

## Syrian Refugees in Turkey and the Politics of Postconflict Reconciliation

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### Abstract

Finding suitable settlements to civil wars, then proceeding to reconcile and reintegrate civilian communities to realize such settlements and avoid future conflict, poses many seemingly insurmountable challenges. The Syrian conflict is a case in point. Not only has a settlement proved elusive, but little is known about how the millions of civilian refugees who have fled the war feel about postconflict reconciliation and the future of their country. We use an original survey of 1,384 Syrian refugees conducted in Turkey in 2016 to draw attention to how refugees view the politics of postconflict reconciliation and reconstruction. We find that refugees desire peace in Syria more than anything else, yet they also desire harsh punishments for the perpetrators of violence, especially against civilians, from all sides of the conflict, which is likely to complicate any process of reconciliation.

**Key words:** Syrian Refugees, Conflict, Turkey, postconflict reconciliation

Despite the lack of strong data concerning how Syrian refugees feel about postconflict reconciliation, representatives from different sides in the conflict have repeatedly referred to the Syrian people as the ultimate authority on charting a way forward for the war-torn country. When asked about President Bashar al-Assad's future role in Syria, former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson declared it would have to be decided by the Syrian people.<sup>1</sup> Similar statements have been made by virtually all parties to the conflict, from the Syrian regime and opposition groups to the external actors involved, including Russia, Turkey, and Iran. For example, in a live interview broadcast on the Turkish television network Star on October 7, 2015, the then Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu was asked to address the possibility of a transitional, negotiated settlement that would leave Assad in power. Davutoğlu's remarks on

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<sup>1</sup> "Tillerson says Assad's fate to be decided by Syrian people," *Reuters*, last modified March 30, 2017, <https://in.reuters.com/article/mideast-crisis-syria-usa-tillerson/tillerson-says-assads-fate-to-be-decided-by-syrian-people-idINKBN1711QL>.

this topic illustrate the importance of understanding Syrian refugees' attitudes about postconflict reconciliation and especially how exposure to violence has shaped these attitudes:

Even if we accepted a transition with Assad, would the Syrian people approve of it? Would the people [refugees] that I spoke with on Wednesday or those currently living in camps accept or believe in a transition with Assad? Will they believe that a person who showers them with bombs will bring peace? Will they believe that a person who uses chemical weapons will bring peace? All this talk about a transition with Assad is easily said on paper and behind closed doors in luxurious negotiation rooms. . . . But who are you going to convince? . . . Put yourself in these people's shoes. The person who killed him [sic], destroyed their home, and used chemical [weapons] still occupies Damascus, and the global community is telling you, "Return while he is still there." Would you return?

Although geopolitical realities and Turkish domestic politics have shifted considerably since Davutoğlu made his statement, the experiences of Syrian refugees have not. Indeed, the human costs of the war have only gotten worse: an estimated 475,000 people have died, and close to 14 million Syrians have been wounded or displaced.<sup>2</sup> Among those displaced, more than 5 million had to leave Syria as refugees.<sup>3</sup> As our research and that of others reveal, a substantial portion of Syrian refugees were exposed to violence in numerous forms.

In this article, we use an original survey of 1,384 Syrian refugees that we conducted in Turkey in 2016 to draw attention to how refugees view the politics of postconflict reconciliation and reconstruction. In the survey, our research team asked questions related to a number of themes, including exposure to violence in Syria, patterns and motives for leaving, access to services, daily life in Turkey, attitudes toward various participants in the conflict, and beliefs about peace and reconciliation in a postconflict Syria. One of the primary motivations of our work is to give a voice to ordinary Syrians whose opinions and beliefs largely remain unheard, especially with respect to the future of their home country.

Ignoring these voices has the potential to prolong the conflict and decrease the likelihood of a lasting peace. Scholars have found that postconflict processes that take public opinion into account are more likely to lead to reconciliation and durable peace.<sup>4</sup> By contrast, failure to consider the attitudes of the victims of conflict increases the likelihood that grievances will go unaddressed and that conflict will recur in the near future.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, when public perceptions and attitudes about fairness and justice are ignored, trust in institutions can be eroded even further, making order all the more difficult to establish. In contrast to earlier research in which scholars had the opportunity to study civilian attitudes about justice long after the fighting

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<sup>2</sup> "About 475 thousand persons were killed in 76 months of the Syrian revolution and more than 14 million were wounded and displaced," Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, last modified July 16, 2017, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=70012>.

<sup>3</sup> "Syria emergency," UNHCR, accessed July 31, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/syria-emergency.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Howard Zehr, *The Little Book of Restorative Justice: Revised and Updated* (New York: Good Books, 2015); Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Cyanne Loyle and Benjamin Appel, "Conflict Recurrence and Postconflict Justice: Addressing Motivations and Opportunities for Sustainable Peace," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, Issue 3 (September 2017): 690-703.

ended,<sup>6</sup> our survey examines the attitudes of displaced victims of an ongoing civil war. These attitudes are important: previous research has shown that refugee populations can play a critical role in peace building by either supporting ceasefires and peaceful settlements of conflict or siding with warring groups and continued fighting.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore critical to establishing lasting peace that reconciliation processes are designed to cover a diverse set of voices, including displaced civilian victims of conflict.

After providing some context and outlining our study, we describe the preferences of the Syrians to whom we spoke in an effort to examine the tensions that make the politics of negotiation and postconflict reconciliation so difficult. We found that although the overwhelming majority of our respondents desired peace and wanted Syria to remain a unified state, a very sizable group also expressed an unwillingness to live with those who supported the regime and/or anyone who directly partook in violence against civilians. Traumatized civilians come to dislike *all* groups associated with violence, regardless of which side they were on, and yet these armed groups are almost always those tasked with negotiating the peace. Our findings suggest that relying exclusively or primarily on the perpetrators of violence to negotiate peace may create serious political barriers to postconflict reconciliation. This is because civilians are prone to view the perpetrators of violence with particular vengeance and distrust, thereby inhibiting collective processes of forgiveness, reintegration, and reconciliation.

### **The Syrian Civil War and Syrian Refugees in Turkey**

The respondents we interviewed in our study were all refugees from the Syrian Civil War residing in Turkey. The civil war was initially sparked by protests that began in March 2011, when children ages 9 to 15 were detained and reportedly tortured for writing graffiti denouncing the Assad regime on the walls of their school in Der'a.<sup>8</sup> On March 15, during demonstrations calling for the children's release, four people were shot dead by the security forces, causing demonstrations to escalate. Protests soon spread to other cities, such as Hama and Homs, and were met with a harsh response from the regime.<sup>9</sup> In early April, Assad introduced a number of minor reforms in hope of quelling the growing unrest: He replaced the governor of Der'a; lifted the Emergency Law, which had been in effect since 1963; and gave citizenship to some 300,000 Syrian Kurds.<sup>10</sup> These reforms proved insufficient, and by the end of July 2011, around 2,000 people were reported to have died as result of mounting violence.<sup>11</sup> Also in July of that year, a number of Syrian Army officers deserted to form the Free Syrian Army (FSA). This significant development in the organization of the opposition was followed in October 2011 by the

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<sup>6</sup> For an example based on a 2008 survey of attitudes in Spain toward transitional justice for victim of the Spanish civil war and Francoist dictatorship, see Paloma Aguilar, Laia Balcells, and Hector Cebolla-Boado, "Determinants of Attitudes Toward Transitional Justice: An Empirical Analysis of the Spanish Case," *Comparative Political Studies* 44, issue 10 (May 2011): 1397-1430.

<sup>7</sup> Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War," *International Organization* 60, no. 2 (April 2006): 335-366; Idean Salehyan, "Transnational Rebels: Neighboring States as Sanctuary for Rebel Groups," *World Politics* 59, Issue 2 (January 2007): 217-242; Idean Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> John McHugo, *Syria: From the Great War to Civil War* (London: Saqi Books, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Emile Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant* (London: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> "Syrian president grants citizenship to Kurds," *The Telegraph*, April 7, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8435041/Syrian-president-grants-citizenship-to-Kurds.html>.

<sup>11</sup> McHugo, *Syria*.

formation of a political body called the Syrian National Council, which met in Istanbul, Turkey. In 2012, fighting spread to Aleppo, the commercial center of Syria and its second-largest city.

By July 2012, the initial protests – which were largely peripheral, organized by people of the lower and middle classes, and mostly fueled by local grievances – had turned into a brutal civil war, fought between the Syrian government forces and multiple rebel factions, including both secular and Islamist groups.<sup>12</sup> In March 2013, Islamist rebel forces took control of Raqqa, making it the first major city to come under insurgent control in the civil war. Around this time, the regime also started to withdraw its forces from eastern Syria. The war entered a new phase in June 2014, when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured the Iraqi city of Mosul and declared an Islamic caliphate with the Syrian city of Raqqa as its de facto capital. After ISIS started to attack Kurdish forces dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in northern Syria, Kurds became a fourth major player in the war.<sup>13</sup>

In summer 2014, while the government was in control of Damascus and the coastal cities of Latakia, Baniyas, and Tartous, the city of Aleppo was divided between government and opposition groups. To the east of the Euphrates River, the regime had no forces present, and the Syrian Kurds and various Islamist groups battled for control. In March 2015, the city of Idlib was captured by Islamist rebel groups, and ISIS captured the desert city of Palmyra in May 2015. These losses forced Assad to concede that the Syrian Army faced a manpower shortage.<sup>14</sup> In the fall of 2015, Russia, a staunch supporter of the Assad regime, started its first air strikes from Khmeimim Air Base, near Latakia, to bolster regime control. These strikes aimed at both ISIS and non-ISIS opposition groups, bombing targets in Homs, Hama, and Quneitra provinces.<sup>15</sup> Russian intervention had reset the military balance in Syria by early 2016,<sup>16</sup> and the Assad regime gained ground throughout the year. Around this time, the war also had clearly become a proxy conflict between actors supporting the regime (Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah) and those supporting the opposition (the United States, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar). At the end of 2016, the regime recaptured the entire city of Aleppo.<sup>17</sup>

As a result of the violence, millions of Syrian civilians fled to Turkey, as well as Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Europe. Although Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees – it is now home to more than 3.5 million<sup>18</sup> – their experiences have been understudied when compared to refugee experiences in Lebanon, Jordan, and especially Europe. For instance, in a recent issue

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*; Alexander De Juan and André Bank, “The Ba’athist blackout? Selective goods provision and political violence in the Syrian civil war,” *Journal of Peace Research* 52, Issue 1 (January 2015): 91-104.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Maher Samaan and Anne Barnard, “Assad, in Rare Admission, Says Syria’s Army Lacks Manpower,” *New York Times*, July 26, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/world/middleeast/assad-in-rare-admission-says-syrias-army-lacks-manpower.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*.

<sup>16</sup> Genevieve Casagrande, Christopher Kozak, and Jennifer Cafarella, “Syria 90-day Forecast: The Assad Regime and Allies in Northern Syria,” *Institute for the Study of War*, last modified on February 24, 2016, <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Syria%2090%20Day%20Forecast%2024%20FEB%202016%281%29%20.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> “Aleppo battle: Syrian city ‘back under government control,’” *BBC News*, last modified December 22, 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-38408548>.

<sup>18</sup> “Temporary Protection,” *Directorate General of Migration Management*, last modified June 9, 2018, [http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection\\_915\\_1024\\_4748\\_icerik](http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik).

of a prestigious journal devoted to displaced Syrians,<sup>19</sup> only a single article out of 27 exclusively focuses on Syrians in Turkey. In part, the lack of research reflects the particular nature of Turkey's response to the massive refugee inflows. Although in most refugee crises the response is coordinated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in the case of the Syrian crisis the Turkish government has insisted on directly handling the refugee registration and management process within its own borders through two state-controlled bodies, the Prime Ministry Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD) and the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM). AFAD tightly controls access to the refugee camps and generally prohibits most researchers from entering. Furthermore, AFAD and DGMM also refuse to release any detailed data on the origin areas or settlement patterns of refugees entering Turkey.<sup>20</sup> Finally, in the spring of 2015, the Interior Ministry announced that academic research with Syrian refugee populations in Turkey was subject to the approval of the ministry. This approval requirement was lifted by the end of 2015. Taken together, however, these regulations and prohibitions have limited researchers' access to refugee populations.

Capturing the collective voice of Syrian refugees in Turkey is made more difficult by the fact that these individuals are widely dispersed. Currently, only 6 percent of refugees are living in camps, while the rest have settled among the general Turkish population. More than half of the refugees are living in four provinces of Turkey: Istanbul, Gaziantep, Hatay, and Şanlıurfa.<sup>21</sup> We therefore conducted our study in those provinces. Although we were not able to ask questions about religious sects because the topic was considered too sensitive, our prior fieldwork taught us that Syrians residing in Gaziantep are mostly Sunni Arabs, that Syrian Kurds live in Şanlıurfa, and that Alawite Syrians are more likely to reside in Hatay. Gaziantep, Hatay, and Şanlıurfa share a border with Syria, while Istanbul is far away from the border.

Within these provinces, we targeted districts that had the highest concentration of Syrians, according to information we collected in 2015 during our interviews with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that assist Syrian refugees. In Gaziantep, we sampled Şahinbey and Şehitkamil districts. In Şanlıurfa, we sampled Haliliye and Eyyubiye districts. In Hatay, we sampled Antakya. In Istanbul, we sampled in five districts: Bağcılar, Esenler, Fatih, Küçükçekmece, and Sultanbeyli. In the next stage, within each neighborhood with a heavy concentration of Syrians, our enumerators randomly chose a street and then randomly selected households on that street. The enumerators asked if the household was Turkish or Syrian. If the household was Turkish, they randomly selected another household on the street; if Syrian, the male head of the household was asked to participate in the survey if he was at home.<sup>22</sup> If the

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<sup>19</sup> "Syrians in displacement," *Forced Migration Review*, Issue 57, last modified February 2018, <http://www.fmreview.org/syria2018>.

<sup>20</sup> The two exceptions are the reports published by AFAD, the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, in 2013 and 2017, but they report refugees' origin in Syria only at the governorate level. See, "Syrian refugees in Turkey, 2013: Field Survey Results," AFAD, 2013, [https://www.afad.gov.tr/upload/Node/2376/files/61-2013123015505-syrian-refugees-in-turkey-2013\\_print\\_12\\_11\\_2013\\_eng.pdf](https://www.afad.gov.tr/upload/Node/2376/files/61-2013123015505-syrian-refugees-in-turkey-2013_print_12_11_2013_eng.pdf); "Field Survey on Demographic View, Living Conditions and Future Expectations of Syrians in Turkey," AFAD, 2017, [https://www.afad.gov.tr/upload/Node/25335/xfiles/17b-Field\\_Survey\\_on\\_Demographic\\_View\\_Living\\_Conditions\\_and\\_Future\\_Expectations\\_of\\_Syrians\\_in\\_Turkey\\_2017\\_English\\_1.pdf](https://www.afad.gov.tr/upload/Node/25335/xfiles/17b-Field_Survey_on_Demographic_View_Living_Conditions_and_Future_Expectations_of_Syrians_in_Turkey_2017_English_1.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> According to the figures provided by Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), at the time of our survey, the numbers of Syrians living in each of these provinces were as follows: Istanbul, 397,456; Şanlıurfa, 395,823; Hatay, 377,053; Gaziantep, 318,290.

<sup>22</sup> The initial choice of speaking with the male head of the household was motivated by our cultural sensitivity concerns based on our prior fieldwork among Syrian refugees in Turkey.

male head of the household was not at home, the female head of the household was asked to participate; in a rare number of cases, the female head of the household opened the door and was then asked to participate. If the respondent agreed to participate, the enumerators proceeded to the survey. Having completed at most 10 interviews per street, our enumerators randomly picked another street and completed the next round of interviews using the same sampling procedure.

In our work, we recorded the opinions of people ranging from 18 to over 70 years old, with a roughly equal mix of men and women. Some 67 percent of the refugees we interviewed hailed from Aleppo, which has been the site of some of the war's worst fighting and bombing.<sup>23</sup> In addition, roughly 10 percent came from Raqqa, 9 percent from Idlib, 5 percent from Damascus, and 1-2 percent from each of Syria's remaining governorates (Al-Hasakeh, Deir ez-Zor, Hama, Homs, Lattakia).

Given that such a large subset of our interviewees came from Aleppo, it is not surprising that most (92 percent) fled because they perceived imminent danger to their lives. The extent of loss and exposure to violence among the refugees in our sample is sobering. For example, 36 percent reported that there were individuals killed or injured in their neighborhood because of the violence in the civil war, and 16 percent reported that someone in their family had been killed or injured because of the war. The main source of these losses among those we interviewed were barrel bomb attacks by the Assad regime. In fact, 36 percent of our respondents said that their neighborhood had been barrel-bombed. Barrel bombs – improvised explosive devices dropped from helicopters – are a particularly horrific weapon. They are typically oil barrels, fuel tanks, or gas cylinders packed with explosives, fuels, and pieces of metal like nails and machine parts. Medical responders working in Syria informed us that the damage inflicted from a barrel bomb is unpredictable within about a 500-meter radius, with some people surviving unscathed, some injured to various degrees, and others killed. Of those whose neighborhood had been barrel-bombed, 67 percent said the bombs had completely destroyed their homes.

Unsurprisingly, we also found that refugees reported staggering economic status reversals. Of the 63 percent who said they were part of the middle class in Syria, almost all said they had fallen to lower income groups, with 71 percent saying they were now low income and 25 percent saying they were now lower-middle income. These findings clearly indicate that our respondents have faced trauma on a number of different levels.

## **Destination Europe?**

With this traumatic past, how did the Syrian refugees we interviewed envision their future and that of their country? Anyone who has been keeping pace with the news will be aware of the media coverage that depicts an insurmountable wave of Syrian refugees clamoring at the gates of Europe. The typical depiction is one of refugees being held back by the Turkish regime, with some using any means necessary, including harrowing boat trips and long treks, to get into the Schengen Area of Europe.<sup>24</sup> Our research, however, does not fully support the dominant story highlighted by Europe's populist movements and the media. While some Syrians are clearly trying to get to Europe, 90 percent of the people we spoke with said that, ideally, they would like to return to Syria as their first choice of where to live. Moreover, when asked about their second

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<sup>23</sup> “‘Death Everywhere’: War Crimes and Human Rights Abuses in Aleppo, Syria,” *Amnesty International*, 2015, [https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/embargoed\\_5\\_may\\_aleppo\\_report\\_death\\_everywhere.pdf](https://www.amnestyusa.org/files/embargoed_5_may_aleppo_report_death_everywhere.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> For a recent example, see “On the edge of the EU, refugee flows flood the Evros river,” *Deutsche Welle*, March 25, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/on-the-edge-of-the-eu-refugee-flows-flood-the-evros-river/a-43068842>.

choice, 85 percent mentioned Turkey, while only 10 percent mentioned Europe. These numbers strongly suggest that the refugees we spoke to either plan to be back in their home country or stay close at the very least. Hence, we conclude that the refugees we surveyed want to be part of the future of Syria, making their opinions on postconflict reconciliation all the more important.

## **Syria Past and Future**

Given that Syrian refugees see themselves as ideally returning to their home country, what kind of Syria do they hope for? Turning first to the past, the majority of refugees we spoke with still showed a commitment to the principles of the initial uprising against Assad in 2011, with 62 percent saying that, even knowing what they know now, they still would have supported the initial protests. When asked what they believe the original motives for the protests were, the most common responses were to stand against oppression or tyranny (42 percent); to stand against the regime or, specifically, the Assad regime (33 percent); to stand against disorder (8 percent); to stand for freedom (4 percent); and to stand against corruption (3 percent).

This persistent belief in the initial goals of the uprising was visible also in our respondents' preferences about hypothetical resolutions to the conflict in Syria. Of those we surveyed, 78 percent said they supported the removal of Bashar al-Assad, while only 28 percent said they supported a resolution in which all groups reach a settlement with the regime. Although the desire for Assad's removal was strong, the refugees we interviewed showed virtually no support whatsoever for changing the administrative structure of Syria: 97 percent said that they think Syria should remain a united and unitary state. When asked about what they consider to be an ideal resolution to the conflict, only a small fraction – less than 5 percent – preferred partition or even a decentralized federal system. Even among the Kurds in our sample, the percentage supporting partition or a federal system was very low, only 5 and 11 percent, respectively.

It is important to note that our respondents' reported preference to see the Assad regime removed from power without compromising the territorial and administrative integrity of the Syrian state was also accompanied by a strong desire to bring an end to the fighting. When asked if they would agree with a family member who spoke out publicly to call for an end to fighting, without specifying what type of peace deal would follow the end of fighting, close to 80 percent said they would agree. Our respondents also expressed sympathy toward all civilian groups affected by the violence in Syria, no matter which side of the conflict those civilians happened to fall on. Of our respondents, 73 percent said they would approve of a member of their community helping to provide services and aid to people in both opposition- and regime-held areas. Finally, only 8.3 percent of our respondents reported feeling that no peace settlement was acceptable and that fighting should continue until an outright victory.

## **Transitional Justice**

Although we found the refugees to be supportive of peace, we also found that war and trauma had hardened their attitudes toward “out-groups” and especially towards the perpetrators of violence. One piece of evidence to this effect is that most of the refugees we surveyed said they would not be willing to live in close proximity to former enemy combatants and their supporters. For instance, 92 percent said they would be unwilling to live in a building or neighborhood with those who supported ISIS. We also found that 87 percent said they would be unwilling to live in a building or neighborhood with those who supported the Assad regime. Most surprising of all –

especially in a subsample of refugees who were largely pro-opposition<sup>25</sup> – nearly 40 percent were even unwilling to live in a building or neighborhood with those who supported other armed groups, which included the opposition. This notable distaste for all groups involved directly in violence is particularly striking and suggests that our respondents support Assad’s removal through peaceful means and hold a particular disdain for those who committed atrocities.

Indeed, with regard to their attitudes toward the perpetrators of violence, the Syrians we interviewed were not particularly compromising. Of our respondents, 98 percent said that they think that members of ISIS, an especially violent group toward civilians who do not support it, should be punished. When given different options for punishments, the respondents expressed a strong desire for extremely harsh punishment: about 50 percent of our respondents said that they want ISIS fighters to be executed. Also consistent with this interpretation is the fact that when asked about the appropriate punishment for opposition fighters *who killed civilians*, close to 40 percent of our respondents picked execution – a very high number in our predominantly pro-opposition sample. An overwhelming majority of Syrians in our study, about 97 percent, also said that they want regime members and individuals who fought for the regime to be punished. The desire for inflicting harsh punishment on individuals who have fought for the regime was, interestingly, much weaker, however, with only about 20 percent of our respondents citing execution as the appropriate punishment. It is notable that twice as many of our respondents supported the execution of regime *fighters* as those who supported execution of regime *members*, suggesting that many of our respondents distinguish between those involved in violence directly and those tacitly associated with certain forms of it.

What is more, descriptive evidence from our survey suggests that nationalist sentiments seem to have a significant effect on refugees’ attitudes about what should happen to individuals affiliated with the regime. The majority of our respondents (53 percent) thought the appropriate punishment for regime members would be trial by the Syrian national courts. As for the punishment of regime fighters, the most common response (42 percent) was again trial by Syrian national courts. Another segment (33 percent) considered trial by Syrian national courts as the appropriate punishment for opposition members who killed civilians. When it comes to ISIS, support for trial by Syrian national courts fell to 25 percent. As the Syrians we interviewed told us, one potential explanation for this variation in preferences regarding trial in national courts across groups is that some parts of the opposition in general, and ISIS in particular, are not considered to be homegrown and “Syrian.”<sup>26</sup>

In short, perpetrators of violence, no matter which side they fought for, and especially those who harmed civilians, drew particularly strong feelings of vengeance and a desire for harsh

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<sup>25</sup> When asked an open-ended question about which party to the conflict most closely represented them, 71 percent said the opposition.

<sup>26</sup> The rest of the responses on the appropriate punishments for regime members were trial by an international court (12 percent), they will get their own punishment (9 percent), trial by Syrian local administration councils (9 percent), serving time in jail (4 percent), and admitting their actions and seeking forgiveness from those they harmed (1 percent). For the regime fighters, the distribution of preferences was very similar to those for regime members; the only difference between the two was the higher support for execution of regime fighters. For ISIS, results regarding support for the rest of the punishments were as follows: trial by an international court (10 percent), trial by Syrian local administration councils (7 percent), they will get their own punishment (6 percent), admitting their actions and seeking forgiveness from those they harmed (1 percent), and serving time in jail (less than 1 percent). For opposition members who killed civilians, the numbers were as follows: trial by an international court (10 percent), they will get their own punishment (8 percent), trial by Syrian local administration councils (3 percent), admitting their actions and seeking forgiveness from those they harmed (4 percent), and serving time in jail (3 percent).



punishments from our respondents. However, this desire for punishment did not come at the expense of a complete disrespect of due process. Support for trials ranged from 74 percent for regime members to 41 percent for members of ISIS. So far, there have been very limited attempts, mostly in Europe, to bring the perpetrators to justice.<sup>27</sup> Our findings indicate that much stronger domestic efforts for justice will be needed to make reconstruction in Syria possible and to ease some of the grievances of the refugees traumatized by the violence of the civil war.

## Conclusion

All these findings indicate that when Syrians took to the streets in the spring of 2011, they wanted a peaceful change in Syria, nothing more, nothing less. Some years later, they still hold the same aspirations for their country as they continue to support the initial uprising. It is worth noting that these aspirations do not come with a sectarian agenda. In fact, despite the arguments in academic and policy circles about ISIS being a Sunni-supported force,<sup>28</sup> the refugees in our sample had strong grievances toward ISIS and its supporters. The marked desire for a united Syria and very low support for partition further testify to the absence of refugees' sectarian intentions. Rather, their aspirations about the future of their country seem to be determined by more patriotic and nationalistic motivations.

Moreover, we can conclude that our respondents' exposure to vast and horrific forms of violence makes them desire peace in Syria more than anything else. Yet their traumatic experiences have also hardened their attitudes toward the perpetrators of violence, especially violence against civilians. Our respondents wanted to see such individuals punished, and they also did not want to be in close proximity to anyone who had been involved in committing atrocities. Although the people we interviewed expressed a remarkable level of sympathy toward their fellow Syrian civilians, it is hard to imagine them returning to Syria, reintegrating, and living comfortably with those responsible for the violence they have suffered. In fact, the armed actors who have dominated the multiple failed rounds of peace negotiations are unlikely to ever inspire confidence among refugee populations like the one we worked with.

A variety of institutional solutions have been used in other contexts for the purpose of holding the perpetrators of violence and repression legally accountable.<sup>29</sup> These include truth commissions,<sup>30</sup> lustrations processes,<sup>31</sup> and collective punishment.<sup>32</sup> Whereas much of the literature on these transitional justice institutions has looked at their efficacy, we know much less

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<sup>27</sup> See, e.g., "As Atrocities Mount in Syria, Justice Seems Out of Reach," *New York Times*, April 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/15/world/middleeast/syria-bashar-al-assad-evidence.html>. For a description of efforts in Germany by the European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights, see, "Here is how German courts are planning to prosecute Syrian war crimes," *Washington Post*, April 4, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/04/04/heres-how-german-courts-are-planning-to-prosecute-syrian-war-crimes/?utm\\_term=.ec5bc8e841d8](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/04/04/heres-how-german-courts-are-planning-to-prosecute-syrian-war-crimes/?utm_term=.ec5bc8e841d8).

<sup>28</sup> For an example, see Zack Beauchamp, ed., "18 things about ISIS you need to know," *Vox*, November 17, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/cards/things-about-isis-you-need-to-know/sunni-shia-conflict-ISIS>.

<sup>29</sup> Leslie Vinjamuri and Jack Snyder, "Law and Politics in Transitional Justice," *Annual Review of Political Science* 18 (May 2015): 303-27.

<sup>30</sup> James L. Gibson, *Overcoming Apartheid: Can Truth Reconcile a Divided Nation?* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2004).

<sup>31</sup> Monika Nalepa, *Skeletons in the Closet: Transitional Justice in Post-Communist Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> Erin Daly, "Transitional Justice in Iraq: Learning the Hard Way," *Israel Law Review* 47, Issue 1 (March 2014), 63-83.

about the type of justice civilians initially want and how this can vary given their own individual experiences during conflict as well as the actions and identity of the accused. Our work thus contributes to an emergent body of research focusing on the attitudes of civilians toward armed actors<sup>33</sup> and transitional justice.<sup>34</sup> We believe such research holds the modest promise of informing policy interventions aimed at developing viable and sustainable postconflict reconciliation processes.

When it comes to reconciling with the incumbent regime, our findings indicate that domestic trials are the refugees' preferred institutional form of accountability. Domestic trials are known to be polarizing and controversial in the aftermath of civil wars. For instance, the *gacaca* trials in Rwanda were criticized as "a state-imposed veneer of reconciliation."<sup>35</sup> In addition, the empirical record shows that amnesties have been more common than either trials or truth commissions in peace agreements between 1980 and 2006.<sup>36</sup> It is not hard to imagine a similar outcome in the case of the successful implementation of domestic trials in Syria, especially given the fact that Bashar Assad seems to have won the civil war. Nonetheless, if and when refugee return becomes possible, addressing this group's grievances through accountable domestic institutions will be imperative to achieving durable peace in Syria.

Although the Syrian civil war is not necessarily unique in terms of its duration or the scale of the violence it has produced, we need to be careful about the generalizability of our findings for two reasons, one methodological, the other more theoretical. First, we surveyed refugee populations who are currently outside Syria and therefore are relatively secure from the warring parties and especially the incumbent regime. Previous research has shown that feelings of insecurity can lower the willingness to demand transitional justice.<sup>37</sup> Thus, we may have found different results with respect to demands for transitional justice if we had surveyed *internally* displaced Syrians who may feel less secure compared to the refugees outside Syria. Second, previous research suggests that there may be low levels of public support for aggressively punishing the perpetrators of violence, especially if victimized groups gain politically in the aftermath of a civil war and are afraid to lose their political gains in pursuit of holding perpetrators of violence accountable.<sup>38</sup> Since there is little chance that opposition groups in Syria will achieve such a political gain, we should expect pro-opposition Syrian refugees' demands for transitional justice to be more unwavering than in other cases.

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<sup>33</sup> Graeme Blair, Kosuke Imai, and Jason Lyall, "Comparing and Combining List and Endorsement Experiments: Evidence from Afghanistan," *American Journal of Political Science* 58, no. 4 (October 2014): 1043-63; Daniel Corstange and Erin A. York, "Sectarian Framing in the Syrian Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science* 62, no. 2 (April 2018): 441-55.

<sup>34</sup> Cyrus Samii, "Who Wants to Forgive and Forget? Transitional Justice Preferences in Postwar Burundi," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 2 (February 2013): 219-33; Mara Revkin, "The Limits of Punishment: Transitional Justice and Violent Extremism (Iraq Case Study)," *United Nations University Centre for Policy Research*, last modified May 2018, <https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/2768/2-LoP-Iraq-Case-Study.pdf>.

<sup>35</sup> Susan Thomson and Rosemary Nagy, "Law, Power and Justice: What Legalism Fails to Address in the Functioning of Rwanda's *Gacaca* Courts," *International Journal of Transitional Justice* 5, Issue 1 (March 2011): 11-30.

<sup>36</sup> Leslie Vinjamuri and Aaron P. Boesenecker, "Accountability and Peace Agreements: Mapping Trends from 1980 to 2006," *Henry Dunant Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue*, last modified September 2007, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/39727/0907\\_Accountabilityreport.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/39727/0907_Accountabilityreport.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> Priscilla B. Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths: Transitional Justice and the Challenge of Truth Commissions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>38</sup> Samii, "Who Wants to Forgive and Forget?"