

# How Should One View the Current Status of Syria and the Awareness among Syrians?

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## I. “Middle East Public Opinion Poll (Syria 2016, 2017)”

The recapturing of areas occupied by the “Islamic State” in several regions of Iraq and Syria, including the Mosul recapture operation of the Iraq army, has clarified the signs of defeat of the faction. Amidst this, in both Iraq and Syria, all the parties in the conflict are strengthening their actions in anticipation of the “Islamic State.” Further, as the authors have pointed out from time to time, with respect to the Syrian conflict, various parties are acting in anticipation of the “post-conflict” situation in Syria. Issues such as the referendum problem that questions the independence of the Kurdistan district in Iraq, the YPG attacks in Syria by the Turkish forces, and the occupation of the Iraq border region by the American army are all results of decisions by each party on how to acquire an advantageous position in Iraq and Syria following the subjugation of the “Islamic State.”

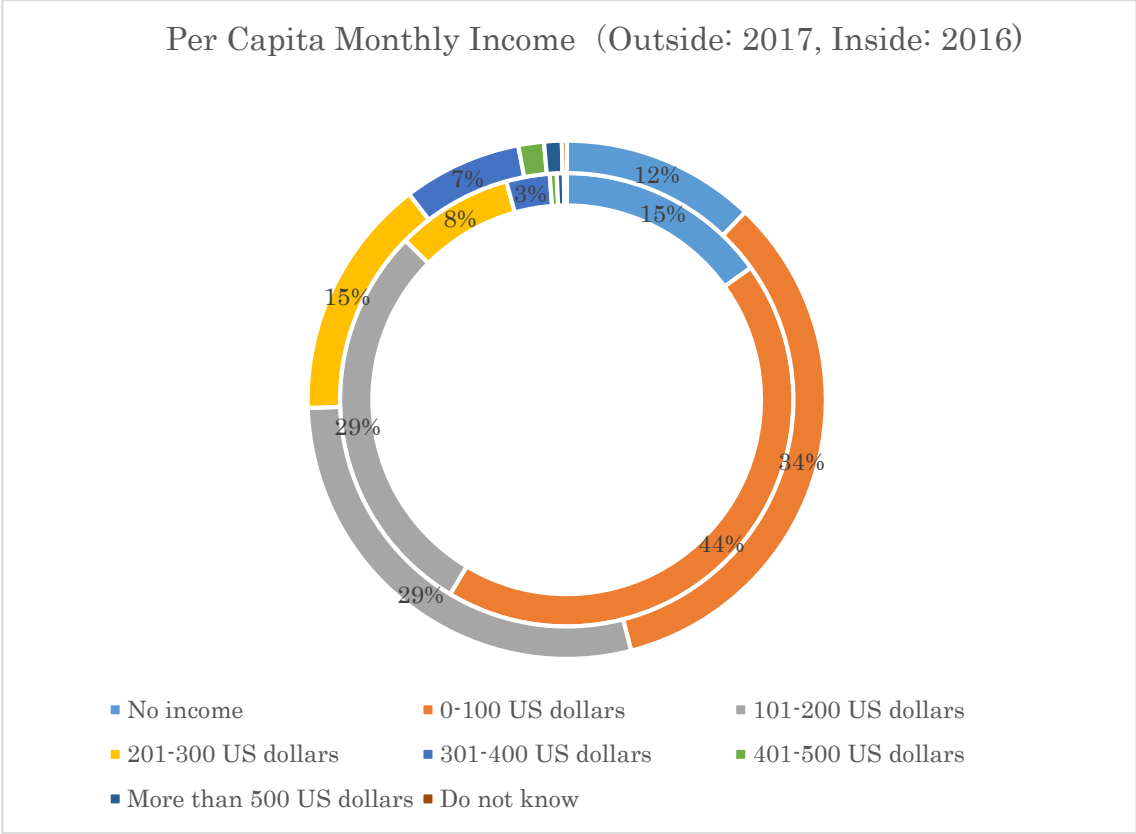
In such a situation, two important concerns are (1) how the general populace of Syria, which has been alienated from the development and outcomes of the Syrian conflict and has been suffering from the horrors of the conflict, will continue to live and (2) what kind of consideration is being given to the various problems surrounding this general populace. To ascertain the living conditions and awareness of the general Syrian populace, is it enough to “go into the field” in a confined place for a short period of time and merely listen to the opinions of a few people familiar to the investigators? There is a certain importance and significance in “going into the field”; however, it would be impossible to “represent the entire Syrian society” in limited experiences and human relationships. In the hopes of answering this query, a public opinion poll was conducted, targeting the general Syrian public living in Syria.

For this poll, the Syrian Opinion Center for Polls & Studies (SOCPS) provided full cooperation with respect to the implementation of the survey and the final adjustment of questionnaire contents, sampling, and interviewing of candidates, including data entry. The survey was conducted targeting 1500 people in Damascus Governorate and Rif Damascus Governorate, Homs, Latakia, Aleppo, and al-Hasakah governorates, representing each of the five regions of Syria. The implementation of the survey clarified that SOCPS had proposed a revision of the questionnaire according to their concerns and had added their own questions at certain places. Therefore, it is unlikely that the institutions conducting the poll or the Syrian authorities in the background had “prepared the responses in advance.” Further, it was a general poll, but it is precisely in a dictatorship that a survey becomes necessary to know the residents’ intentions because in a “dictatorship,” the authority cannot know public opinion through election results. Polls are conducted in many such cases. In this survey, the Syrian side particularly indicated interest in the items “satellite broadcasting stations that you trust/do not trust” and “things deemed important when moving outside Syria.” Please refer to the link at the end of the document for a simple tally report of survey results. Further, if one closely observes the collection of questions, one can see that the institutions conducting the poll or the respondents are strongly interested in the “religious conditions of the respondents” and more detailed responses were received by the authors than expected.

## II. Life of the Syrians

As a result of the conflict, social capital and production facilities have been destroyed, and numerous people who would be better involved in production activities are engaged in combat or have fled outside the country. Further, several Syrians are living in poverty and destitution. As seen in the graph, as per the 2016 and 2017 surveys, more than 70% of the people have a monthly income of less than 200 US dollars, revealing serious impoverishment among the populace.

On the other hand, the percentage of people with less than 200 dollars monthly income reduced from 88% in 2016 to 75% in 2017. Incomes have particularly improved in the al-Hasakah Governorate, where the fighting subsided relatively early. These results indicate that the current situation requires (1) expanding the regions without hostilities in a form conducive to economic activity and to the recovery of people’s lives and (2) a support that contributes to the improvement of people’s living conditions in addition to the humanitarian aid provided as a stopgap measure to cope with an emergency.



### III. Awareness among Foreign Countries

In the Syrian conflict, various countries have intervened with various intentions, and these interventions were termed “support” for Syria. The following Table 1. summarizes the responses to the question of how to evaluate the “support” from each country to the Syrians. The question of how to interpret the word “support” was left to each individual respondent, but people under the control of the Syrian government and the pro-government political force evaluated the countries highly supporting the government militarily and politically, such as Russia, Iran, and China. In contrast, the evaluation was low for countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar supporting the “dissident factions” and “radical armed Islamism” and for most of the Western countries.

On the other hand, Germany, Sweden, and Japan were placed in the relatively highly evaluated group. The policies of the governments of these supporting countries with respect to the Syrian conflict are not restricted to their friendly relations with the government and the pro-government forces but are interesting because they reflect the image held by Syrians people in those countries.

Furthermore, the people who responded as “really want to stay (abroad)” and “want to stay (abroad)” were requested to answer the following question: “Please name three foreign countries you would like to stay in, in the order of priority.” In response to this question, the top five responses were Germany, the United States, Sweden, Canada, and Japan. The “support” extended by both Germany and Sweden was highly evaluated, and the fact that both these countries topped the list of foreign countries in which people wanted to stay indicates that they have a good reputation among the Syrians, primarily for their acceptance and treatment of immigrants and refugees from Syria.

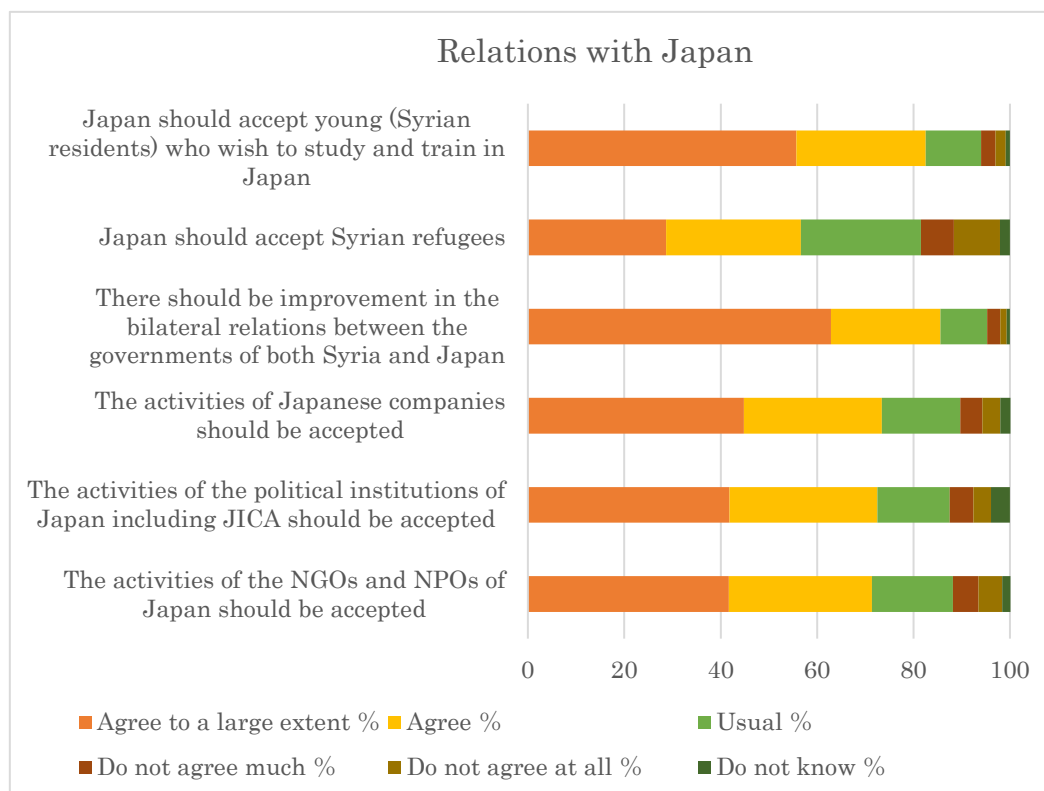
Table 1

	Evaluated highly	Evaluated	Usual	Not evaluated so well	Not evaluated well at all	Not known
	%	%	%	%	%	%
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
Britain	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
The United States	5.9	6.4	8.2	7.8	65.9	5.7
Japan	8.6	8	23.7	19.1	21.9	18.7

#### IV. Awareness regarding Syria's Relations with Japan

What then do the people of Syria think about the support from Japan or about Syria's relations with Japan? Table 2. provides the responses to the question "To what extent do you agree with the following views on the relationship between your country (Syria) and Japan, and about the social situation in your country?" Certainly, with respect to either opinion, the responses "agree to a great extent" and "agree" constituted the majority; however, it is interesting that (1) "more than the acceptance of refugees, it is about the provision of opportunities to study abroad and the vocational training that the expectations are high" and (2) "more than the acceptance of companies, aid organizations, and NGOs, there was stronger agreement for the view that it is better to improve bilateral relations between the two countries."

Table 2



President al-Assad and the Syrian government have repeatedly expressed that it is necessary to improve bilateral relations prior to involvement in aid and reconstruction in the Syrian territory. While this may have potentially influenced the answers of the respondents, several countries cut off diplomatic relations with Syria during the conflict period. On the other hand, it is also possible that in general, the Syrians are dissatisfied with attitude of foreign governments seeking Syrian cooperation in counter terrorism or migrant / refugees issue without improving bilateral relations. And Syrians may be dissatisfied to foreign countries which is attempting to be engaged to assistance and reconstruction without coordinating to Syrian government.

## V. Conclusion

Naturally, depending on the place of the implementation of the survey, including Syria, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and the various countries of the European Union (EU), differences are bound to be in the experiences and awareness of the Syrians living there. This within-Syria survey may not be sufficient to gain knowledge about the awareness of the entire Syrian population. Criticism about this aspect should rather be more along the lines of “the awareness of the Syrian people living outside Syria” and should not focus on “conducting a public opinion poll under the control of the Syrian dictatorship is meaningless”. Currently, a survey of the awareness among the Syrians living in Turkey is being prepared, and research is in progress on Sweden as well, which is a highly popular destination among residents of EU countries.

Further, the issue regarding how to analyze the information shown in the poll results is also important. In any kind of survey, it is natural for respondents to be influenced by the circumstances around them and to respond to something they are concerned about. It is important to analyze why this kind of response was given and not just interpret the numbers. To comment on Syria and the Syrians who cannot obtain sufficient information about on-site conditions due to the conflict, above all, the ability to think and analyze is particularly essential.

Finally, I would like to raise the question of what kind of attitude Japan and the Japanese should have in the future with respect to Syria and the Syrian conflict. Syria is not a large oil-producing country and is distant from Japan. In addition, considering the various restrictions imposed on the security of Japan and its diplomacy, there is little that can be done, with the end result being apathy. However, issues such as the bilateral relations between the two countries and the acceptance of study and training of Syrian refugees are not matters that are better left to the government agencies and institutions directly involved in them. They should instead be evaluated by the voters and investors of the general public in Japan that is essentially directing the government agencies and institutions. An attitude of “finding what to do” in Japan with regard to Syria, compelled by the demands of international organizations or foreign news media is not as effective as the idea of what citizens “want to do.” I hope that this series of public opinion polls will provide hints in that direction.

## References

[Simple Tally Report of “Middle East Public Opinion Poll \(Syria 2017\)”](#).

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