



UPINION - Olive Branch

Humanitarian needs and displacement in southern Syria: Community experiences in Sweida and Dar'a

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Table of contents

Table of contents	2
Introduction	3
Methodology	4
Key findings	5
Findings	6
Communities in Sweida	6
Displacement, shelter, and property damage	6
Freedom of movement and "siege" dynamics	7
Access to basic services and infrastructure	8
Access to humanitarian aid	8
Security and governance	8
Displaced communities in Dar'a	11
Shelter arrangements	11
Safety and freedom of movement	12
Access to basic services and infrastructure	12
Access to humanitarian aid	13
Conditions for return to Sweida	13
Conclusion and recommendations	14

Introduction

Between November 2025 and January 2026, Upinion continued its engagement with residents of the Sweida governorate via its Digital Engagement Platform (DEP). This period of monitoring follows an initial assessment conducted between August 4 and September 5, 2025, which captured the immediate fallout of the violent intercommunal clashes that erupted in July 2025 between Druze and Bedouin armed groups. Upinion also engaged with displaced communities in the neighboring Dar'a governorate between December 2025 and February 2026.

The situation in Sweida remains critical. While a fragile ceasefire has been in place since July 19, 2025, the governorate continues to grapple with the aftermath of an escalation that killed hundreds and displaced over 150,000 people.

The conversations with residents of Sweida and displaced communities in Dar'a shed light on the lived realities of communities caught between localized conflict and a fragile political transition in Syria. They assessed humanitarian needs in southern Syria, focusing on shelter arrangements, safety, freedom of movement to, from, and within Sweida, access to basic services and infrastructure, as well as humanitarian aid.

Methodology

Upinion engaged with 120 and 185 Syrians in Sweida and Dar'a, respectively. Although indicative of trends and patterns, findings derived from this convenience sample may not be generalizable to all Syrians affected by the clashes in southern Syria. They should therefore be interpreted as perception-based insights rather than statistically representative data.

Sweida

Respondents were recruited via a local collaborator and two Syrian youth-led CSOs based in Sweida, namely *Sada Aljanub* and *Baite Baitak*. The conversation held with people residing in Sweida involved 120 respondents consisting of a primarily stable, sedentary population (**86%**) deeply rooted in the local area, with **81%** identifying Sweida as their area of origin, and smaller groups originating from Damascus and Rural Damascus. The majority of participants were concentrated in Sweida city (**58%**) and Shahba subdistrict (**19%**).

Dar'a

Olive Branch¹ conducted the outreach to inform and onboard potential respondents onto the platform. In total, 185 displaced respondents in Dar'a governorate participated in the conversation. Among them, **69%** (n=185) were originally from Sweida, and **31%** were from Dar'a.

It must be noted that during the outreach period, field reports indicated that many more individuals, particularly in Dar'a, expressed a desire to participate but were prevented from doing so by the severe disruptions or total loss of telecommunications infrastructure, a finding echoed by respondents in Sweida.

¹ Olive Branch is a humanitarian, non-profit organization registered in Türkiye with headquarters in Gaziantep.

Key findings

Sweida community experiences

- Most respondents were forced to flee due to violence, and many remain displaced.
- Sectarian threats, fear of armed groups, and the destruction of homes were the main drivers of displacement.
- A majority of homes were damaged or destroyed, posing a major barrier to return.
- Respondents reported that travel to, from, and within Sweida is extremely dangerous or impossible.
- There is a severe lack of adequate access to basic services and infrastructure including electricity, telecommunications, and healthcare.
- Food insecurity is widespread mainly due to prohibitive costs.
- Local village protection committees and militias are the most visible security actors, while government presence is minimal.

Displaced communities in Dar'a

- Most displaced respondents in Dar'a, particularly those originally from Sweida, live in tents or temporary shelters.
- Respondents reported multiple challenges in their accommodation including poor insulation or weather protection, lack of privacy, and risk of eviction.
- More than half of respondents reported their original homes were damaged or destroyed.
- The vast majority of respondents from Sweida reported that movement to and from Sweida is impossible or extremely dangerous.
- Access to basic services and infrastructure among displaced communities in Dar'a is largely inadequate. Food supplies are also hard to access primarily due to high costs.
- Displaced communities from Sweida most frequently cited security and safety as a necessary condition for return.

Findings

Communities in Sweida

Displacement, shelter, and property damage

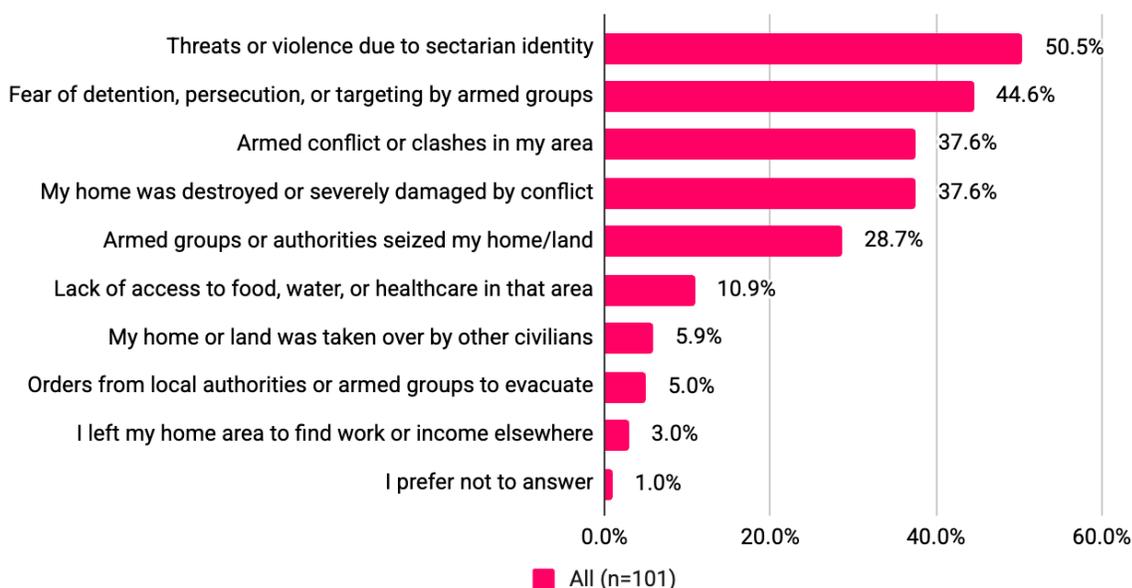
The July 2025 escalation largely impacted the governorate's demographics. Of those surveyed (n=119), a striking **85%** were forced to leave their homes because of the violence. Over half (**56%**) remain displaced at the time of data collection (November 2025 - January 2026). While **29%** have returned, many noted these returns are temporary visits to inspect property.

10% of the respondents did not flee but instead hosted displaced families, highlighting the heavy reliance on social safety nets in the absence of formal alternative shelter.

Those unable to return reported for the most part relying on informal arrangements (not facilitated by the government, United Nations agencies, or other external actors) for shelter. **56%** (n=66) were staying with relatives or host families, while **30%** had managed to rent apartments. However, **11%** were living in precarious conditions, including public facilities like schools and churches or in abandoned/damaged buildings.

The primary reasons for fleeing reveal a deeply strained social environment where sectarian identity is a major security risk. The key drivers mentioned were sectarian threats (**51%**, n=101), the fear of armed groups/detention (**45%**), the fear of armed conflict (**38%**), home destruction (**38%**), and property seizure (**29%**). Furthermore, the physical toll is immense: only **40%** (n=119) of homes remained intact, with **31%** partially damaged and **29%** completely destroyed, posing a significant barrier to return.

Figure 1. Primary reasons for leaving home among respondents in Sweida.



Freedom of movement and "siege" dynamics

The Sweida governorate is currently characterized by extreme isolation, with movement restricted by both physical blockades and sectarian "red lines."

Travel to and from Sweida was viewed as extremely dangerous or impossible by **86%** (n=119) of respondents due to attack and kidnapping risks or because of the total siege over the region.

The ability to *move within the Sweida* was considered unsafe by the majority, with only **23%** (n=119) feeling safe. It was severely compromised by both active conflict and logistical collapse. The primary deterrent was the fear of being caught in crossfire (**60%**, n=92), followed by attacks on public transit (**17%**) and sectarian-motivated violence (**16%**). In addition, nearly one-third of the population (**28%**) reported lacking either fuel or transportation, further restricting their ability to move within Sweida.

Qualitative feedback highlighted that the siege is enforced not only by physical blockades but by technology; respondents reported that armed drones and random shelling frequently violate the truce, targeting civilian areas and city centers.

These accounts of pervasive insecurity and isolation mean that a near-term return is not viable for the 56% (n=119) who remain displaced, trapped in a physical and sectarian "siege."

Furthermore, across all respondents, only **9%** (n=117) reported that schools in their area have been fully cleared and the academic year has fully started, while a large majority (**68%**) stated only

some students were able to go back. **9%** of respondents reported that schools remain full of displaced people, preventing students from returning.²

Among the 15 students surveyed, **9** were completely unable to attend school, and another **4** could only attend irregularly. **7** of out-of-school students reported that the routes to their institutions are too dangerous due to shelling or the presence of militias, with **2** students noting that their school buildings were currently being used as shelters for displaced families. For those displaced away from their original subdistricts, the distance to functioning schools had become an insurmountable barrier.

Access to basic services and infrastructure

Infrastructure in Sweida is at a breaking point, with no services reported as "stable." Utilities are severely affected: **86%** (n=118) reported severely limited electricity, and **97%** (n=118) experienced severe disruptions or total loss of telecommunications. Healthcare was similarly strained, with **88%** (n=118) of respondents facing severely limited access to facilities.

Food insecurity affected over **91%** (n=118) of respondents, with prohibitive cost (**78%**, n=105) being the main barrier, compounded by the insufficiency of United Nations/Food and Agriculture Organization aid (**35%**). Water and sanitation were critically poor for **32%** (n=117) of respondents, primarily due to water pumps being inactive from power failure (**79%**, n=90). High costs also rendered basic hygiene items unaffordable for **69%** of families, with **26%** reporting insufficient hygiene aid.

Access to humanitarian aid

While nearly half the community finds external aid reliable, **51%** (n=115) reported that these efforts have either failed, stopped, or never existed, highlighting a critical gap in the humanitarian pipeline.³ In practice, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) acted as the primary aid actor for **40%** (n=114) of respondents, while international agencies, such as the World Food Programme (WFP) (**11%**) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (**4%**) did not maintain a heavy direct presence. International medical organizations were not reported as having any active operations. These findings suggest that community and local actors are the vital backbone of the current response.

Security and governance

The absence of an active government presence across much of the Sweida governorate has resulted in a landscape of shared control among various local actors. **72%** (n=117) of the community indicated local village protection committees are the most present and influential

² The last **15%** of respondents indicated the issue did not apply to their area, implying from the question that schools in their area had not been occupied by displaced people.

³ This concerns aid from Syrian regions outside Sweida governorate or cross-border routes.

actors in maintaining daily security, **26%** mentioned militias or local armed groups, and only **5%** Syrian Government forces. However, the perception of the aforementioned groups is deeply polarized. Approximately **47%** (n=116) of respondents reported feeling safer due to their presence, and **29%** felt less safe. This lack of oversight is reflected in the high rates of personal violations reported since July 2025: **44%** (n=115) of respondents experienced property theft, and **23%** have faced threats or intimidation. Similarly, **59%** (n=115) of the community reported active theft or destruction of agricultural resources.

Respondents expressed a conflicted view of local influential groups. A majority (**60%**, n=116) was at least somewhat willing to approach them with security concerns yet only a small minority (**26%**, n=115) granted them full and legitimate authority to govern.⁴

Upon reflecting on their perceptions of the groups in control in their area, many community members viewed the National Guard (الحرس الوطني) as a unified, legitimate military body and a necessary security guarantee. However, even supporters acknowledged it is a "hybrid" institution that lacks mature legal frameworks and oversight. A significant portion of the community remained skeptical, viewing armed actors as fragmented "factions" with individual agendas, lacking discipline, and prone to corruption ("thugs" and "crisis profiteers").

"أغلب الفصائل اليوم انضمت الى الحرس الوطني، الجهة العسكرية الوحيدة المسؤولة أصلاً. لكن في حالة الفوضى وعدم القدرة التامة على ضبط الأمور، يبقى هناك تشكيلات نفوسها ضعيفة أما مرتبطة بجهة معينة وتعمل لحسابها او تعمل لحسابها الشخصي"

"Most factions today have joined the National Guard, the only legitimate military body. However, in the current state of chaos and complete inability to control matters, there remain weak formations that are either affiliated with a specific entity and work for it, or work for their own personal gain."

Security perceptions differed regionally, with eastern Sweida seen as protected by local Druze groups.

"مجموعات شبابية من الحرس الوطني الدرزي من أبناء المحافظة يساعدون في الحفاظ على الأمن والاستقرار والحماية في المنطقة والتنسيق والتنظيم فيما بينهم من قبل مسؤولين عن هذه المجموعات"

"Youth groups from the Druze National Guard, comprising residents of the governorate, assist in maintaining security, stability, and protection in the region, and coordinate and organize among themselves under the supervision of those in charge of these groups."

⁴ This tension is underscored by a high percentage of "I prefer not to answer" responses across both questions, which strongly suggests a widespread climate of fear and caution among the population regarding their safety and openly discussing local power structures.

On the other hand, Western Sweida was perceived by respondents as being under the control of state security forces and allied militias, leading to profound mistrust and labels of "sectarian terrorism."

"وفي الجزء الغربي للمحافظة الأمن السوري وقواته الرديفة من عشائر وهم يحتلون القرى، والناس لا تأمن جانبهم بسبب ما فعلوه في 14 و15 و16 و17 و18 تموز الفائت عام 2025."

"In the western part of the governorate, Syrian security forces and their allied tribal forces occupy the villages, and the people do not trust them because of what they did on July 14, 15, 16, 17, and 18 2025."

Armed groups were broadly seen as *in transition*, exhibiting positive traits like being youth-led and organized, but were still perceived as immoderate and lacking accountability.

Displaced communities in Dar'a

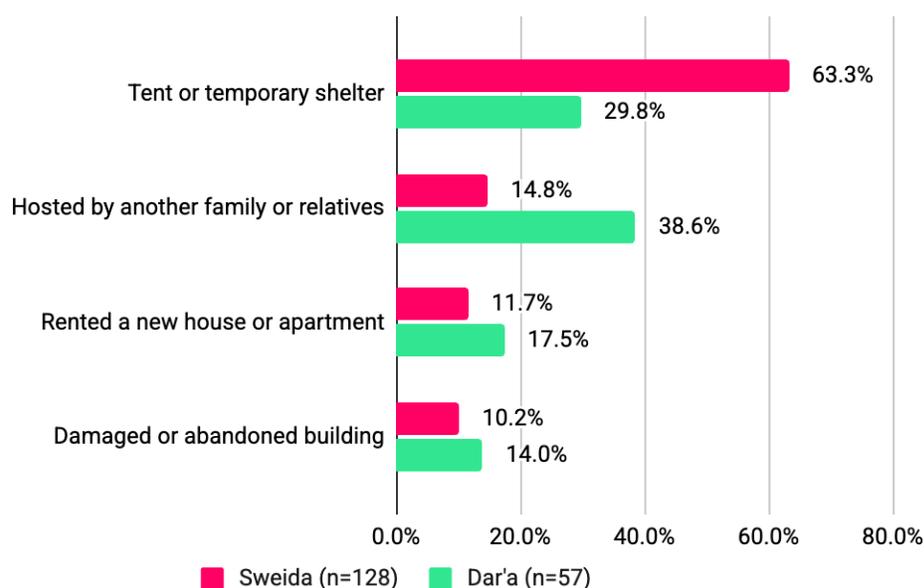
Shelter arrangements

More than half of respondents reported living in a tent or temporary shelter (**53%**, n=185), **22%** were hosted by relatives or another family, **14%** lived in rented accommodation, while **11%** lived in a damaged or abandoned building. Challenges in their current accommodation included poor insulation or weather protection (**60%**, n=181), lack of privacy (**28%**), risk of eviction (**20%**), overcrowding (**14%**), and safety concerns (**11%**).

Concerning the state of their original homes, only **4%** (n=183) of respondents reported they were intact, while **33%** and **19%** reported they were partially and completely destroyed, respectively.⁵

There were differences between displaced communities originating from Sweida and Dar'a. While respondents from Sweida mainly resided in tents or temporary shelters (**63%**, n=128), only **30%** (n=57) of those originally from Dar'a did so (Figure 2).

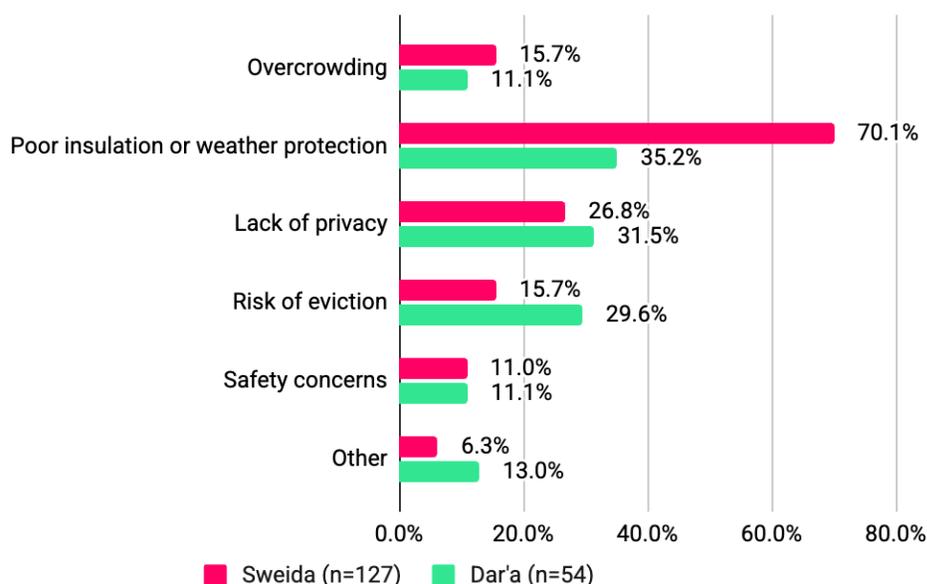
Figure 2. Shelter arrangements among displaced communities in Dar'a, disaggregated by governorate of origin.



Moreover, displaced respondents from Sweida more frequently cited poor insulation or weather protection as a challenge in their current accommodation (**70%** [n=127] compared to **35%** [n=54] among those from Dar'a) (Figure 3).

⁵ 44% of respondents reported not knowing the state of their home.

Figure 3. Challenges in current shelter among displaced communities in Dar'a, disaggregated by governorate of origin.



Safety and freedom of movement

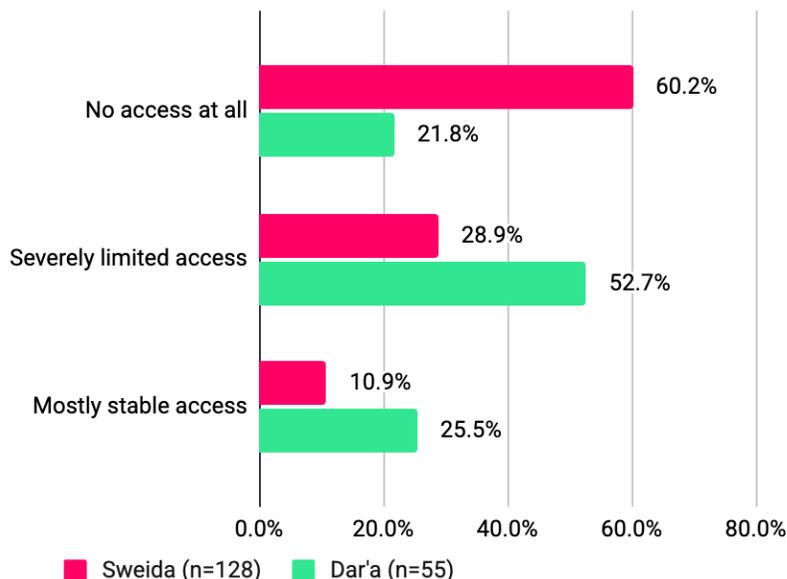
37% (n=183) of respondents reported only feeling safe sometimes, and **10%** did not feel safe in their current location in Dar'a. Moreover, the majority of displaced respondents from Sweida (**73%**, n=128) indicated that movement to and from Sweida is impossible, while **23%** reported it is possible but extremely dangerous. The remaining respondents believed it is possible, yet difficult due to cost and checkpoints (**3%**) or easily manageable (**1%**).

Access to basic services and infrastructure

Respondents reported limited access to basic services and infrastructure. Indeed, most respondents reported no or severely limited access to electricity and power (**85%**, n=183), telecommunications (**72%**, n=183), and healthcare facilities (**57%**, n=183). Moreover, **33%** (n=183) reported being unable to access water supply and hygiene necessities. As for medications, **48%** (n=183) of respondents reported being unable to access essential medications. The remaining respondents indicated they could partially (**47%**) or fully do so (**5%**). Food insecurity was also widespread: **30%** (n=183) could not access food supplies and **67%** only partly. The main reason for difficulties accessing food were high costs (**88%**, n=177).

Respondents from Sweida described worse access to basic infrastructure. Indeed, while **60%** (n=128) of them reported no access to electricity and power, only **22%** (n=55) of those from Dar'a did so (Figure 4). Access to telecommunications also tended to be better among respondents from Dar'a.

Figure 4. Access to electricity and power among displaced communities in Dar'a, disaggregated by governorate of origin.



Access to humanitarian aid

While most respondents indicated that external aid efforts from other areas in Syria and cross-border routes have been reliable sources of support (**74%**, n=179), some indicated that they failed (**8%**) or were non-existent (**18%**). The most active local aid actors and humanitarian NGOs operating in their area were the SARC (**71%**, n=179), followed by UNHCR (**8%**) and WFP (**5%**). Some respondents also mentioned that no humanitarian aid actors were active in their current area (**5%**).

Conditions for return to Sweida

Respondents originating from Sweida were asked what conditions are necessary for displaced people to return to their homes and villages in Sweida governorate. They predominantly cited security and safety (**74%**, n=124), followed by reconciliation and social stability within local communities (**8%**), as well as repairing damaged houses and villages (**7%**).

Conclusion and recommendations

The situation in southern Syria remains dire. In Sweida, a fragmented security landscape, as well as damaged or destroyed homes mean that many residents continue to be displaced. Travel to, from, and within Sweida is restricted and unsafe. Moreover, access to basic services and infrastructure, as well as food and water is largely inadequate both in Sweida and among displaced communities in Dar'a.

United Nations agencies and international and local non-governmental organizations must scale up their support for residents of Sweida and displaced communities in Dar'a to improve their access to basic services and infrastructure. Displaced communities in Dar'a urgently require shelter support, including weatherproofing and legal assistance focused on eviction. Housing, land, and property (HLP) support is also required in Sweida and Dar'a, prioritizing reconstruction and rehabilitation of damaged or destroyed homes.

Third country governments need to support real-time monitoring and engagement activities in hard-to-reach communities in southern Syria to keep track of the evolving displacement and HLP needs in Sweida and Dar'a. Moreover, direct communication between crisis-affected communities and high-level decision-makers can help ensure aid is directly aligned with community needs and priorities.

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