

Poverty, Precarity, and Isolation: The Economic Situation of Syria's "Middle Class"

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Abstract

This paper examines the repercussions of Syria's prolonged economic crisis, primarily in Damascus, Hasaka, and Idlib, initiated by the conflict's onset in 2011. The nation has witnessed a severe economic decline with a staggering 300 percent inflation rate, leading to uncontrollable price spikes for essential commodities, rendering them financially inaccessible to most Syrians. Over 90 percent of the population now resides below the poverty line, grappling with poverty, job insecurity, and precarious living conditions. This study focuses on the contemporary status, challenges, and self-perceptions of individuals who identify as "middle class" in Syria. The research is based on comprehensive, semi-structured, and longitudinal telephone interviews with eight Syrian residents between October 2022 and January 2023. The paper underscores the difficulties in maintaining a reasonable standard of living, the scarcity of essential goods and services, and the lack of basic infrastructure in urban areas. Many participants employ individual strategies, including receiving remittances or leveraging personal connections to access necessities. Furthermore, participants express disillusionment with prospects for transformative change, a sense of resignation, and the need to endure day-to-day. They face limitations in expressing grievances, providing mutual support, uniting against challenges, or engaging in acts of protest against prevailing conditions.

Keywords: Syria, Social Justice, Poverty, Socio-economic Rights

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Introduction

Syria's economy has been in decline since 2011, following the exacerbation of a peaceful uprising against the Syrian Government (the regime) into a war waged by the Government, different international actors, and armed opposition groups. Although guns had fallen silent in many areas of Syria and the Syrian Government managed to regain control over big parts of the country in 2018, poverty and economic hardship have drastically increased across the territory over the past three years (Fayyad, 2022). The reasons behind this economic crisis are many: the financial burdens of war and the loss of access to strategic sectors such as oil and gas, the collapse of traditional economic

activities, the suspension of import and export operations, the imposition of international economic sanctions targeting the Syrian Government since May 2011 (Carter Center, 2020; Al Shami, 2020), corruption, maladministration, the enactment of short-sighted economic austerity policies (Sabaqani 2021), and the advent of regional and international developments such as the financial crisis in Lebanon (Barthelmess/Carson, 2020), the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russo-Ukrainian War (Adar et al., 2022). During the last 11 years, the inflation rate has reached 300 percent. Prices for basic commodities such as food, medicine, gas, fuel, and basic services have risen uncontrollably, which made them unaffordable for most Syrian residents (Alexander/Ahlam, 2021). Recurrently the worsening economic situation has led to protests by residents especially in the Sweida governorate in South-West Syria, with the last one of these mobilisations taking place in December 2022. During these protests, the blurred boundaries between demands for political change and better living conditions could be witnessed as protestors shouted the now famous slogan “The people want the overthrow of the regime” next to demands for access to basic goods (BBC News, 2022; Ezzi, 2022).

Today, the majority of Syrian residents are struggling to make ends meet. Poverty, precarity, unemployment, and unstable living conditions prevail. In a report published in May 2022, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) stated that “14.6 million people in Syria rely on aid, 1.2 million more than a year before; more than 90 percent of Syrians live in poverty. Food insecurity has touched new records; 13.9 million people go hungry every day.” (UNHCR, 2022).

Prior to the uprising and the 2011 war in Syria, much of the literature focused on a rapidly expanding 'new middle class', primarily concentrated in urban areas. Members of this middle class often held jobs in the public sector or were self-employed entrepreneurs running small businesses in trade, services, or industry (Hamlo, 2015; Ianchovichina/Dang, 2016; Syrian Economic Science Society, 2018). After 2011, this 'new middle class' gradually disappeared as a result of emigration, impoverishment, and the downturn of many economic sectors. Today, the pre-war middle class in Syria seems to have largely disappeared, and there has been no recent research that looks at the present state of the middle class in Syria, however, it may be defined. This study does not claim to address this gap comprehensively. The limitations of the fieldwork, coupled with the volatile political and economic situation in Syria, render such an undertaking challenging at this time. This study examined the current status, challenges, and self-perceptions of those Syrian residents who identify as "middle class". Therefore, this study tackled 'social class' as a subjective self-designation by the interviewees, their own interpretation of this class, and its distinction from other classes.

This paper explores the situation in three different cities: Damascus, the capital and seat of the official Syrian Government under President Bashar al-Assad, Idlib in North-Western Syria, since 2017 under the control of "Syrian Salvation Government" (⁽¹⁾???? ????? ??????)

????? ??????? ???????, and Hasaka, the largest city in North-Eastern Syria, that is mainly controlled by the “Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria” (AANES)^[2]. These three cities were selected to identify the different political and economic contexts within Syria while highlighting at the same time the economic difficulties that people are facing across the country from the perspective of its residents.

Methodology

The paper is based on qualitative research, primarily based on semi-structured, in-depth, and longitudinal phone interviews that were undertaken in Arabic with eight residents in Syria from October 2022 until January 2023. The interviewed participants were two young women and two middle-aged men living in Damascus, one man and one young woman living in Idlib, and a couple with three children living in Hasaka.

The first participants in each city were selected based on personal contacts; the remaining participants were recruited using snowball sampling in the three areas. The main selection criteria were individuals residing in Syria who still identified themselves as part of the middle class, despite the economic challenges facing the country. The authors aimed to guarantee diversity in sex, age, and family status but faced difficulties identifying interlocutors willing to conduct an interview.

The situation in all three areas is very volatile, which renders a comparison difficult and the access to and verification of exact macroeconomic data challenging. That is why the study relied on qualitative interviews with residents of these cities instead of economic metrics.

The selection of participants with middle-class status was done by relying on participants' self-reporting. The participants of this study attributed their self-identification as middle-class to the fact that they are still able to make ends meet, and are in a much better financial position than most other residents in their city. However, they still encounter challenges and constraints resulting from the economic crisis affecting their own financial and social situation.

The interviews tackled topics such as participants' perception of their economic and social status, their wages, work conditions, rising prices, scarcity of goods, and their (in)ability to buy basic necessities and access fundamental services. We also delved into the impact of the economic crisis on their social lives, mental health, future plans, and the coping mechanisms they employ to meet the diverse challenges of daily life in Syria amidst the economic crisis.

Despite guaranteeing anonymity, many potential interlocutors declined to participate citing safety concerns. Others cited time constraints or the futility of "always talking while nothing changes anyway" - as we were recurrently told. These refusals reveal a prevailing sense of fear, hopelessness, and being burdened by the many challenges of daily life.

Participants

In Damascus, this paper is based on interviews with Najwa^[3], a 37-year-old woman living alone and working as a waitress in a restaurant; Hisham, a 43-year-old man who is married with two children and works as a data analyst for an international NGO; Mouna, a 39-year old woman who works as a freelancer in the film industry and lives alone; and Fadi, a 35-year-old man who is married with four kids and is working as a carpenter.

In Hasaka, our main interlocutors were Sassan and Amira, a couple in their mid-thirties with one child. Both work for the AANES.

In Idlib, this paper is based on interviews with Mahmoud, a 48-year-old man who is married with three kids and owns a small electronics shop; and Roula, a young woman in her twenties, who lives with her parents and does not work.

Scarcity of goods, high prices, crumbling infrastructure, and lack of services - living in Damascus, Idlib, and Hasaka

For all of our interlocutors - whether they lived in Damascus, Idlib, or Hasaka - accessing basic goods and fulfilling basic needs has become increasingly difficult or impossible in the last three years. Although they all recount that financially and economically the situation has been constantly deteriorating since 2012, they still perceive the last three years as a “daily escalation, where everything related to prices, wages, and availability of goods becomes crazier every day.”^[61] The salaries of six participants ranged between 50 and 200 United States Dollars (USD). Roula, the only unemployed participant, lives with her parents. Her father works in a hospital and earns a monthly salary of 120 USD. Hisham is the only participant who earns a monthly salary of 1,500 USD. It should be noted that these salaries fluctuated on a monthly basis due to inflation^[62].

Najwa is a young woman of 37 years who has been living in Damascus all her life. Since her parents passed away and her siblings left Syria, she lives alone in a small rooftop studio. She works in a restaurant as a waitress. She recounts to us her daily struggle with rising costs and expenses:

My monthly salary is 350,000 Lira, which equals around 80 USD a month. This is considered a good salary in Syria these days. I live in a very small studio on a rooftop and I pay 150,000 Lira in monthly rent. This is very cheap, especially in the area I live in. Most people pay more than 500,000 Lira in rent for a small apartment and most people pay a higher rent than their salary. I also pay around 25,000 Lira utilities per month. I have to walk to work because there is no public transportation anymore and a taxi is too expensive. Luckily it is not too far. I don't cook because I cannot afford gas and it is also very difficult to get gas, so I usually eat something small outside. Also, power cuts are very bad, we usually have like one hour of electricity and then eight hours of power cut. But people do not complain about this anymore, we are busy with how to survive and eat. I think compared to other people, I am quite well-off but this does not mean I can afford a lot.^[63]

Najwa's account does not only reveal how difficult it is to make ends meet despite being employed but also the diminished expectations of people in Syria regarding their daily requirements and options. Najwa affirmed many times during the interview that she is better off than others and lucky to be living within walking distance from her place of work and to be paying cheaper rent. However, when pressed

for more details, she revealed that she cannot afford or access basic necessities anymore and lives in a constantly unstable and precarious situation.

Hisham, another interlocutor from Damascus, was the only participant who still earned a four-digit salary in USD. He works as a data analyst for one of the big international donor Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Damascus and earns a monthly salary of 1,500 USD. Hisham is 43 years old and lives together with his wife and two children in a rental apartment in Damascus. During the interview, he assured us many times that only a small minority of people have as high a salary as he does, but he still recounts having to deal with shortages and deprivation.

Prices are increasing every day so, even with my salary, I feel the prices. A few months ago, the monthly expenses for my family (excluding rent) were about 600 USD, today I need 1,000 USD just to sustain our basic needs. We don't live a fancy life, we don't eat in restaurants, we spend only money on essential things, diesel, gasoline, home maintenance, and the rest on food. We also support our two families; we have not bought any luxury items for years and we cannot make any savings. Also, there are so many shortages, of water, gas, and medicine in the country. Even if you have money, you cannot get them. I always ask people to bring me medicines from Lebanon, although there is also a shortage there."^[21]

Similarly to Najwa, Hisham does not address the future with any kind of positive outlook or with any hope for change. Life for him is about getting by on a daily basis and not about planning or wishing for a better future. "I want my children and my wife to have a good life today. I don't know what will happen tomorrow, but if today we are doing well, this is enough."^[22]

As is the case in Damascus, working with an international NGO is a possible and lucrative employment opportunity for people living in the North-Eastern part of Syria under the AANES. As our interlocutors tell us, there are only three possible occupations in the Hasaka region that make it possible to live a rather decent life: being employed in an international NGO, being employed at the AANES, or being a business owner. Sassan and his wife Amira both work for the AANES. According to their own account, they lead a simple but good life, although they concede how their financial situation has become more difficult.

If you work for the AANES, your salary is between 300,000 and 900,000 Syrian Pounds, that means between 70 and 200 USD. Me and my wife are somewhere in between. We are lucky because we own an apartment, rent is crazy expensive so if you have to pay rent, you can hardly manage. Since we use the Syrian currency, we are affected by the sanctions and inflation, so things have become much more difficult in the last few years. We cannot afford meat anymore for example, sometimes we need to borrow money to buy medicine we need. But compared to the regime areas, we are in a much better situation here."^[23]

Unlike Damascus and Hasaka, the local currency in Idlib and its surroundings is the Turkish Lira, after the ruling "Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham" stopped using the Syrian Pound as tender in the summer of 2020, following the drastic devaluation of the Syrian Pound (Hodali, 2021). While prices in the region were in fact successfully stabilised for around one and a half years, the exacerbating currency and debt crises in Turkey started to affect prices and the value of wages in the region soon after. "Wages constantly

decrease and prices increase” participants confirmed. At the time of writing, it was increasingly difficult for the residents of Idlib to earn enough money to make ends meet. In October 2021, this situation led to recurrent protests in the area against the local authorities and the demands for better wages and better living conditions ([al-Khateb](#), 2021).

Mahmoud, a resident of Idlib, reported that high prices of goods and low incomes are the main obstacles for people like him to access basic goods, not scarcity.

Honestly, we have everything here, from food to petrol to cars, but there is no money. Idlib was not affected by the sanctions that were imposed on the regime. Turkey is just beyond the border and everything gets imported from there and there is a lot of smuggling, but we cannot afford it. Daily workers for example on a construction site get 20 to 50 Turkish Lira per day, this equals between 2 - 3 USD, hardly enough for a family to have breakfast. Yesterday, I made a profit of 0,5 USD in my shop, so practically nothing. And we need to pay for everything, even if it is provided, water, electricity, petrol, medical care, especially medicines. We do not have any subsidised goods like in the regime areas.^[10]

As the accounts of the participants from these three cities have shown, they all suffer from challenges in accessing basic goods such as food, medicine, fuel, gas, and housing. They live with constant shortages of water, electricity, and infrastructure. According to our interviews, these shortages and scarcities are mainly due to the constantly increasing prices and low wages, but also caused by the monopoly of goods and services by the political elite.

Smart cards, remittances, political connections, black market, and humanitarian aid - The ambivalence of irregular support systems

In 2014, the Syrian Ministry of Petroleum introduced the so-called “smart card” system. A card was distributed to families in Damascus with which they could purchase a set amount of fuel at a subsidised price. The objective of the “smart card” was to prevent the hoarding of fuel by smugglers and residents, and to enable the impoverished people of the capital to buy fuel at an affordable price. The smart card, despite it being a Syrian Government initiative, was managed and organised by a private company, “Takamol”, that has close ties to the country’s first lady Asma al-Assad (Al Shami, 2022). In 2020, the Syrian Government introduced a new “smart card” which applied to other basic goods such as gas, bread, tea, rice, and sugar (Advani, 2020). Although the smart card was supposed to relieve families from the burden of increasing prices in the country, it was met with a lot of criticism and anger by many Syrian residents and media outlets close to the government since its introduction. The main points of criticism were the outsourcing of state subsidy programs to a private company, as well as the chaotic, and often unfair, implementation of the card distribution process. Furthermore, many people argued that the regulated amount of goods per person was not enough to meet the needs of one person or a family (Mehchy/Haid/Khatib, 2020) and that many people were excluded from the smart card program, such as unmarried and undocumented individuals, and people not residing in the governorate in which they were registered (Daher, 2020).

During interviews, participants confirmed these perceptions. Najwa reported that she tried numerous

times to get a smart card but was not found eligible because she was not married and had no children. This meant that she could not access some basic goods.

I don't cook at home because I don't have gas and no electricity to store food in the fridge. It became very expensive and impossible to get a gas cylinder. If you have a smart card, you can get some benefits from the subsidised stuff including a gas cylinder every three months. I tried several times to get one but they refused me. If I had this card, I would get subsidised bread, rice, sugar, diesel, and gas, well, one gas cylinder every three months. It is not enough but still, it would help. The price for one gas cylinder on the smart card is maybe 15,000 Lira but on the black market it costs more than 100,000 Lira, so I cannot afford this.^[11]

Mouna, another resident of Damascus, said that she would not apply for the smart card even if she qualified. She prefers buying goods on the black market or accepting that she cannot afford them

The smart card is only for families. Recently, the government was discussing whether to issue cards for students and singles but nothing happened. But honestly, for me, I prefer not to enter into this system even if I could. It is complicated and corrupt. Often, the application does not work and you have to wait forever or you have to spend money for transportation just to go to the place where you can buy the subsidised goods. For many, the smart card is the only way to get anything but it is a very flawed system. For myself, I cannot afford many things these days but I got used to it. But I can make this decision because I live alone.^[12]

In Hasaka, a similar system as the smart card exists for subsidised gas and bread (Christou 2021). According to our participants, the system works better than the smart card system in the areas under the Syrian Government's control. However, they must still economise as much as possible to make ends meet according to Amira:

I am not saying that things are easy because you have to think how you use the gas so that it is enough for the whole month but I have never heard that a family couldn't eat because they didn't have gas. Not like in the regime area... We had a bread problem about two years ago when the administration raised the wheat price but bakeries had to sell bread for a cheaper price. They went on strike and we could not get bread. This was very bad for the poor families that mainly live on bread anyway.^[13]

In Idlib, only some subsidised goods, such as bread, are available and there is hardly any social assistance from local authorities. Most available goods are smuggled from Turkey, Kurdish-held areas, or areas held by the Syrian Government. Therefore, prices are determined by the black market which constitutes a big challenge for the residents. As mentioned before, participants confirmed that all basic and even some luxury goods were available but inaccessible due to their high prices. The only available support was aid delivered by local and international NGOs through the Bab al-Hawa crossing. However, mounting Russian pressure in the UN Security Council on NGOs to only deliver humanitarian aid through Damascus made their work even more challenging (Human Rights Watch, 2022/The Cradle, 2022). According to participants, NGO provisions in Idlib are never enough and do not reach the vast majority of people in need. Roula, a young woman who lives with her parents in Idlib tells us of her experience with NGO-based support:

The only support that exists is the support from NGOs, so they distribute monthly baskets with basic goods but only for the displaced people who live in the camps. There are a lot of NGOs but there is no fair distribution of aid. And there is also corruption. Some wealthy people get aid and those that really need it do not get it. And to be honest some of them exploit our vulnerable situation. A guy working in an NGO used to harass me and send me inappropriate texts after I had approached them for help. I had no choice then to stop asking for help. Since there is no other support than the NGOs, they can actually do whatever they want.^[14]

Most participants mentioned that access to subsidised goods or aid was an unfair, unregulated, and unclear process that was often based on dynamics of clientelism or favouritism between beneficiaries and “aid” providers, be it NGOs or state institutions. According to Hisham, access to basic goods in Syria is limited to a minority of those who have “money, power, and connections” and “they decide who they grant this access to.”^[15]

Based on these experiences with governmental or NGO support, most participants rely on personal networks, such as relatives sending remittances from abroad, for them to be able to afford or access some of the missing goods on the black market (UN Escwa, 2022). According to participants, prices on the black market often reach ten times those of the open market and shortages are prevalent. Remittances are often the only outlet for people to meet their daily needs and expenses. For many participants, the constant reliance on these networks is exhausting and stressful. According to Mahmoud: “People outside got bored supporting us. And we always need to remind them that we are still in need or even more than before, and this is stressful and also humiliating. My brother lives in Sweden, he always sends money but I feel like a burden, no longer like a brother. I used to have two friends in France who were sending me money but they stopped at some point because they realised there is no end to this situation.”^[16]

The striking similarity among all participants was their sense of hopelessness and their inability to imagine a better future. This was mainly due to the overwhelming combination of limited financial means, the constant scarcity of some basic goods and services, and the insurmountable dependence on unreliable and insufficient support systems. This dominant feeling of despair was also fuelled by the often-overlooked impact of precarity, poverty, and scarcity of goods and infrastructure in Syria which was emphasised by participants: the disintegration of social life and loneliness.

The crisis of loneliness - no fuel for transportation or tea for visitors

“People are not complaining anymore, they don’t talk about it, all they think about is how to eat and survive, they become crazy. When you walk in the streets, you see them talking to themselves all the time.”^[17]

All participants brought up their poor mental health or that of the people around them. This psychological distress is, without a doubt, the result of experiencing more than a decade of an ongoing war and its consequences: violence, oppression, instability, economic crisis, poverty, scarcity of goods, destruction of infrastructure and support networks. Fadi, a resident of Damascus, buys food and gas for

his family using the smart card and his eldest son works in a small shop in the neighbourhood to earn an additional income. Fadi recounts how the refuge of many of his relatives and friends was the first major shock to a previously vibrant social life:

We used to always be together, as a family, the door of our house was always open, so my uncles or cousins or relatives of my wife, they just passed by. And I also had my friends, those from school, those from the neighbourhood. We just meet and sit together; we have known each other for ages. Then everyone left, I don't even know where they are, Sweden, Germany, Canada, Lebanon, no idea. I lost track. I never wanted to leave, I have my parents here, I love this place. But today, nothing is left of our social life. I cannot welcome any visitors, what should I offer them? We hardly have tea and bread for ourselves, and there is no electricity, shall we sit in the dark? Visiting became a complicated matter, like something to really think about. What should I offer? What should I bring? What should we talk about? So, we just stay home.^[18]

Even participants who have a slightly higher income and no family find it difficult to move around and meet or visit friends or relatives, mainly because there is no transportation and women reported not feeling safe to walk around alone. Mouna recounted her reasons for no longer going out or seeing her friends: "I used to either take a taxi or walk to see friends, but today I can no longer afford a taxi and I don't always feel safe walking because streets are very often empty. And also no one cares anymore. I once got insulted by a taxi driver while walking. He threatened to hit me, there were people around but nobody intervened. We became like robots. [...] I stay at home most of the time."^[19] Her testimony also shows how diverse factors and considerations play a role in the social isolation of many Syrians today, including economic considerations but also issues such as safety for women, the lack of public engagement, and the general mistrust in society.

The disintegration of social life implies the loss of solidarity, mutual support, and exchange of grievances or worries. In the long run, this also suggests the lack of a possibility to solidarize or organise in light of a constantly distressing and unbearable situation.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the impact of the economic crisis in Syria on residents who consider themselves middle class. It highlights the increasing deprivation and precarious economic conditions and daily life of the people in the cities of Damascus, Idlib, and Hassaka. The areas under the control of the Syrian Government and the AANES are much more economically entangled due to their use of the same currency and their exchange and trade of essential goods, such as medicine and flour. Economic recession, increasing prices and scarcity of goods affected both areas in tandem and have been a challenge to both authorities for many years (SNHR, 2023). The areas under the control of the Syrian Salvation Government are economically and politically entangled with Turkey. As the devaluation of the currency and rising prices since 2021 have shown, the economic situation of this area often emulates that of Turkey (Firas, 2023). The interviews conducted revealed the challenges of making ends meet, the scarcity of goods and services, and the lack of infrastructure in these three cities. Faced with a scattered and unreliable support system and social assistance by the respective political authorities and

humanitarian aid providers, most participants were forced to rely on individualised solutions, such as remittances or using “connections” to access goods and services. Participants also pointed out their lack of hope for change, their resignation, and surviving one day at a time. This sentiment of despair and resignation is reinforced by the impact of the economic crisis and the precarious situation of most people on social life in Syria. As this study shows, the interviewed residents of the three cities live in increasing isolation and loneliness and therefore have a limited capacity to express their grievances or worries, support each other, join forces to meet diverse challenges, or protest against them.

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^[1] “Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham” (HTS) is a Sunni Islamist political organisation that emerged from the fusion of different armed and political groups in 2017. The government that the HTS formed in the Idlib governorate is called “The Syrian Salvation Government” (????? ??????? ???????).

^[2] The AANES is a quasi-autonomous region in North-eastern Syria consisting of several self-governing sub-regions. The AANES has been de facto autonomous from the central government in Damascus since 2012.

^[3] All names and confidential personal information used in this paper have been changed to guarantee the anonymity of the respondents.

^[4] Interview with Najwa, a 37-year-old woman from Damascus. She lives alone and works as a waitress in a big restaurant. Interview conducted in December 2022.

^[5] Interviews were conducted between October 2022 and January 2023. During this period, the approximate exchange rate was 1 USD = 4000 SYP, based on the parallel market rate. This exchange rate was consistently used in the paper.

^[6] Interview with Najwa, October 2022.

^[7] Interview with Hisham, a 43-year-old man from Damascus. He lives with his wife and his two children in Damascus and works as a data analyst for a big donor NGO. October 2022.

^[8] Interview with Hisham.

^[9] Interview with Sassan and Amira, a couple in their mid-30s that lives in Hasaka. They have one child. October 2022. In June 2023, a civil servant in Damascus still earned about 15 USD a month due to the soaring inflation rate (The Syrian Observer, 2023).

^[10] Interview with Mahmoud, a 48-year-old man who lives in Idlib. Mahmoud owns a small electronics store; he is married and has three kids, October 2022.

^[11] Interview with Najwa.

^[12] Interview with Mouna, a 39-year-old woman from Damascus. She lives alone and works as a freelancer in the film industry. October 2022.

^[13] Interview with Sassan and Amira.

^[14] Interview with Roula. Roula is a 26-year-old woman who lives in Idlib with her parents. She does not work but draws comics in her free time that she publishes in a community centre in Idlib. December 2022.

^[15] Interview with Hisham.

^[16] Interview with Mahmoud.

^[17] Interview with Najwa.

^[18] Interview with Fadi, a 35-year-old Syrian man, married with four kids. He works as a carpenter.

^[19] Interview with Mouna.