status settlement get approved by the GoS.⁶³ If a person whose application has not been approved returns to Syria, he will most probably be arrested and interrogated upon return.⁶⁴ Syria Direct said that an example of this was the arrest of many Syrians who, before obtaining a status settlement, were forced to return to Syria from Lebanon in 2018.⁶⁵

1.2.4.1. Treatment of persons with status settlements regarding illegal exit or evasion

Persons who apply for status settlement because of illegal exit or evasion (in order to subsequently pay the exemption fee) will most likely obtain it,⁶⁶ and they usually do not face any problem with the GoS upon return.⁶⁷ However, Suhail Al-Ghazi had heard of two individuals who, despite having settled their illegal exit, were arrested upon return because of accusations that they were part of the opposition. The arrest took place when they reported their return to the security branch that they were referred to. One of the persons was 43 years old and originated from Dumair in north-east Damascus. He returned from Lebanon and was arrested and detained for around 40 days. He was interrogated about some rebel commanders. The person was released after forty days but he was later called in for further interrogations; however, he was not re-arrested. The second person was a 24-year-old man from Damascus who was arrested a couple of weeks after he went back to Syria from Egypt. There was no specific reason for the arrest other than extortion as he was released after his family paid 14,000 USD.⁶⁸

While advising that no organisation is monitoring what happens to returnees, Jusoor for Studies assumed that some people who settle their illegal exit or evasion might get temporarily arrested upon return. The source also assumed that some of them might even get tortured.⁶⁹

Consequences of settlement of illegal exit or draft evasion for family members

According to Suhail Al-Ghazi, a person's application for status settlement does not have consequences for his family members (e.g. interrogation or arrest). However, their names and information about them will be recorded in the security file of the person who applied for status settlement.⁷⁰ Syria Direct stated that family members of a person, who applied for a status settlement because of illegal exit or outstanding military service issues, do not face any issues as a result of the person's application.⁷¹

1.2.4.2. Treatment of persons with status settlement regarding security issues

According to Jusoor for Studies, it is risky to return to Syria on the basis of a settlement of a security issue.⁷² Suhail Al-Ghazi mentioned that there were cases of persons who were arrested when they reported their return to a security branch even though they had settled their security issues with the GoS.⁷³

Jusoor for Studies stated that persons who applied for a status settlement would also have their profiles on social media investigated by the Syrian security forces. A person might be interrogated about any anti-

⁶³ Syria Direct: 8; Al-Ghazi, S: 16

⁶⁴ Syria Direct: 13; Al-Ghazi, S: 16

⁶⁵ Syria Direct: 13

⁶⁶ Jusoor for Studies: 5; Syria Direct: 10

⁶⁷ Syria Direct: 10

⁶⁸ Al-Ghazi, S: 19

⁶⁹ Jusoor for Studies: 6

⁷⁰ Al-Ghazi, S: 17

⁷¹ Syria Direct: 10

⁷² Jusoor for Studies: 7

⁷³ Al-Ghazi, S: 19

government activity on his/her profiles upon return to Syria. Even if a person has a status settlement paper, the person may face problems; for example, if a friend of his/her has liked a post that the GoS regards as anti-government activity.⁷⁴ Similarly, Syria Direct and SOHR stated that having settled one's security issues, and having had removed one's name from wanted lists, does not necessarily mean that a person will not face problems with the authorities upon return. Such persons may risk facing new accusations and being arrested upon return despite their status settlement.⁷⁵ SOHR knew of people who completed a status settlement for having outstanding security issues but who were nonetheless arrested upon return.⁷⁶

According to SOHR, there were also cases of people who entered and exited Syria without having settled their status, even though they were wanted by a security branch. Those people did not face any problems because they were lucky that they did not run into the security branch that they were wanted by.⁷⁷

Consequences of settlement of security issues for family members

The brothers and parents of a person who is wanted for security issues may risk being called in for interrogation by the Syrian authorities, as a consequence of this person's application for a settlement. In general, the family members will be asked about the person's motives to return to Syria and about his work and activity in the foreign country he is applying from. Syria Direct assumed that the person's relatives might be verbally harassed as well.⁷⁸

In addition, Syria Direct knew of persons, whose relatives were from the opposition, and who faced issues with the authorities upon their return to Syria despite having settled their issues prior to the return. The source mentioned a case related to the "Al-Bouaidani" family which is a well-known family in Douma. Most of this family, including a former opposition leader, have been participating in the armed opposition. A person from this family had his land and car seized, and he was interrogated when he returned to Syria in 2019. This happened even though he was not wanted by the GoS, neither for military service nor for opposition activities.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Jusoor for Studies: 8

⁷⁵ Syria Direct: 12

⁷⁶ SOHR: 2

⁷⁷ SOHR: 4

⁷⁸ Syria Direct: 11

⁷⁹ Syria Direct: 14; SOHR: 3

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Appendix 1: Meeting minutes

Skype meetings with Ammar Hamou, senior editor, Syria Direct, 10-11 August 2020 and 2 October 2020

About the source: On the website of Syria Direct, it reads that *“Syria Direct is an independent media organization that seeks to promote a democratic and just future for the Syrian people. (...) Founded in 2013, Syria Direct is a registered LLC in Jordan, and is financed through grants and projects. [Syria Direct’s] main activities are: 1) Media coverage on Syria: Publishing original news reports, interviews with newsmakers, and newsworthy photographs and videos from Syria, as well as newsletters; 2) Training: Syria Direct conducts trainings and workshops on basic and advanced journalism skills as well as investigative and conflict reporting.”*⁸⁰

Security clearance

1. People who exited Syria legally and who are not wanted for military service or security issues are not required to apply for any kind of approvals, including security clearance, if they want to return to Syria.
2. With regard to organized group returns of Syrian citizens from Lebanon to Syria, the citizens had to apply for a permission to return. This application for permission to return included a security clearance. In general, if a person obtains a permission it means that his/her name is not on a wanted list.
3. Internally displaced people (IDPs), who are not wanted by the GoS, are required to obtain a security clearance if they want to return to government-controlled areas. The security clearance is a stamped document which IDPs will need to show at checkpoints in government-controlled areas.
4. A security clearance is required of Syrian citizens for a number of procedures, including registration of birth, death and marriage; renting, buying and selling a house etc.

Status settlement

5. The procedure of status settlement for Syrian citizens who live abroad and for those who live inside Syria is similar. Syrians and Palestinians from Syria, IDPs and refugees, who are wanted for evading obligatory military service and want to pay the exemption fee; who are wanted for security issues; or who exited Syria illegally (for those living outside Syria), will need to settle out their situation before returning to Syria/government-controlled areas. An outstanding security issue, which a person can be wanted for, is an anti-government activity as for example, participating in demonstration, stating anti-government slogans, carrying weapon against the GoS, evading or deserting from reserve and obligatory military service (where the person will have to do his service after returning to Syria).
6. Sometimes people are on wanted lists without knowing it. This is why most people who are not sure whether they are wanted by the GoS, informally check whether they are on wanted

⁸⁰ Syria Direct, About us, [url](#)

lists before return. This check is conducted through relatives in Syria by bribing an employee in the security services to check whether the person's name is on the wanted lists of any of the four intelligence services. The source knows Syrians in Jordan who did this check before visiting or returning to areas in Rural Damascus including East Ghouta.

7. A person who lives abroad and wishes to settle his situation has to go to the nearest Syrian embassy or consulate and state that he/she wishes to return to Syria/pay exemption fee. The person will then be asked to fill in an application form, which actually is an application for status settlement. The application form includes questions about when, why, how and with whom he exited Syria and whether he has been active. In addition, the person will be asked questions about his parents, sisters, brothers and their children, including their names, their work, their place of residence, whether they are wanted and whether they were active against the GoS. The Syrian consulate or embassy will then send the form to the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates and the security services in Damascus. They will check the information and decide whether to settle the person's issue(s) or in other words, whether to agree to delete the person's name from wanted lists. If the person's obtains a status settlement, his name is deleted from wanted list and he/she will receive information from the embassy or consulate that he/she is allowed to return to Syria/pay the exemption fee, few weeks after the submission of the application.
8. Most people who apply to settle their outstanding issues get an approval. People who want to return to Syria will receive a stamped document from the Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates indicating that they are allowed to return. Syrians in Lebanon and Jordan do not need a Syrian passport to enter Syria if they have such a document to show at the Syrian border entrances.
9. Men, who settle their evasion from military service and pay the exemption fee, will receive a stamp in their military service book that they are exempted from military service. They will also receive a receipt that they have paid the exemption fee which they will have to show to the Recruitment Division upon return to Syria.
10. A person who obtains a Status Settlement for illegal exit or evasion usually does not face any problem with the GoS upon return. Family members of a person who applies for a status settlement because of illegal exit or outstanding military service issues do not face any issues as a result of the person's application.
11. Brothers and parents of a person, who is wanted for security issues, may risk being called in for interrogation with the Syrian authorities, as a consequence of the person's application for a status settlement. In general, the family members will be asked about the person's motives to return to Syria and about his work and activity in the foreign country from which he is applying. The source assumes that the person's relatives might be verbally harassed as well.
12. Having ones name removed from wanted lists when obtaining a status settlement, does not necessarily mean that a person will not be prosecuted after arriving to Syria. A person who was wanted for security issues but whose name was deleted from wanted lists when he/she obtained a status settlement, may face new accusations upon return and he/she may even get arrested, even if he/she carries the status settlement paper.

13. People who are not wanted do not need to apply for a settlement. The source knows Syrians who live in Jordan, who went to Syria without applying for a settlement beforehand because they were not wanted. Those people were able to enter and exit Syria without facing any issue. However, people who are wanted but who have not sorted out their issues will likely be arrested upon return. An example is the arrest of many returnees from Lebanon in 2018, who were forced to return to Syria before they obtained a settlement.
14. The source knows of cases of people, whose relatives are from the opposition or known to be part of the opposition. Those people faced issues with the authorities upon their return to Syria despite having settled their issues prior to the return. As an example, the source mentioned the case of a person from the "Al-Bouaidani" family who is a large family in Douma most of whom have been participating in armed-opposition, including a former opposition leader. Even though this person was not wanted for military service or for opposition activities, his land and car were seized, and he was interrogated when he returned to Syria in 2019.

Skype meeting with Suhail Al-Ghazi, non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, 5 August 2020

About the source: *The source is a Syrian researcher and activist from Damascus. He is a non-resident fellow at Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy located in Washington DC, and a member of Verify-Syria fact-checking platform. His research focus is on military and security development around Syria as well as the socio-economic situation in government-held areas.*

Security clearance

1. A security clearance/approval is a procedure that Syrian citizens need to apply for if they want to buy, rent or renovate a house; when they want to get married etc. When a person gets an approval it means that he **is not wanted**. If a person knows that he is wanted, he will not apply to a security clearance.
2. The source does not distinguish between the procedure of status settlement and security clearance as a person will be asked almost the same questions in both procedures and he/she will need to give a lot of information.
3. There are cases of persons who have not obtained a security clearance because their family members are wanted by the GoS. However, this is not a systematic practice by the GoS. Many persons have been able to get a security clearance despite having family members who are wanted. For example, the source knows of cases of persons who left for Idlib and who have family members wanted by the GoS, have been able to obtain a security clearance in order to return to government-controlled areas. In general, it depends on what security issue the family member is wanted for.
4. Persons who want to return to Syria but who are not wanted by the GoS, do not need to apply for a permission to return and thus they do not need to have a security clearance.

Status settlement

5. A person, who lives outside Syria, who is wanted because of evasion from obligatory military service (but wants to pay the exemption fee or return), exited illegally or knows that he/she is wanted for security issues will have to settle his/her issue with the Syrian authorities in order to return to Syria or be allowed to pay the exemption fee. A status settlement (*Taswiyat Wada'*) is the procedure that a person applies for if he/she is wanted by the GoS in order to have his outstanding issues cleared by the GoS. When the person's application is approved by the authorities, it means that he **is not wanted anymore**.
6. A Syrian refugee who needs to settle his/her outstanding issues will have to apply for a status settlement at the nearest Syrian representation, embassy or consulate. The person must first prove that he/she is a Syrian national by showing a Syrian ID or a Syrian passport. After registering the person, a special application form is handed over to the person, which he/she must fill in. The form, which consists of two-three pages, contains a number of detailed questions about the applicant, including whether the applicant has been involved – or knows someone inside or outside Syria who is involved - in armed opposition against the GoS. In addition the applicant will be asked about when and how he/she left Syria, where he/she has stayed outside Syria and what he/she has done during his/her stay abroad. In the form, the applicant is also asked to provide information about his/her close family members, including, parents, sisters, brothers, children and spouse.
7. When the form is filled in and submitted, the person in charge at the consulate may – based on the information submitted - ask the applicant to give more information, in writing, on some of the question in the form.
8. After the applicant fills in the form, the consulate sends it to Syria for approval. In Syria, the application will be processed involving central and local security offices.
9. Men in the military service age (18-42) who want to settle their military issues should also fill in a separate form about their military service status. This will be sent to Syria together with the status settlement application.
10. Men, who want to pay the exemption fee, will have to fill in the two forms mentioned above plus an additional form for the exemption fee.
11. Sometimes, the security services in Syria may ask for more information about some issues. In that event, the consulate will contact the person and ask him/her to provide (in writing) the information requested. If there is someone in the applicant's family or among his/her relatives, who is affiliated with the armed opposition, the applicant will be asked to provide detailed information about the person in question, his activities and whereabouts.
12. When the authorities in Syria finish processing the application, the person will be informed through the consulate that his/her outstanding issues have been approved to be settled and that the person can now return to Syria (or pay the exemption fee). The person is then issued a stamped document by which he can return.
13. A person who goes through the procedure of status settlement for illegal exit or security issues, will also receive a stamped document when the person gets approval, indicating that the outstanding issue is now settled and they are not wanted anymore. In addition, the person will

also be asked to contact the security branch mentioned on the paper for further investigation when he/she returns to Syria. When the person returns and reports his/her return to the security service in question, the person will mainly be asked about his/her family members and about people from his/her area who joined the rebels or who are residing outside Syria. In addition, the person will be asked about what he/she did during the protests and early years of the uprising.

14. A person who gets an approval to settle his outstanding military service issues in order to pay the exemption fee, will then be asked to pay the exemption fee and as a result his name will be removed from wanted lists. He will receive a stamped document that he can now return to Syria and his military book will be stamped to inform that he has paid the exemption fee. He will not be asked to report his return to a security service branch.
15. If the application for status settlement has not been approved, the case will be put on hold and the applicant will not receive any response from Syria confirming that he cannot return.
16. As far as the source is informed, most applications for status settlement are being approved. If a person, whose application has not been approved, returns to Syria he/she will most probably be arrested and interrogated upon return.
17. A person's application of status settlement does not lead to consequences, as interrogation or arrest, on his family members. However, their names and information about them will be in the security file of the person who applied for status settlement.
18. The source has information about four Syrian men who settle their outstanding issues in order to go back to Syria from Lebanon to join a pro-regime militia.
19. There are cases of persons who had a Status Settlement because they were wanted for security issues, but who have been arrested when they reported their return at a security branch. The source has also heard of two individuals who, despite having settled their illegal exit, were temporarily arrested upon return because of accusation that they were part of the opposition. The arrest took place when they reported their return at the security branch they were referred to. One of the persons was 43 years old and originated from Dumair in north-east Damascus. He returned from Lebanon and was arrested for around forty days. He was interrogated for long time to confess about rebel commanders who, according to the security officer who interrogating him, had information on where corpses of 10 SAA soldiers were buried. The person was released after forty days but he was later called for further interrogations, however, he was not re-arrested. The other person was a 24 year old man from Damascus who was arrested a couple of weeks after he returned from Egypt. There was no specific reason for the arrest other than extortion as he was released after his family paid 14.000 USD.
20. Sometimes people are unsure whether they are wanted by the GoS before returning to Syria. Therefore they would check it out before they return. According to the source, Syrians often know someone in their home area in Syria, or sometimes even abroad (e.g. in Jordan or Lebanon), who has connections within the Syrian security apparatus, and who against payment can provide information on whether someone is wanted by the authorities. Many Syrians avail themselves of such persons to make sure that they will not face issues with the authorities upon return to Syria. Individuals whose application for status settlement has not been approved may also use such persons to settle their outstanding issue.

21. When a person fills in the above-mentioned form at the consulate, he/she writes which area he/she intends to live in upon return to Syria. However, this does not mean that the person cannot stay other places in Syria. There have been cases of people returning to their home areas in Syria, who had to move to other areas when they, upon return, realized that living conditions in their home area was too dire.

Skype meeting with Jusoor for Studies, 25 August 2020

About the source: On the website of Jusoor for Studies, one reads: Jusoor for Studies is "an independent institution specializing in information management and conducting studies and research related to the Syrian political and social affairs in particular and the Middle East region in general. [Jusoor for Studies] aims to build bridges with officials and decision makers in various state fields and developing sectors to help them make balanced decisions related to regional issues by providing them with accurate, detailed and professional data and reports."⁸¹

Security clearance

1. A security clearance is required by the GoS for a number of purposes. For example, people, who want to sell or rebuild their houses, conduct reconstruction work or open a store, are required to obtain a security approval beforehand.
2. People who are regarded as pro-government obtain security approvals quickly. People who are in family (first and second degree) with persons, who are wanted in cases related to terrorism, will face difficulties in getting a security approval.

Status settlement

3. Status settlement is the procedure that people who were residing in opposition-controlled areas and who entered into reconciliation agreements, had to go through to be allowed to stay in/return to their area after the GoS retook control. In addition, persons today who reside in opposition-controlled areas, such as Idlib, and those who are wanted by the GoS, have to go through the same procedure to be allowed to return without facing prosecution.
4. Status settlement is also a procedure that some profiles living abroad are required to go through. A Syrian refugee who lives abroad, has to settle his/her issue if he had exited illegally from Syria or had evaded from obligatory military service (does not include desertion from military service), in order to be allowed to return to Syria or pay the exemption fee.
5. To settle his/her issue he/she applies to return/pay the fee by filling in a status settlement form at the nearest Syrian representation. In the form, he/she will be required to answer questions about himself/herself and his/her family. This is what the source calls "the legal status settlement".
6. The source is well-aware that no organisation is monitoring what happens to returnees; however he assumes that some people who settle their legal issues might get temporarily arrested when

⁸¹ Jusoor for Studies: [url](#)

they go to a security branch in Syria. The source also assumes that some of them might even be arrested and tortured.

7. A person who is wanted for security issues can also apply to settle his/her issue by applying for a status settlement. This is “the security status settlement”. The source believes that it is risky to return to Syria on such a status settlement as the GoS cannot be trusted.
8. Persons who apply for a status settlement will also have their profiles on social media investigated by the Syrian Security forces. A person might be interrogated about any anti-government activity on his/her profiles upon return to Syria. Even if a person has a status settlement paper, the person may face problems, for example, if a friend of the person in question has liked a post on Facebook that the GoS regards as anti-government activity.
9. The source emphasises that people inside Syria who obtained a status settlement, got it for outstanding security issues. Many of those people were arrested when they returned from opposition-held areas to government controlled areas.
10. The person who enters Syria on a status settlement will be handed a notice at the border saying that he/she has to go to the nearest security branch within 5 to 15 days. At the security branch the person will be asked the same questions again about his/her family and himself/herself.

Phone interview with Rami Abdulrahman, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), 24 November 2020

About the source: SOHR was founded in May 2006. From its base in UK, it documents human rights situation in Syria. Based on information collected from 236 sources throughout Syria, SOHR reports on human rights violations committed by the Syrian government as well as the opposition groups.

1. A security clearance is not required for those who do not have an outstanding issue with the GoS and who want to return to Syria.
2. A person who is wanted for security issues is required to apply for a status settlement if he wants to return to Syria without facing any problem with the security branches.
3. However, a status settlement is not a guarantee that the person will not be arrested when he is back in Syria. The source knows cases of people who did a status settlement for having outstanding security issues but who were arrested upon return.
4. There are also cases of people who entered and exited Syria without a status settlement even though they were wanted by a security branch. Those people did not face any problem because they were lucky that they did not run into the security branch that they were wanted by.

5. Many Syrians do not trust the Syrian authorities and therefore they would not settle their outstanding security issues through the Syrian embassies or consulates. Many Syrians prefer to bribe an employer in the security branch they are wanted by, to have their names removed from a wanted list.