

# The Reality That Will Enable the Return of Northern Residents

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On March 1, 2025, residents of northern Israel were expected to return to their homes. However, they have also been exposed daily to reports of mutual violations of the ceasefire agreement, both by Israel and Hezbollah, as well as the return of South Lebanon residents to their homes—some even carrying Hezbollah flags and pictures of Nasrallah. Residents with children found the return date problematic, as it required transferring their children to a different educational framework mid-year. Additionally, the return date marked the termination of the financial grants, which the residents consider a threat. From their perspective, after months of neglect, they are now being forced to return under conditions that are not optimal, while the responsible authorities refuse to fulfill even minimal responsibilities toward them.

This article examines the gap between the perceptions of government and military authorities and those of the evacuated residents of the north by focusing on the unprecedented crisis of trust that began on the morning of October 7, 2023. This crisis intensified during the war due to the inadequate government response given to the evacuees; only in September 2024 did the government and the IDF add the safe return of northern residents to the declared objectives of the war. This paper is based on field research that included a focus group of northern residents, a targeted survey of evacuated and non-evacuated residents of the north, in-depth interviews, and monitoring of the social media discourse. The findings confirm assumptions about existing gaps in military, social, and economic aspects. The paper concludes with recommendations that aim to narrow the gaps and are essential for ensuring the prosperity of Israel's northern communities after the war.

For a decade, northern residents had been preparing for a scenario that ultimately materialized in Hamas's attack on the western Negev on October 7, 2023. When the scale of the disaster in the south became clear, many residents in northern Israel did not wait for military or state directives and evacuated on their own initiative. It was only on October 16—after most residents of border-adjacent communities had evacuated independently—that the IDF and the National Emergency Management Authority announced an evacuation plan for 29 northern communities within two kilometers of the Lebanon border, relocating them to state-subsidized guesthouses. Government Resolution 975, dated October 18, 2023, retroactively validated the evacuation.

A few days later, on October 22, the evacuation range was expanded to four kilometers, and an additional 15 communities—including the city of Kiryat Shmona—were evacuated by government decision. In total, across both evacuation waves, 61,800 residents from 43

northern communities were displaced. In addition, thousands evacuated independently, without a government mandate, and therefore did not receive grants or benefits from the government.

During the first months of the war, military and government officials frequently set target dates for the residents' return to their communities. However, these dates were perceived as unrealistic and disconnected from reality, especially as fighting in the north continued to escalate. By September 2024, the conflict had intensified significantly, culminating in the IDF launching ground operations in Lebanon by the end of the month. Senior military officers and political figures then declared that the new security reality would soon, or was expected to, allow for the residents' return within a relatively short time frame. In late November 2024, a ceasefire agreement was signed between Israel and Lebanon, further amplifying discussions on the subject.

Despite the significant military gains in the north, a deep and unresolved gap remains between government and military officials' views on the conditions necessary for the safe return of residents and the perspectives of the residents themselves. This document presents the findings of field research conducted to assess whether such a gap indeed exists and offers recommendations to bridge it, ensuring the safe return of residents to their homes. To achieve this, surveys were conducted among northern residents, supplemented by a focus group, in-depth interviews, and an analysis of the social media discourse.

### **Background Issue—The Crisis of Trust**

There is no dispute that the failures of October 7 triggered an unprecedented crisis of trust between Israeli citizens and the IDF, which failed in its fundamental mission—protecting Israel's civilians. However, among northern residents, this crisis has been particularly severe, as it stems not only from the failures of October 7 but also from developments before and after that day.

At its core, this crisis is rooted in the widespread feeling that it was mere luck that prevented Hezbollah's Radwan Force from storming northern communities. The fighting in the north exposed that the defense establishment, led by the IDF, had allowed the Radwan Force to arm and strengthen itself to dangerous levels near the border fence. Meanwhile, warnings from local residents about this threat were dismissed as exaggerated hysteria. The discovery of a cross-border tunnel—despite repeated military assurances that no such tunnels existed—further undermined trust, even though the IDF claimed it was a single tunnel that was blocked on one side.

This crisis escalated in September 2024 when the safe return of northern residents was formally incorporated to the war's declared objectives. Northern residents felt that there was one standard for Tel Aviv and another for them. Moreover, the civilian handling of the evacuees during the war was inadequate; the body overseeing northern rehabilitation suffered from constant turnover of officials and project managers, ultimately proving to be ineffective.

While the IDF's significant military achievements in the northern campaign have greatly contributed to strengthening security and partially restoring trust, they are not enough to eliminate the deep crisis that endures. This crisis remains a central theme in conversations with residents regarding their return home.

### **The Military Aspect**

[A survey conducted by the Eastern Galilee Regional Knowledge Center](#) in February 2024 found that for residents who left their homes during the war, the most significant factor in deciding whether to return is their sense of security and safety. However, in focus groups conducted for this research, a recurring sentiment among residents of various communities is that they no longer seek a mere *sense* of security—they demand *actual* security and safety.

There is a substantial gap between the operational reality on the ground and the residents' understanding of the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Lebanon. Access to the official text of the agreement is problematic, as it is available only in English. As a result, many residents are unfamiliar with its full details and feel forced to make decisions about returning home amid total uncertainty. Each resident must interpret the situation with Hezbollah independently and act based on his or her personal assessment. The ambiguity surrounding the agreement—together with the gap between residents' perceptions of security and the actual security situation—is reflected in the findings of a survey conducted by the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) between November 27 and December 1, 2024. According to the survey, a vast majority—about 70%—of respondents opposed the agreement, with 43% strongly opposing it and 27% somewhat opposing it.

Despite the crisis of trust, many residents still acknowledge that their security ultimately depends on the IDF. One resident stated, "There is only one IDF—this is what we have, and we believe in it." Another resident added, "There is the state, and there is the people. The state failed—we have no trust in it. But trust in the people is stronger than ever, and the army is the people's army. We are the ones serving there." This sentiment was reinforced by the immediate mobilization of reservists from northern communities on October 7.

At the same time, the IDF's conduct has also further weakened trust in both the state and the military. Many residents view the communication of military operations as misleading. For example, just before the ceasefire, residents recounted that a colonel-level commander assured them via a community platform that they could safely return home. However, on that very same day, the community was subjected to heavy rocket fire, directly contradicting the commander's assurance.

The INSS survey found that 36% of respondents identified the threat of a ground invasion as the most significant factor influencing their decision to return to the north. Its impact may be even greater, as indicated by responses in the focus group on the issue of the hostages. Participants expressed deep concern that civilians like them, who had lived or stayed along the border, had been kidnapped and many were still in captivity; this reinforced their fears that a similar scenario could occur if they returned to live on the northern border. In addition, some residents cited the continued captivity of many hostages as one of the main reasons they were delaying their return home.

Trust was further eroded by the military's repositioning of outposts. While settlements remained on the front line, many military outposts were moved back even before October 7, although some of these outposts have since been re-manned. Military presence remains a key factor in restoring trust: 90% of the survey respondents stated that a military presence in the border area would somewhat or greatly improve their willingness to return. However, 6% said that it would not improve their chances much, and 4% stated that it would not improve their chances at all. Additionally, 78% of respondents indicated that a military presence within the northern settlements would somewhat or greatly improve their chances of returning. Another 12% said it would not improve their chances much, and 9% said it would not improve their chances at all.

In addition to a military presence, the respondents also mentioned the IDF's role in enforcing the ceasefire agreement. Many agreed with statements that if Israel returns to a policy of containment, the crisis of trust will deepen. A similar conclusion is also reflected in the INSS survey. In response to the question, "If you were sure that the terms of the agreement would be enforced, would you return or not return to live in your settlement?" 21% said they were sure they would return, while 45% thought they would return. Another 15% indicated they would not return, and 9% were certain they would not return.

A notable difference in responses emerged between those with minor children, those without children, and those with adult children. Among respondents with minor children, 21% were certain they would return, and 38% thought they would return. Among those without children, 17% were sure they would return, while 53% thought they would. Among those with adult children, 36% were certain they would return, while 40% thought they would return. However, some residents fear that, given the current political reality, they will be forced to leave their homes in the north again within a few years.

Regarding the prolonged presence of military forces in a "security zone" in southern Lebanon, responses in the INSS survey differed from those in the focus group. While the focus group participants stated that the cost of such a move would outweigh its benefits if casualties were high, the INSS survey results showed that most respondents agreed with the statement that "it is impossible to protect the residents of the north without a broad and permanent IDF presence in a security zone in southern Lebanon." A majority of 61% strongly agreed, while another 27% agreed somewhat. Only 6% somewhat disagreed, and 2% completely disagreed. Participants in the focus group also stressed the importance of a buffer zone to prevent the return of residents from villages near the border in southern Lebanon.

Now, three months since the ceasefire came into effect, the situation remains fragile. Daily media reports highlight mutual violations of the agreement alongside the return of southern Lebanon residents to their homes—some carrying Hezbollah flags and images of Nasrallah. Given the concerns raised by the focus group participants, the security conditions that the northern residents had hoped for have yet to materialize, and it is doubtful whether they ever will.

In summary, security is a necessary condition for the residents' return, yet achieving it in a way that inspires trust among northern residents remains a distant goal. Special attention

should be given to a central and recurring claim: since October 7, a “sense of security” is no longer enough—rather, residents of the north demand tangible security. Therefore, the recommendations presented below focus on concrete measures that will ensure both real security and a sense of security for the residents.

### **The Social Aspect**

Testimonies from residents highlight a disconnect between the media discourse, the state’s proposed solutions, and the social issues that concern them the most.

Focus group participants emphasized that longstanding internal divisions among northern communities—such as those between Kiryat Shmona, moshavim, and kibbutzim—have deepened during the war. A new divide has also emerged between evacuees and non-evacuees, described by residents as the distinction between “those whom the state took care of and those it did not.” Residents criticized the aid distribution system, which is based on proximity to the border, as flawed and unfair. This system has created inequities, comparisons, and even tensions within families. For example, while residents of Beit Hillel, located five kilometers from the border, received assistance, residents of Kfar Szold, just half a kilometer further away—and not evacuated as a result—did not receive aid, despite suffering from the same security threats and rocket fire. Some communities that fell through the cracks of the aid system are now in poor condition, and many residents believe resources should be directed toward those who remained, rather than only those who were evacuated.

Demographic characteristics add another layer of social complexity and shape the needs of each community, even as both the media and the state treat all northern residents as a homogeneous group. Focus group participants pointed out that settlements such as Yiron require tailored measures to bring back young people; in Kiryat Shmona, for example, the demographic issue may be less relevant.

Moreover, within each settlement, the needs of returning residents vary by demographic characteristics. In some areas, the first wave of returning residents consists of elderly individuals and families without children, who plan to return once essential services—such as grocery stores and health clinics—reopen. The second wave, mainly families with children, faces greater challenges due to the complexities of reopening schools and daycare centers. In one settlement, it was reported that a significant number of schools and kindergartens lack bomb shelters, prompting some families to delay their return until at least June 2025.

These concerns align with the findings of the INSS survey, which indicate that 81% of evacuees believe that improving protective measures—such as providing shelters and fortifying educational institutions—would somewhat or greatly improve their chances of returning, while 10% felt it would have little improvement, and 9% saw no effect. Residents emphasize that bringing back families with young children is the main challenge.

According to data from the Eastern Galilee Regional Knowledge Center, all evacuated residents believe that investing in quality teaching staff, emotional support, social skills, and children’s resilience would encourage families to return. However, the current reality on the ground differs significantly, requiring urgent attention.

Testimonies from the focus group participants reveal concerns about widening educational gaps between students who had previously studied in the same classroom before the evacuation—a problem attributed to inadequate governmental response. Residents from communities where students had attended schools in nearby settlements—such as Alma, Kerem Ben Zimra, and Dalton, whose students study in Yiron—reported that no official educational solution was provided. Instead, these communities were forced to create their own learning centers, whose effectiveness remains questionable, according to interviewees.

Additionally, focus group participants noted that key elements of community and belonging—essential for maintaining a stable educational environment—have been severely disrupted. A teacher from one of the communities described the relocation of schools as harmful to the students' connection to their surroundings, an important factor in community resilience. She explained that students who were sent to schools for evacuees in other towns have struggled significantly. This testimony aligns with findings from the Eastern Galilee Regional Knowledge Center survey, which found that 66% of parents who were evacuated reported emotional distress in their children.

Following the ceasefire agreement, students faced yet another social upheaval, as reflected in a survey conducted in late [November 2024 by the Eastern Galilee Regional Knowledge Center](#). According to the survey, 55% of evacuated parents reported a decline in their children's social well-being, while 43% reported worsening behavior. This additional disruption stems from the fact that some parents now wish to return to their former homes, while others have settled elsewhere—finding jobs, enrolling their children in new schools, and no longer planning to return. This divide may explain the split responses in the INSS survey, where 50% of respondents said that resuming school operations would somewhat or greatly influence their decision on when to return to their settlements, while 45% responded that it would have little or no impact. A similar divide was found in the Eastern Galilee Regional Knowledge Center survey regarding the effect of discontinuing educational and cultural infrastructure in the host cities; a total of 42% said this factor would somewhat or greatly influence their decision to return, while 54% said it would have little or no influence.

Additionally, special attention must be given to the situation of Druze residents in the north. Residents described conditions in Majdal Shams as dire, noting that no governing body is effectively managing the complex crisis there. A local resident, a friend of one of the focus group participants, described the community's feeling of double discrimination, stating, "I thought we were being mistreated because we are Arabs, but it turns out it's because we're from the north."

### **The Economic Aspect**

According to data from the Ministry of Labor and Welfare and the Central Bureau of Statistics, the north was already economically weaker than the rest of the country before the war. The employment rate in the north, which had dropped significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic, remained below the national average at the end of 2022. Additionally, the average income in the region was approximately 30% lower than the national average. The proportion of self-employed individuals in the north was also relatively high compared to the rest of the

country, as was the share of workers in the tourism sector—one of the industries severely affected by the war.

Despite these economic challenges, before the war, many northern residents believed the region was on a path of growth. This perception was reflected in focus group discussions held during the war, as well as in in-depth conversations with local stakeholders. Participants noted that in the years leading up to the war, the region had experienced demographic growth, which contributed to the development of small businesses, a shift toward advanced agriculture, growth in tourism, and industrial expansion. All these fostered an entrepreneurial ecosystem, particularly in food-tech and agro-tech.

However, the war—and particularly the evacuations—severely disrupted the region’s economic and employment situation. The direct consequences included extensive damage to property and infrastructure. In addition, the initial security tension and subsequent fighting devastated the tourism sector, a major source of income for many in the region. This was compounded by the loss of income sources due to evacuation and the depletion of human capital in some workplaces.

In [the survey conducted by the Eastern Galilee Regional Knowledge Center](#) in February 2024, 73% of self-employed respondents and 39% of salaried respondents reported that their financial situation was much worse than before October 7. Nearly half of the self-employed (47%) reported a severe financial hit—losing more than 51% of their income. A November 2024 survey by the same center showed a similar trend: 31% of residents evacuated by the state reported that their economic situation had deteriorated compared to before the war. Among those who self-evacuated, this figure rose to 41%, and among those who remained in their homes, it was 52%.

However, the war did not affect all residents equally, and there were significant differences between those evacuated by government order and those who either self-evacuated without state compensation or chose to remain in their communities. Insights from the focus group and in-depth interviews indicate that state-evacuated residents experienced significantly less financial harm. In fact, some even improved their economic situation, enabling them to pay off debts, close loans, and purchase items they could previously not afford. However, concerns emerged that once government aid ends, these residents may struggle to readjust to life in their communities after becoming accustomed to a relatively higher standard of living.

By contrast, residents who were not evacuated by the state—whether they remained in their homes or self-evacuated—suffered significant financial losses. Focus group participants highlighted the economic damage sustained by the “eight kibbutzim” (Gonen, Shamir, Kfar Szold, Lehavot HaBashan, Neot Mordechai, Amir, Kfar Blum, Sde Nehemia) as a prime example. These communities were not evacuated but still experienced severe economic hardship. Some participants expressed resentment toward both the state and those who received compensation for being evacuated, feeling frustrated that some were taken care of while others were not. While the official evacuation criteria were ostensibly based on proximity to the border, many residents felt the process was arbitrary.

In addition to financial losses, returning residents—both in the focus group and in social media discussions—have described widespread neglect and severe property and infrastructure damage, requiring substantial investment for repairs. The full extent of these damages remains unknown, making it difficult to assess the economic implications. Discussions in regional and evacuee social media groups frequently revolve around these issues, with many residents seeking and offering advice on how to cope with the damage and navigate the bureaucratic challenges of obtaining government aid.

Findings from the focus group and surveys indicate that infrastructure investment matters more than financial grants in determining when residents will return. According to the INSS survey, the most influential government action was large-scale state investment in rebuilding, job creation, and a governmental plan for prosperity in the north. A majority of 75% of respondents said such investment would somewhat or greatly influence their decision on when to return, while 10% said it would not influence them much, and 12% said it would not influence them at all. Similarly, the Eastern Galilee Regional Knowledge Center survey found that tax breaks for the self-employed and attracting large employers were seen as the most significant incentives for encouraging people to stay or return to the north—further highlighting the need for long-term investments that will revitalize the region.

This sentiment was also echoed in the focus group discussions, where some participants noted that despite the war’s destruction, it also presents an opportunity. While the north suffered significant damage, the crisis also provides a chance to rebuild and create a strategic development plan for the coming years—one that includes higher education, economic growth, and industrial development. Participants emphasized the need for a long-term solution that fosters the region’s growth rather than temporary “band-aid” measures that merely compensate for damages without addressing underlying infrastructure issues. Many returning residents seek more than just restoring what existed before—especially after experiencing the conveniences of life in central Israel and realizing the stark disparities between the regions.

Regarding financial grants, the INSS survey indicates that incentives are more effective than penalties. When asked how various government actions would influence their decision to return, 67% of respondents said that government-provided return grants would somewhat or greatly influence their decision. Another 15% said grants would not influence them much, and 16% said grants would not influence them at all. Additionally, 59% of respondents said that ending economic support for evacuees would somewhat or greatly influence their decision to return, while 15% said it would not influence them much, and 21% said it would not influence them at all.

In-depth interviews revealed that incentives and penalties would affect those with limited options, but they are unlikely to influence the economically strong population—the very group whose return is essential for regional development, particularly in industries such as food-tech and agro-tech. Without this population, a negative cycle could emerge, where employers lack incentives to invest in the area, small businesses struggle due to a lack of customers, and economic recovery stalls.

Many focus group participants expressed skepticism about financial grants, questioning what would actually be given and whether they might later be required to repay the funds. This distrust stems from both a general lack of confidence in the state and its institutions and past instances of government mishandling of crises. Participants also noted that they were unaware of any economic plan designed to support businesses. Given past precedents, many fear that financial assistance received now might need to be paid back in the future. Discussions in social media groups also reflect concerns that grants might be used as a means of coercion—enticing some residents to return prematurely and, in turn, pressuring others to follow suit once the first wave of returnees “give in” to these financial incentives.

### **Policy Recommendations**

#### **The Military Aspect**

Territorial defense should be based on the IDF’s combat doctrine rather than relying solely on a physical barrier, which is inevitably vulnerable to breaches (as seen in the south) and fails to ensure real security or a sense of security for residents. Both the survey conducted among northern residents and the focus group discussions indicated that the threat of a ground invasion is a key factor in whether to return to their communities. Given this, regional divisions must be equipped with sufficient capabilities to defend the border and settlements, even in the event of a surprise attack, without relying on immediate reinforcements from general headquarters. Their firepower, intelligence, and ground forces must be capable of maintaining a strong defense that effectively deters enemies from attacking.

Furthermore, residents expressed concerns that a return to Israel’s policy of containment would once again erode their trust in the IDF and the state. To prevent this, Israel must adopt a consistent, clear, and uncompromising policy against any violation or “spillover” incident. Any unresolved security threat within Lebanon—whether by the Lebanese army or an international force—should be addressed directly by the IDF without limitations on the scope or intensity of its operations. A balance must be maintained between firm military action against violations and ensuring a stable security environment to restore public trust.

Additionally, to create sufficient conditions for residents’ return—without maintaining a permanent presence inside Lebanon—the IDF must increase its forces along the border and in settlements, at least for the first year following any agreement. At the same time, local emergency response teams in communities should be reinforced.

Given the widespread distrust and limited public knowledge of military operations, the Northern Command and regional divisions must engage with residents transparently—clearly presenting the security situation and actively involving communities in military actions.

#### **The Socioeconomic Aspect**

This crisis must be viewed as an opportunity for a major transformation. Residents will not settle for merely restoring the status quo; they expect their return home to serve as a catalyst for advancing the entire northern region, transforming it into a leading area in Israel while overcoming past social divisions—such as those between kibbutz members and city residents. It is recommended to evaluate whether a dedicated administrative body for the north should

be established or whether it would be more effective to empower existing authorities with resources and decision-making authority.

Each sector and settlement must have a tailored plan that addresses its specific challenges and is developed with full community involvement. Given the diverse characteristics of the different settlements, a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to succeed. Therefore, extensive planning is needed to assess the needs of all the communities, including those that were not evacuated or self-evacuated, in order to develop solutions that bridge the gaps between them and those evacuated by government order.

The development of these plans should be done in collaboration with residents and with the involvement of the “fourth sector”—civil society initiatives, whose resilience was demonstrated on October 7 and beyond. Research shows that rehabilitation efforts are more successful when communities actively participate. Engaging residents in the planning process will help rebuild their trust in state institutions and restore their sense of control over their lives, which was deeply disrupted by the prolonged evacuation and lack of agency over their circumstances.

The plan should focus on improving life in the north as a whole, rather than solely on facilitating the return of residents, particularly given the gaps in the quality of life compared to central Israel that were exposed during the crisis. A special emphasis should be placed on rebuilding communities and rehabilitating the education system as key pillars of community life. Given the alarming data on the students’ social and emotional well-being, strengthening educational staff in the north and equipping them with trauma-response training is crucial. Additionally, as residents have noted, revitalizing schools and community life can also serve as a means to foster greater cohesion among different communities in the region.

To revitalize the regional economy, investment should focus on bringing back industries and companies that relocated southward while creating a favorable environment for renewed economic growth. In addition to investments in industry and incentives for industry, solutions should also be developed to restore tourism and support small businesses.

A suitable model for return grants should be designed with the understanding that many families with children will choose to complete the current school year in their current locations before returning to the north to avoid further disruption for their children. As residents pointed out, the return of young families is a cornerstone of regional recovery, and penalizing those who delay their return until the school year ends could undermine this goal. It is also recommended to offer personalized guidance to grant recipients to encourage the responsible use of resources to support their long-term financial recovery.

## **Conclusion**

This field research aimed to assess whether a significant gap exists between the perceptions of government and military officials regarding the conditions necessary for evacuated residents to return to their homes in the north and the perspectives of the residents themselves. The findings reveal substantial disparities across military-security, civilian, and economic aspects. Based on the research, several recommendations have been formulated

for military and civilian action. Implementing these recommendations will help restore the residents' trust in the military and the state, ensure both actual security and a sense of security, and ultimately facilitate residents' return and the rehabilitation of communities in the region.

- **Military sphere**—A significant gap exists between the operational reality as presented by military officials and the residents' perceptions. Many residents also view the military's communication of changes and developments as misleading. The presence of IDF forces in settlements and along the border is essential to restoring trust. A key insight is that if Israel returns to a containment policy regarding the security threat from Lebanon, the crisis of trust in the military and the state will deepen.
- **Social sphere**—The war and the evacuations exacerbated existing social divisions, widening the gap between evacuated and non-evacuated populations, particularly among those who received little to no assistance. Furthermore, despite considerable diversity among settlements and communities, government responses have treated the "northern residents" as a single, homogeneous group. The research highlights the critical need to rehabilitate the education system and address the unique difficulties faced by Arab and Druze communities, particularly in the Druze villages of the Golan Heights.
- **Economic sphere**—The economic disparities between the north and central Israel, which predated the war, have widened significantly. The sense of economic growth that prevailed before the war has disappeared, reducing residents' motivation to remain in the north. Moreover, government-ordered evacuees suffered less economic damage, with some even improving their financial situation, while those who were not evacuated or who self-evacuated faced severe financial hardship. Financial grants alone are unlikely to have a major impact on residents' decisions to return compared to long-term investments in the region's economic development. Additionally, widespread distrust has led to concerns that grant recipients may eventually be required to repay the funds, further complicating efforts to encourage a return to the north.

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