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## *Middle East Analysis Report*

The protracted fighting in Syria has resulted in a mass exodus of Syrian civilians, fleeing the country as migrants and refugees, and has led to a decline in the standard of living and a rise in poverty among the remaining population. Yet there are very few objective and academically reliable sources of information on how people are actually living their lives, and how they view the current situation. Recently, the results of a public opinion survey conducted through a Syrian research organization were published. The survey was part of “An Empirical Study of the Political System and Its Change in the Middle East by Means of Public Opinion Surveys,” a project funded through the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research 2015–2018 (Basic Research Program (B) 15H03132) provided by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science. Please find below an analysis report on these results prepared by Yutaka Takaoka, our senior researcher.

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### **Syrian people’s view of the current situation**

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#### **Introduction**

This survey was conducted as part of a project funded by the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research. Since it was virtually impossible to travel to the Syrian Arab Republic, due to the ongoing war, we asked the Syrian Opinion Center for Polls and Studies (SOCPS) to conduct the field survey. The survey was administered in areas controlled by the Syrian government and Kurdish forces. Syria was divided into five areas, and the survey targeted a total of 1,500 persons, consisting of 300 persons from each of the following governorates

representing the five areas of Damascus/Damascus Countryside, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo, and Al-Hasakah. The simple tabulations of the survey results and the questionnaire are available at [https://cmeps-j.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/report\\_syria2017.pdf](https://cmeps-j.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/report_syria2017.pdf).

The SOCPs was responsible for administering the survey and negotiating with the local authorities. On the basis of the results of a preliminary survey conducted in January 2017, the SOCPs modified the questionnaire prepared in Japan. The survey was administered in March 2017. It is foreseeable that the credibility of the findings of such a public opinion survey conducted in a country with a non-democratic political system—particularly in a country like Syria where people are believed to be kept under strict surveillance by security agencies—will be called into question for a number of reasons. Some may argue that there is no guarantee that such a public opinion survey would be administered correctly, while others may claim that respondents would not give honest answers. However, it is precisely because a country's non-democratic political system does not allow people's political views to be reflected in national policies, through elections or other means, that its government authorities would try to ascertain people's political views through other means. Further, in a public opinion survey conducted in a non-democratic country, the circumstances and considerations that determine the respondents' answers are very important topics of analysis and observation. In other words, it would be senseless to discredit the results of a public opinion survey administered in Syria or to dismiss the survey as pointless just because it is conducted under the surveillance and supervision of the government.

The SOCPs proposed some changes, while reviewing the questionnaire, before the survey was administered. One of the answer choices to the question asking the respondents how well they trusted the media outlets listed was "Other Arab satellite broadcasting stations." The SOCPs proposed to ask the respondents to name two stations that they trusted or did not trust and give reasons for their answers. In addition, a review of the original questionnaires submitted by the SOCPs revealed that the organization added its own question in the questionnaires prepared for the survey in Aleppo: "How do you think religion should be addressed in Syria's future constitution?" The SOCPs also encouraged the respondents to answer this question by offering a payment to those who did. These facts indicate that there are some issues the SOCPs—or the Syrian authorities behind it—believes should be investigated independently, and they took advantage of this survey to ask questions on issues in which they were interested. In other words, it can be assumed that the SOCPs and the Syrian authorities were not trying to control the respondents or their responses in advance and that they were, in fact, trying to hear the voices of the Syrian people directly.

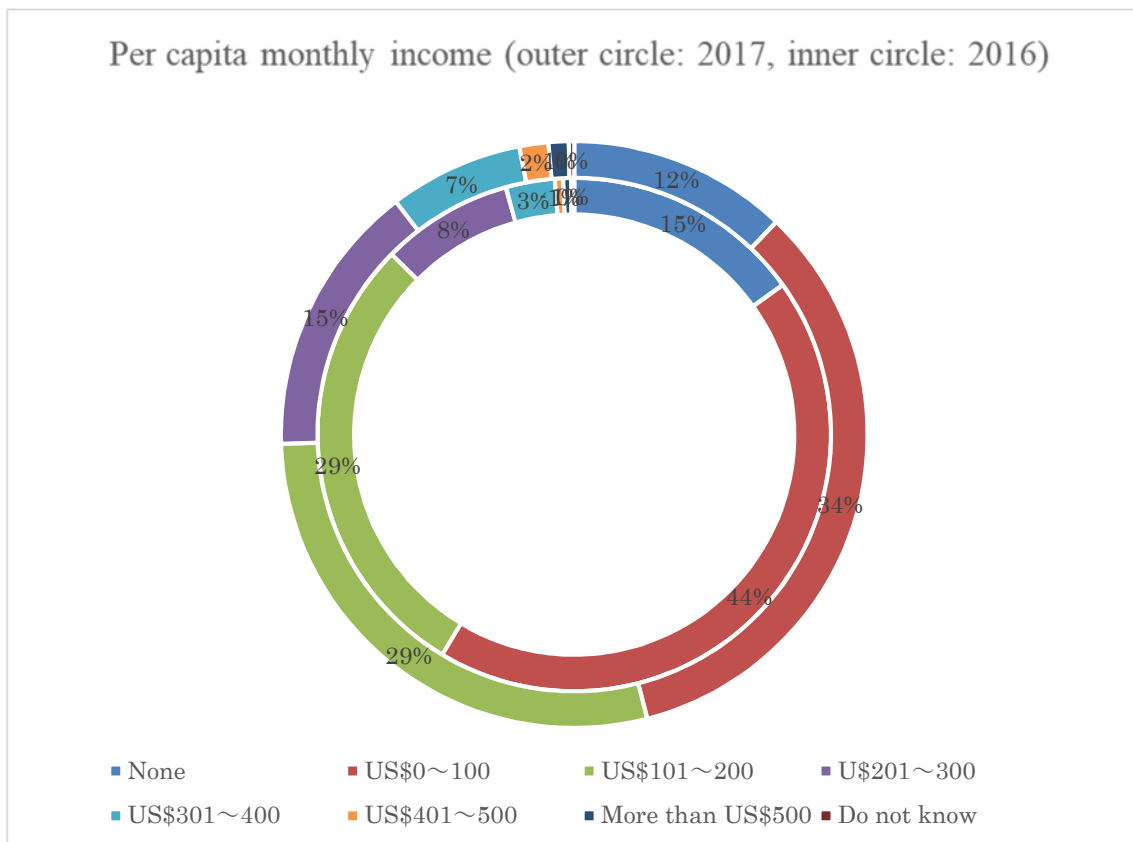
### How the Syrians see the current situation

What, then, were the actual findings of the survey? The following five issues deserve special attention among the results obtained: (1) standard of living, (2) evaluation of foreign aid, (3) trust in various sources of information, (4) factors given serious consideration before relocating within Syria or overseas, and (5) outlook for the Syria–Japan relationship.

#### (1) Standard of living

The Syrian conflict not only took many lives but also led to a decline in the standard of living, due to the destruction of social infrastructure and production facilities, and the sanctions imposed by other nations on civilians’ economic activities. In this survey, approximately 74% of all the respondents replied that their monthly income was 200 dollars or less. In other words, approximately three-quarters of the Syrian population earns less than seven dollars per day. However, this does not mean that Syrian people’s incomes have fallen steadily. In responding to a similar question on a survey conducted in 2016, nearly 90% of the respondents said that their monthly income was 200 dollars or less. It is particularly noteworthy that the respondents in Al-Hasakah, where fighting eased relatively early in the war, tended to have higher incomes.

Fig. 1: Monthly income



## (2) Evaluation of foreign aid

In the Syrian conflict, foreign countries provided aid to those forces they respectively supported. For this reason, how the respondents evaluated foreign aid is believed to be strongly affected by which side they supported in the war and who controlled the area where they lived. Since the survey was conducted in areas under the control of government forces and Kurdish forces, the respondents' evaluations of countries supporting the Syrian government were expected to be favorable, and their evaluations of countries supporting the enemy side to be unfavorable. In fact, countries earning the most favorable evaluations were Russia, Iran, and China, followed by Germany, Sweden, and Japan. The respondents' evaluations of the U.S., the U.K., France, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar were extremely unfavorable.

The wording of the question was as follows: "What is your evaluation of Japan and other nations listed below, based on the aid they have provided for the Syrian people?" The respondents were free to interpret what "aid" meant. The results showed that the respondents had a favorable evaluation of those nations that supported the Syrian government with political and military aid. The respondents' evaluation of China's "aid" was favorable, likely because it is widely known among the Syrian people that China exercises a veto in the U.N. Security Council against almost every resolution to attack the Syrian government, even though China has not engaged in direct military intervention.

On the other hand, the evaluations of Germany and Sweden were likely favorable because the countries were relatively accepting of Syrian migrants and refugees who have flooded into the EU since 2015. The respondents were also asked to list three foreign countries where they wanted to stay, in order of preference, if they chose "Very much want to stay" or "Want to stay" (in a foreign country) in response to another question. The top-five countries were Germany, the U.S., Sweden, Canada, and Japan. The fact that the respondents had a favorable evaluation of foreign aid from Germany and Sweden, and that these countries were ranked high among foreign countries in which the respondents wished to stay, indicated that the two countries had a good reputation among the Syrian people for their acceptance and treatment of migrants and refugees from Syria. As for Japan, although the Japanese government's policy on Syria is far from being friendly toward the Syrian government or Kurdish forces, the respondents gave a relatively favorable evaluation of Japan in terms of its aid to Syria and as a place they wished to stay. This is likely related to the fact that Japan's policy on Syria is not very well known among the Syrian people or that Japan has virtually no presence in the Syrian conflict.

Table 1: Syrian people's evaluation of foreign aid

	Highly favorable	Somewhat favorable	Neutral	Not very favorable	Not favorable at all	Don't know
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Jordan	5.1	6.5	12.9	14.5	56.3	4.8
Germany	12.3	15.7	22.1	19.6	26.1	4.2
Iran	36.4	32.5	14.6	6.3	7.3	2.8
U.K.	6.1	6.1	9	15.8	54.1	9
Russia	50.8	21.3	10.6	5.2	9.9	2.2
Saudi Arabia	6.7	6.6	7	6.3	70.1	3.3
Sweden	8.2	15.2	24.9	20.6	20.9	10.3
China	27.3	26.1	23.2	9.6	9.4	4.4
France	5.5	4.4	11.2	13.4	58.1	7.4
Qatar	5.1	5.5	8.5	6.1	72.2	2.7
Lebanon	6.9	10.5	28.1	23.2	26.8	4.5
U.S.	5.9	6.4	8.2	7.8	65.9	5.7
Japan	8.6	8	23.7	19.1	21.9	18.7

### (3) Trust in various sources of information

There is a well-established view that satellite broadcasting and social media played a major role in instigating and organizing protests in not just the Syrian conflict, but in the Arab Spring in general. Further, face-to-face surveys conducted by the author in Jordan (2014) and Sweden (2015 and 2016) revealed that many of the survey subjects used social media to communicate with their families and to decide on their destinations when migrating across borders. It was expected, therefore, that the Syrian people would have high levels of trust in non-Syrian broadcasting stations and social media.

Regarding this issue, respondents who “very much trusted” and “trusted” “satellite broadcasting from other Arab nations,” respectively, accounted for 12.7% and 23.8%. In contrast, those who “did not trust very much” and “did not trust at all” satellite broadcasting from other Arab nations accounted for 16.3% and 22.7%, respectively. In particular, over 90% of those who “did not trust very much” or “did not trust at all” such stations selected al-Arabiya (Saudi), an 33.4% selected al-Jazeera (Qatar) as a broadcasting station they did not trust. On the other hand, Lebanon's al-Manar and al-Mayadeen were ranked among the most trustworthy satellite stations. The views expressed by the stations in their coverage of

the Syrian conflict strongly influenced the respondents' choices.

The shares of those who "very much trusted" and "trusted" social media were respectively 8.5% and 19.7%, which was not very different from the corresponding shares for word of mouth, which were respectively 13.2% and 18.2%. The result shows that while the use of the Internet and cellphones is prevalent among Syrian people, conversations with families and friends are still considered to be more important sources of information.

While the overall share of respondents who trusted non-Syrian newspapers/magazines and broadcasting stations as information sources was low, this result is likely attributed to a decline in the availability of foreign reading materials, due to the falling standard of living and the deteriorating conditions, as well as the increase in the number of people who are unable to afford such materials, even if they are available.

#### (4) Factors people give serious consideration to before relocating within Syria or overseas

When people are deciding whether to move within or outside Syria, they give serious consideration to factors that include income and other economic factors, factors related to skills development such as education and professional training, and factors concerning the competence and policies of government institutions pertaining to welfare and other public services in the destination area. Security and safety are also very important factors in a war-ravaged country like Syria.

The survey results seem to indicate that "guarantee of security and safety" is the most important factor for domestic relocations, while "opportunities to improve the living environment" is the most important factor for overseas relocations. Further, many respondents also prioritized income levels, skills development and application, and social welfare programs. In this context, one cannot overlook the fact that over half of the respondents considered "living with families" as an important factor for both domestic and overseas relocations. In a face-to-face survey conducted by the author and others in Sweden, most respondents also chose the simplicity of procedures for living with families and the short wait period before they could live with their families as reasons for preferring Sweden as their destination. This point will likely inform discussions concerning policies for accepting not just Syrians, but migrants and refugees in general.

Fig. 2: Factors people give serious consideration to before relocating within Syria

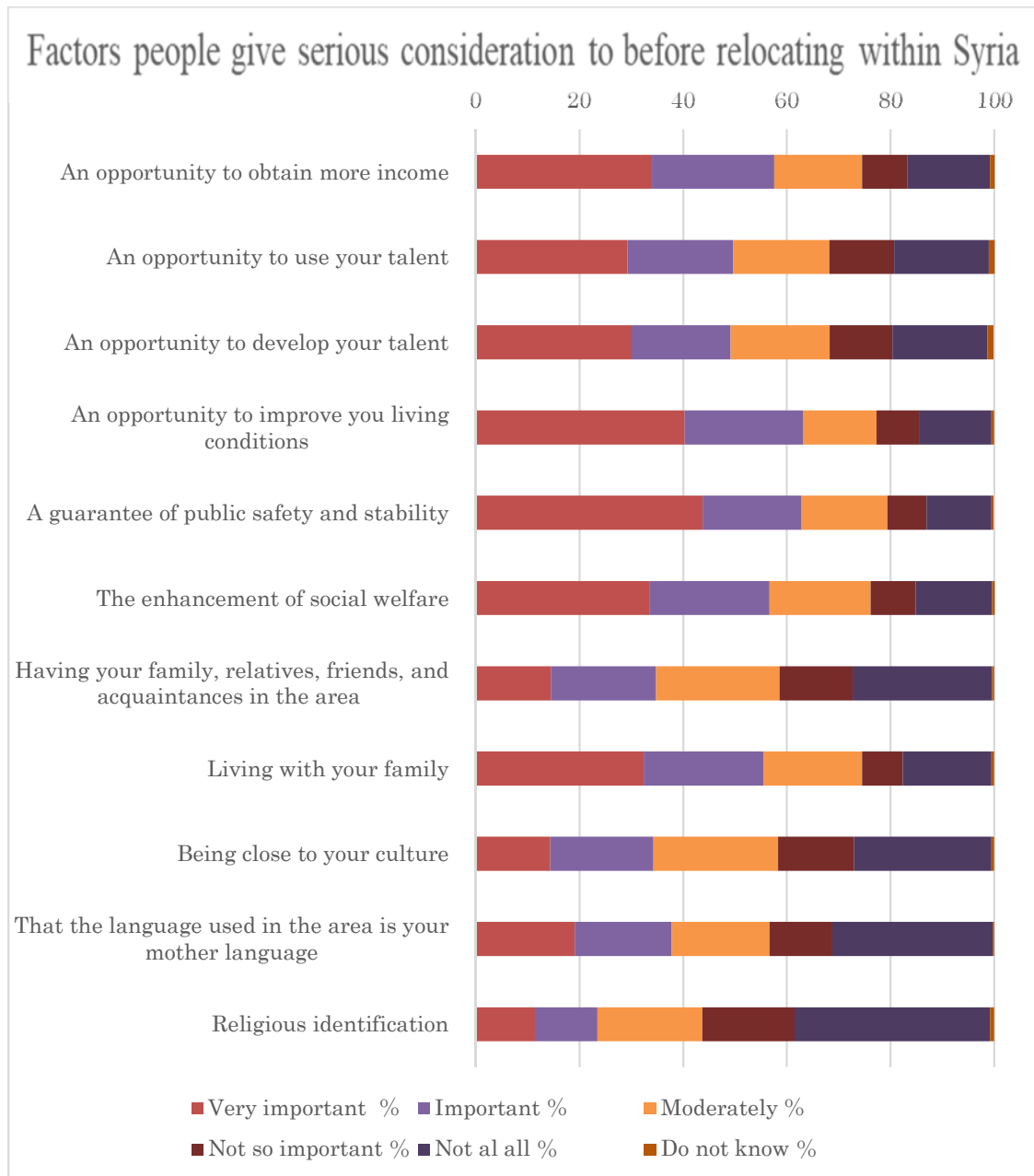
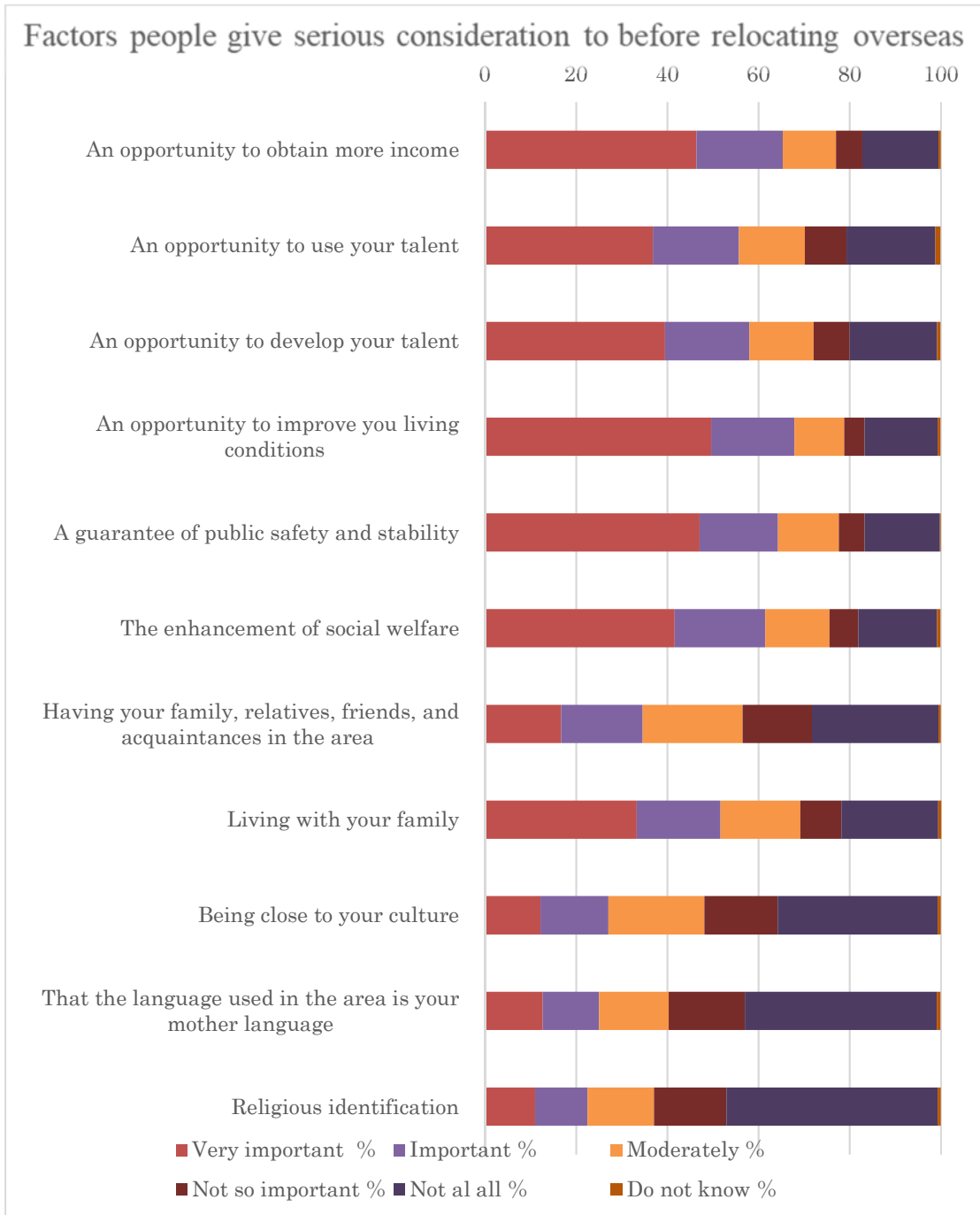


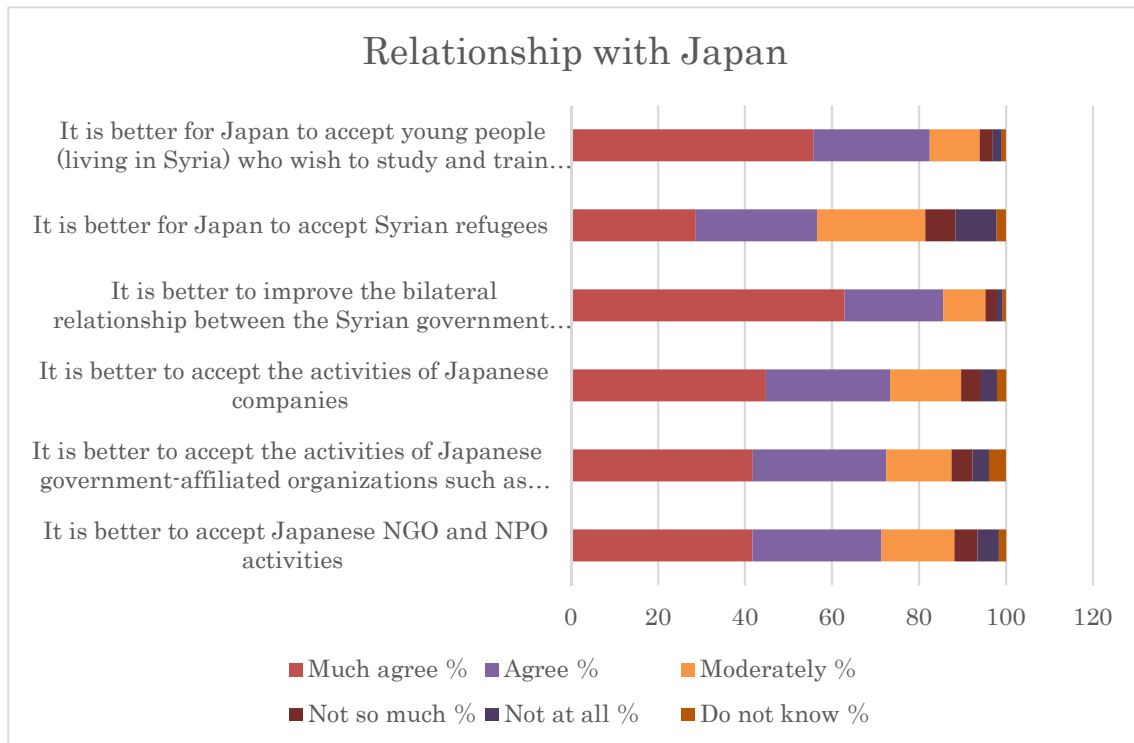
Fig. 3: Factors people give serious consideration to before moving outside of Syria





## (5) Relationship with Japan

Fig. 4: Views on Syria's relationship with Japan



With respect to Syria's relationship with Japan, it is noteworthy that a large number of respondents want Japan to accept those who wish to study or receive professional training, rather than increase the number of refugees the country is accepting. Many also support improving the bilateral relationship between the two nations by re-opening the embassies before accepting institutions such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and NGOs. The idea of linking foreign aid for Syria to improvements in bilateral relations has often been mentioned by President Assad in his interviews with news organizations from various nations, and his repeated statements may have affected public opinion. When it is assumed that the information provided by the Syrian government and news organizations has a strong influence on public opinion, part of this reason can be attributed to the fact that people now rely less frequently on non-Syrian news organizations as sources of information, concerning the decline of the standard of living, deteriorating conditions, and views taken in their coverage of the Syrian Civil War.

**Conclusion**

The survey revealed that Syrian people's standards of living are not declining steadily and that Syrian people are not simply running away from the war in a state of confusion,

but are considering various factors when relocating to a new area inside and outside the country. However, the results represent only part of the views held by people living in areas controlled by the government and Kurdish forces in Syria and are believed to be significantly different from the views of those living in neighboring countries as refugees, and those who were granted a visa to stay in wealthy nations like Western countries. Japan cannot overlook the daily lives of Syrian people and their views of the surrounding circumstances when discussing the Syrian conflict as well as its humanitarian aid and recovery assistance for Syria. We need to continue studying the views of Syrian people under various circumstances.

### **References**

“Middle East Public Opinion Surveys (Syria 2017)”: Results of Simple Tabulations

[https://cmeps-j.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/report\\_syria2017\\_eng.pdf](https://cmeps-j.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/report_syria2017_eng.pdf)

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