SECURITY PROVISION AND GOOD GOVERNANCE IN POST-WAR SYRIA:
A SECURITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT AMONG THE SYRIAN DIASPORA IN GERMANY

Safe Spaces and Protection in Syria before and during the War

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This security needs assessment aims to contribute to open access information on good governance and security sector reform in Syria. It was specifically designed to understand citizens' needs and identify entry points for citizen-oriented security sector reform efforts. It analyses how the Syrian security system would need to change in order for Syrians to feel safe and secure in post-war Syria.

The survey's online questionnaire consists of 63 questions in Modern Standard Arabic. Between March and August 2018, 619 Syrians living in Germany completed the questionnaire. They came from all 14 Syrian governorates. On average, participants were 29 years old (born in 1989).

This working paper is part of a series. For an overview of the survey's objectives, content, and participants, please refer to the Introduction to the Survey and Sample Group Composition, which may be found along with all other working papers by scanning the QR code or accessing the link below:

https://www.lanosec.de/ssr-survey-syria/

About the authors

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Executive Summary

Security is a multifaceted concept, which is very often subjective and comprises different aspects for everyone. This working paper examines the elements of security and the environments in which survey participants felt safe and secure in Syria, both before and during the war. It also sheds light on the actors who provided protection to citizens before the outbreak of the war.

Survey results

Survey participants classified all aspects of human security covered by the question "Security for me means..." as important or very important. When looking only at answers marked as very important, most survey participants selected *Political security*, *Religious freedom*, and *Health safety*. When combining very important and important answers, *Health safety* came first, followed by *Food safety* and *Economic security*. Overall, the results show that participants did not define security exclusively by personal safety (for example, through the absence of war), but rather that many other aspects play a larger role in feeling safe and secure.

Before the war, survey participants generally felt safer in their community areas. They felt most safe at home, and quite safe in their village, town, and neighbourhood. At the same time, respondents felt very unsafe at universities, in the country as a whole, and at their workplace.

During the war, perspectives changed completely, and participants felt unsafe in all categories. Most felt very unsafe in the country as a whole, directly followed by the governorate in which they lived. Formerly intimate places of safety turned into areas where participants felt unsafe, for example in their villages or towns, in their neighbourhoods, and at home. In general, women participating in the survey felt safer before and during the war than men. The results of the survey demonstrate the necessity of restoring safety and security in all areas of society. One of the only sources of protection for survey participants before the war was family, while half of

participants indicated that they also felt protected by their communities. Very few participants felt protected by civil society. Most expressed a deep distrust in the government, especially in the security institutions.

Conclusions

Current political developments in Syria, and the likelihood that the regime will win the war militarily, limit the prospects for comprehensively reforming the Syrian security sector. However, it is important for international actors working in and on Syria to keep in mind where and how Syrians felt protected in the past, and how they envisage an ideal security sector for post-war Syria. Without taking this into consideration, long-term stability and peace will be doomed to fail. This, therefore, prompts several recommendations for further academic research as well as policy analysis and development:

» **Continue to call for an immediate end to violence** in Syria and for restoring safety and security in all areas of society for all citizens.

» **Assess the need for change in all aspects of human security** so that citizens can feel safe and secure again in Syria. This can only be achieved when Syria develops into a state that respects and protects all its citizens. Regardless of how feasible this is given the current political situation, it remains an important needs-based demand. Equally important is to assess in focus group discussions why men felt less safe before and during the war than women. Such assessments should lead to the development of strategies to address the different vulnerabilities of women, girls, men, and boys in post-war Syria.

» **Strengthen trust-building activities and reconciliation** efforts on an interpersonal level to support Syrians when dealing with traumatic experiences. Often disrupted personal networks should be a focus of civil society and the

international community, starting with efforts involving diaspora communities.

» **Initiate a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue among civil society actors to define citizen-oriented expectations** regarding core security providers of the state and its institutions. Such a civil society dialogue could be detached from the political developments inside Syria and could be piloted with the involvement of diaspora communities outside Syria.
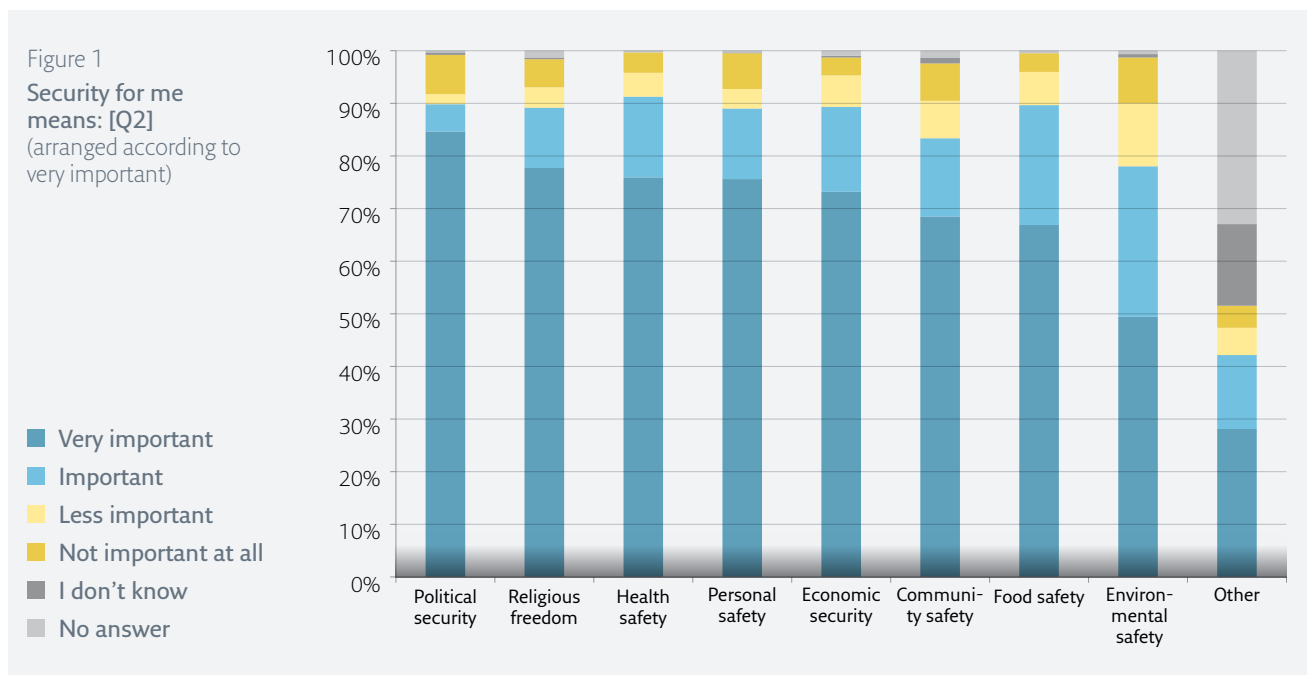
Safe Spaces and Protection in Syria before and during the War

Security is a subjective feeling and differs for everyone. The conditions in which people feel secure depend on many factors; for example, the environment in which they live (at home, in their neighbourhood, in their town or village, in the country as a whole) and the resources available to them (food, clothes, financial resources, etc.). Survey participants evaluated how safe and secure they felt in different environments in Syria before and during the war. The survey also shed light on who provided protection to citizens before the outbreak of the war.

"Security for me means..."

Human security is a people-centred and multi-disciplinary concept; it prioritises the security of human beings and their protection and empowerment, rather than the security of the state.[1] Human security comprises eight dimensions, which were rated by survey participants by completing the sentence "Security for me means ...".

Survey participants classified all eight dimensions of human security as either very important or important (see Figure 1). When looking solely at the dimensions rated as very important, most survey participants selected *Political security* (85%), *Religious freedom* (78%), and *Health safety* (76%). When combining very important and important responses, *Health safety* came first (91%), followed by *Food safety* (89,7%), and *Economic security* (89,3%). It appears that respondents attributed the greatest importance to the weakest dimensions of security in Syria. The fact that *Political security* was very important to so many participants corresponds with the results that violence and repression had been the primary causes of insecurity and

Figure 1

Security for me means: [Q2] (arranged according to very important)

- Very important
- Important
- Less important
- Not important at all
- I don't know
- No answer

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1   For further information on human security as a concept, please refer to *Human Security in Theory and Practice*, United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (2009): Human Security in Theory and Practice, https://www.unocha.org/sites/dms/HSU/Publications%20and%20 Products/Human%20Security%20Tools/Human%20Security%20in%20Theory%20and%20Practice%20English.pdf (accessed: 31 July 2020).

injustice before and during the war (see Working Paper 2: Insecurity and Injustice in Syria before and during the War). Results show that security is not exclusively defined by personal safety (for example, through the absence of war), but that many other aspects play even more important roles in ensuring human beings feel safe and secure.

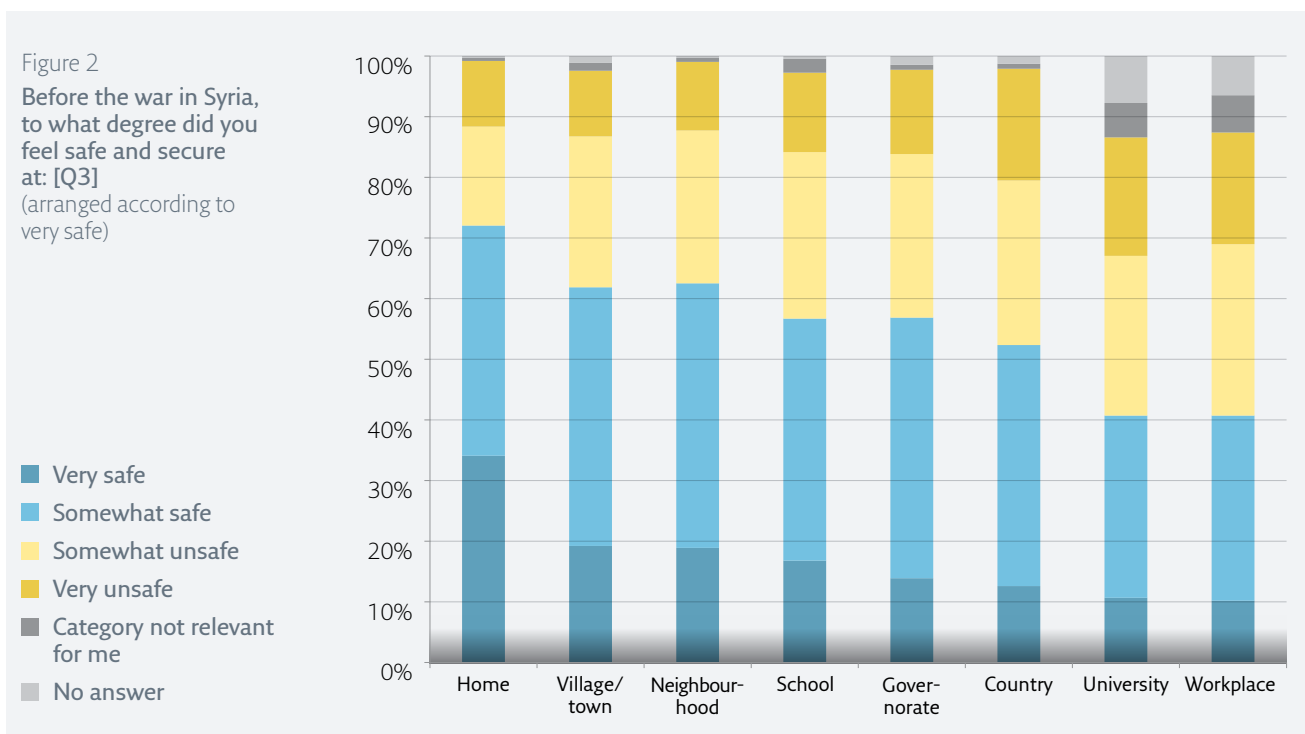## Feeling safe and secure in different environments

Survey participants evaluated how safe and secure they felt in Syria before and during the war in different surroundings: at home, at school, at university, in the workplace, in their neighbourhood, in their villages or towns, in the governorate, and in the country as a whole.

Before the war, taking the average of all variables, nearly the same percentage of respondents felt very safe (17%) as very unsafe (15%). Survey participants felt safe at home first and foremost (see Figure 2), followed by their village/town and neighbourhood. In contrast, only around 10% of participants felt very safe at university and in the workplace.

On average, women participants felt safer than men before the war (see Table 1). At home, for example, 55% of women felt very safe, compared to just 31% of men. Further research needs to be conducted to explore why, on average, fewer men than women felt safe.

During the war, most survey participants felt very unsafe in all areas (see Figure 3); only very few felt very safe. Very unsafe ratings were more than four times higher during the war at the national level, and even five times higher at the governorate level. During the war, participants also felt very unsafe in their village/town, in their neighbourhood, and at home, although they had felt very safe or safe in these places before the war.

Once again results showed that men and women often responded differently. During the war, on average, men felt less safe than women (see Table 2). Most notably, men classified the workplace, village/town, and

Figure 2

Before the war in Syria, to what degree did you feel safe and secure at: [Q3] (arranged according to very safe)

Legend:
- Very safe
- Somewhat safe
- Somewhat unsafe
- Very unsafe
- Category not relevant for me
- No answer

Categories (x-axis): Home, Village/town, Neighbourhood, School, Governorate, Country, University, Workplace

home as being very unsafe. This means that men felt less safe than women, even in the places where they lived or visited on a daily basis.

Table 1: **Before the war in Syria, to what degree did you feel safe and secure at: [Q3]**
Values: Very safe & somewhat safe

	Very safe		Somewhat safe		Combined	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Home	31%	55%	39%	32%	70%	87%
Village/town	18%	31%	43%	39%	61%	69%
Neighbourhood	17%	29%	44%	39%	62%	68%
School	15%	27%	40%	41%	55%	68%
Governorate	12%	28%	44%	37%	56%	65%
Country	11%	27%	41%	28%	52%	55%
University	9%	21%	30%	28%	40%	49%
Workplace	9%	20%	32%	20%	41%	40%

Based on the available statistics, it is not possible to deduce qualitative explanations to understand why men indicated feeling less safe and secure than women. Many reasons may explain this phenomenon, differing from person to person. Some might have experienced domestic violence, others surveillance by colleagues at work, or hostilities in their village or town. Men perhaps also felt more threatened by the overall security situation, because, for example, they were exposed to the threat of serving in the army against their will, or because they experienced the daily war-related violence and insecurity more frequently while trying to provide for their families in their hometowns.

Figure 3

During the war in Syria, to what degree did you feel safe and secure at: [Q4]
(arranged according to very safe in Figure 2)

Legend:
- Very safe
- Somewhat safe
- Somewhat unsafe
- Very unsafe
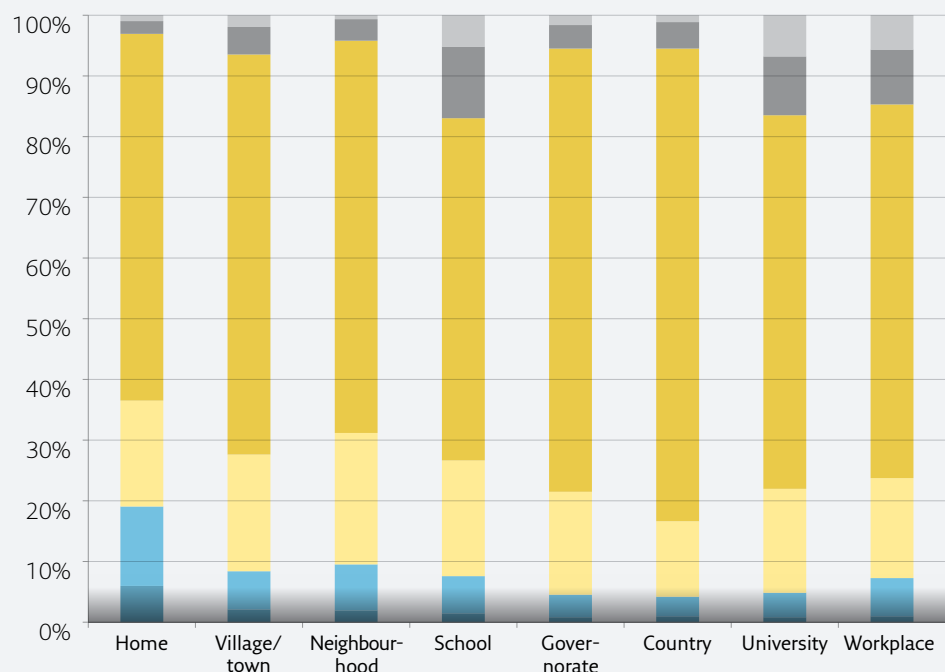- Category not relevant for me
- No answer

Table 2: **During the war in Syria, to what degree did you feel safe and secure at: [Q4]**
Values: Very unsafe & somewhat unsafe

	Very unsafe		Somewhat unsafe		Combined	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Country	79%	68%	12%	16%	91%	84%
Governorate	75%	61%	16%	24%	91%	85%
Village/town	68%	49%	18%	25%	87%	75%
Neighbourhood	66%	55%	21%	25%	87%	80%
Workplace	64%	44%	16%	19%	80%	63%
University	63%	55%	17%	15%	80%	69%
Home	62%	47%	17%	19%	80%	65%
School	58%	43%	17%	31%	76%	73%

When comparing very safe answers before and during the war (see Figure 4), it is evident that safe spaces drastically decreased. According to the survey results, most participants did not feel safe anywhere in Syria during the war. This feeling might have been linked to specific war-related events, such as casualties in the family or among friends, hostilities in neighbouring areas, or persecution by armed groups or government intelligence agents. It might also partly have been the expression of the overall perception of chaos, anarchy, and war. At home, where most people had felt safe before the war, numbers of those who felt safe during the war decreased by 82%. It might be that these results also reflect the loss of homes due to internal displacement or bombings, as well as being forced to flee to other countries.

Answers for very unsafe before and during the war reflect the opposite trend (see Figure 5). Before the war, 15% of the survey participants had felt very unsafe, particularly when people were at universities, in the workplace, and the country as a whole. During the war, the number of survey participants feeling very

Figure 4

Feeling very safe in Syria before and during the war [Q3 & Q4] (arranged according to very safe before the war)

■ Very safe before the war
□ Very safe during the war

Figure 5

Feeling very unsafe in Syria before and during the war [Q3 & Q4] (arranged according to very unsafe during the war)

■ Very unsafe before the war

☐ Very unsafe during the war
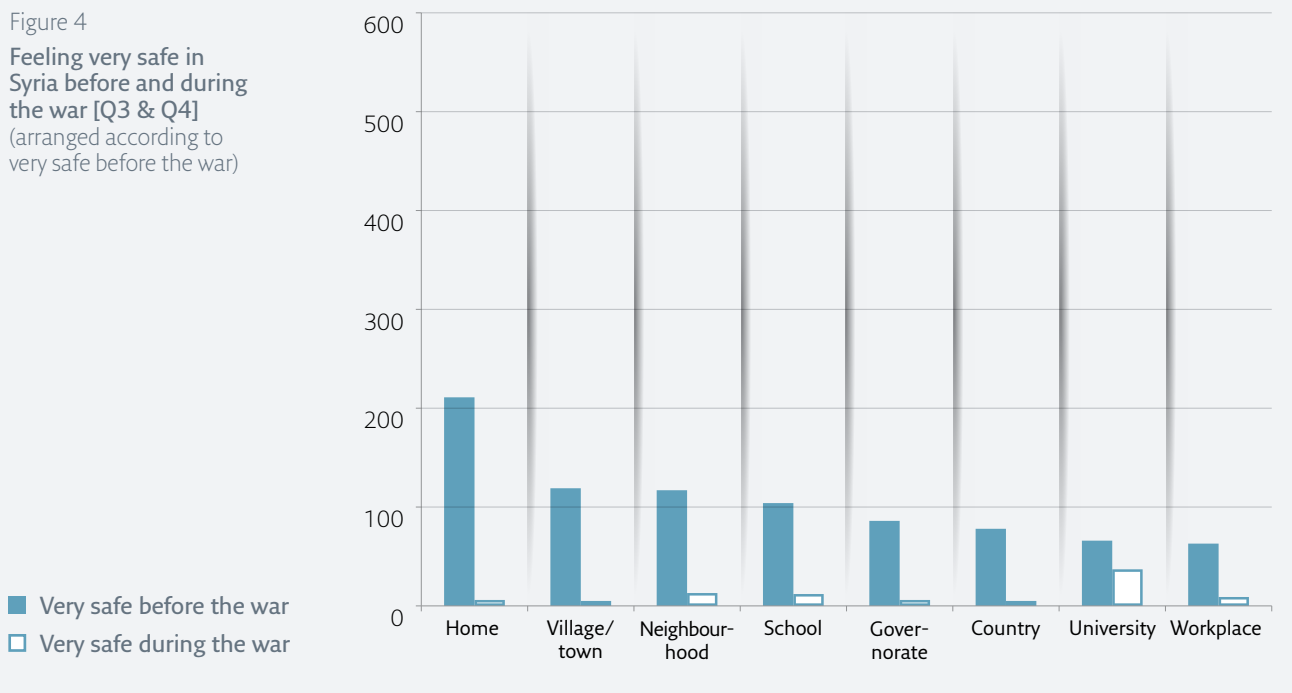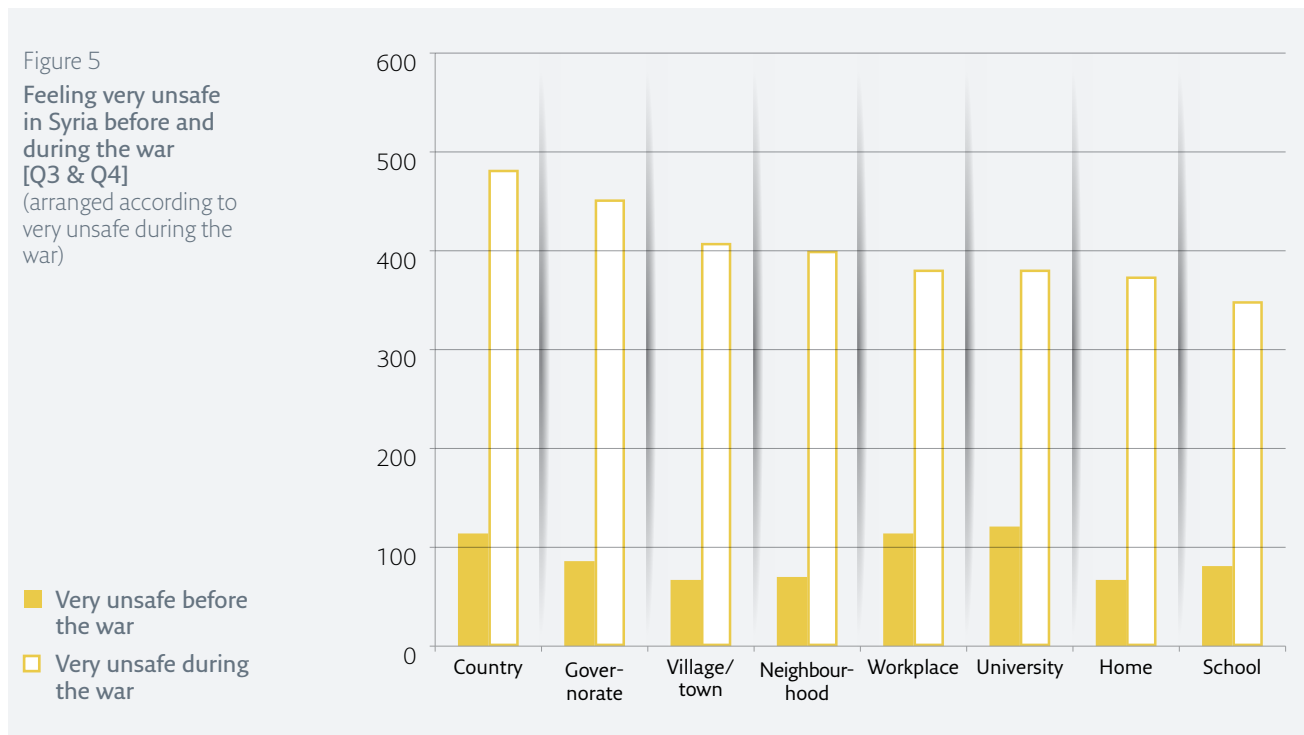
unsafe more than quadrupled, soaring to 65%. This was especially the case when asking how people felt at the national and governorate levels, compared with their direct surroundings, such as villages or towns. However, the feeling of being very unsafe also existed in most villages/towns, neighbourhoods, and homes. It is therefore not surprising that more than four fifths of participants stated that *To live in a safe country* and *To live in a country where human rights are respected* were the two most important reasons for leaving Syria (for a complete analysis of Question 63, see the Introduction to the Survey and Sample Group Composition).

Feeling protected in Syria before the war

In addition to indicating safe environments, such as homes and personal communities, survey participants specified their sources of protection (see Figure 6). The overwhelming majority of participants selected *My family* as the most important source of protection before the war in Syria. One participant explained in the open-ended answer section that, "The family was the only source of protection before and during the war. The Syrian regime did not provide any kind of protection to citizens. On the contrary, it was a regular source of threat to stability." 54% of participants felt protected by their community, such as tribes: "I lived in a predominantly tribal area. I felt protected primarily by the people of my tribe." 17% stated that they felt protected by civil society: "Unfortunately, before the war, we only enjoyed safety and security from society, individual awareness, and proper domestic education [...]."

State actors, including core security providers, fell short of their obligations to protect citizens. The results show that neither the police nor the army fulfilled this duty: only very few participants felt protected by them. Most survey participants who responded to the open-ended variable of this question expressed a deep distrust in the government, and especially in security institutions: "I never had the feeling that anyone could protect me from state violence and the intelligence agencies; that I could get a fair trial; or that the judiciary would grant me justice in any case." Two additional sources of protection surfaced several times: *Not expressing opinions in public* as well as *Money and connections*. "[I felt protected only] by remaining silent and not speaking out at all, and by pretending that I supported the ruling authority [...]. Also, by avoiding any contact with powerful and influential people within the systems of authority [...] and by not allowing

Figure 6

When I lived in Syria before the war, I felt most protected by: [Q18]
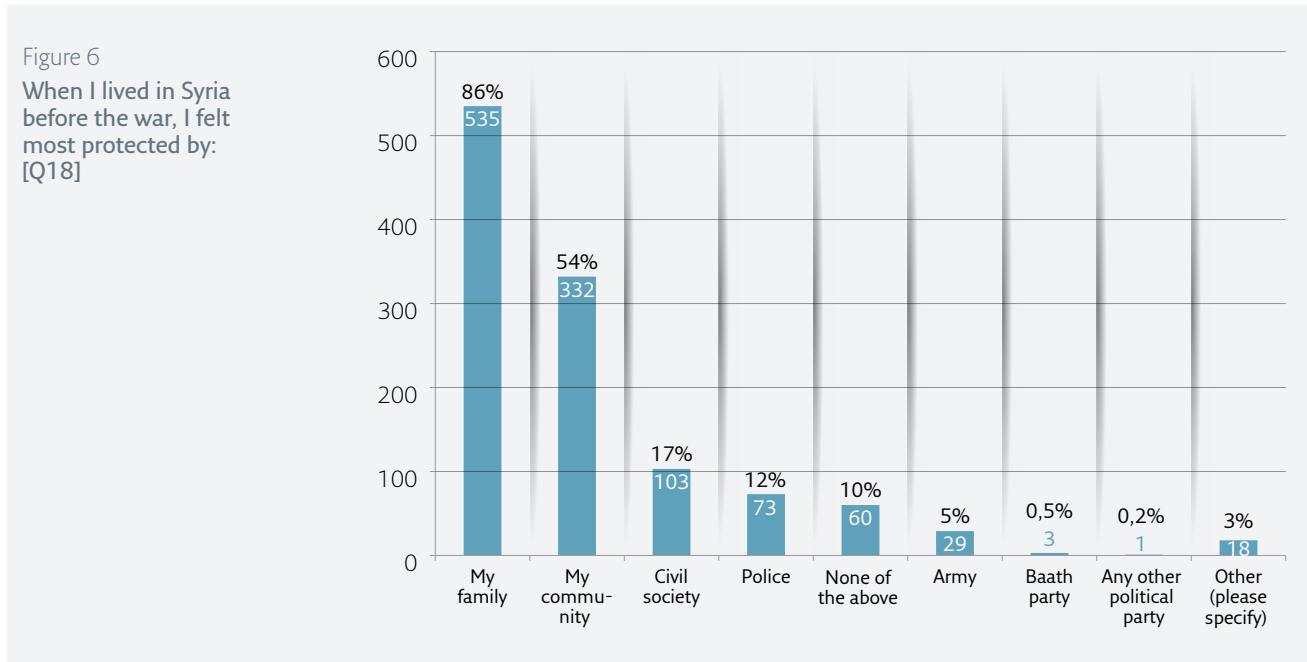
them to participate in my life at all." Another participant described the use of money and connections to wield influence: "Why my family? Because my family knew someone from all entities mentioned before: security officers, investigators, lawyers, etc. My network was big. Anybody could mediate for me when I got in trouble, based on the idea that my actions were not intentional. People actually volunteered to help you for a reasonable price." This demonstrates the dilemma Syrians faced. At a systemic level, corruption was denounced as having a detrimental impact on the effectiveness and functioning of the Syrian security sector long before the war (see Working Paper 3: Assessing Security Providers in Syria before the War). However, very often the only solution for the individual to be secure in a system which encouraged favouritism, bribery, and corruption was to partake in and make use of the corrupt system.

Recommendations

Current political developments in Syria, and the likelihood that the regime will win the war militarily, limit the prospects for comprehensively reforming the Syrian security sector so as to turn it from an oppressive regime-protecting sector into one that provides security in accordance with the needs of Syrian citizens. However, it is important for international actors working in and on Syria to keep in mind where and how Syrians felt protected in the past, and how Syrians envisage an ideal security sector for post-war Syria. Without taking the security needs of citizens into consideration, any future approach for peacebuilding and establishing stability in Syria will be doomed to fail in the long run. This, therefore, prompts several recommendations for further academic research as well as policy analysis and development:

» Continue to call for an immediate end to violence in Syria and for restoring safety and security in all areas of society for all citizens, as the war has destroyed the last safe spaces for Syrians.

» Assess the need for change in all dimensions of human security so that citizens can feel safe and secure again in Syria. The survey results show that participants not only understand human security as personal safety or the provision of food and shelter, but also as the protection of fundamental rights, such as political security and religious freedom. This can only be achieved when Syria develops into a state that respects and protects all its citizens. Regardless of whether this would be feasible in the current political setting, this remains an important needs-based demand.

» Assess why men felt less safe before and during the war than women by conducting focus group discussions with Syrians. Such assessments should lead to the development of strategies to address the different vulnerabilities of women, girls, men, and boys in Syria's post-war security institutions. As shown in the Introduction to the Survey and Sample Group Composition, women seem to perceive security as a largely male topic. Thus, these focus group discussions need to create safe spaces for women, boys, men, and girls equally to identify and express their specific security needs.

» Support civil society in creating safe spaces for open discussions and exchanges of experience. Initiate a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue among civil society actors to define citizen-oriented expectations regarding the state's core security providers and their institutions. Ensure that women and youth participate in these forums equally. These discussions are important, as many citizens have lost trust in the capacity and willingness of core security providers to protect them. Such a civil society dialogue could be detached from the political developments inside Syria and could be piloted with the involvement of diaspora communities outside Syria.

» Encourage the international community and civil society to strengthen trust-building activities and reconciliation efforts on an interpersonal level to support Syrians in their dealing with traumatic experiences and often disrupted personal networks – starting with diaspora communities. As personal communities were important safe spaces and sources of protection before the war, trust needs to be (re)built among neighbours, colleagues, students, and within families.