

GILVEGÖZÜ GÜMRÜK KAPISI

# RETURN PRACTICES OF SYRIANS IN TÜRKİYE

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**Humanitarian  
Consultancy  
Group**

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**Humanitarian Consulting Group (HCG)** was founded in 2023. The HCG is a dynamic consultancy connecting civil society, municipalities, and the private sector with innovative solutions for crisis-affected regions, including Türkiye, Syria, and crisis-affected regions. Our team of seasoned professionals blends global expertise with local knowledge to deliver data-driven, ethical, and impactful programs that inform the decision-making of the actors and amplify the voices of those often unheard, ensuring their needs and perspectives shape more inclusive and effective solutions.

HCG collaborates with governments, NGOs, and communities to strengthen resilience, optimize disaster response, and drive sustainable development. By integrating local perspectives, we ensure our solutions are practical, culturally relevant, and grounded in lived realities. Trusted across diverse regions, HCG empowers communities through tailored, effective interventions that foster ownership and long-term impact.

**Innovation Consulting & Solutions (ICS)** is ICS is a leading international development consultancy providing humanitarian leadership and analytics capacities combined with technology-driven solutions for the humanitarian, public, and private sectors. Headquartered in the UK, ICS operates through regional offices in the UK and Türkiye, with project offices in Syria, and a network of experts across Lebanon, Jordan, Afghanistan, and Yemen.

ICS specializes in institutional capacity building, Third-Party Monitoring (TPM), independent evaluations and research, data analytics, and digital transformation. By integrating AI-powered analytics and custom ICT solutions, ICS enhances efficiency, transparency, and impact. We are also deeply committed to gender equality and inclusive development, a vision championed by our female-led leadership.

# Executive Summary

This report examines the potential for Syrian refugees in Türkiye to return to their homeland following a political transition in Syria after the collapse of the Assad regime. The study seeks to provide actionable insights into the challenges and opportunities of voluntary, dignified, and safe returns. Using a mixed-methods approach, the analysis draws on 20 key informant interviews with key stakeholders and 320 surveys conducted across 13 provinces of Türkiye to capture diverse refugee perspectives, including those of vulnerable groups.

The findings highlight a complex landscape. While 58% of refugees express willingness to return if safety, governance, and infrastructure improve, 31% remain undecided, and 9% refuse due to insecurity, inadequate services, and political uncertainty. Vulnerable groups such as women-headed households, children, and minorities face additional barriers, lack of legal documentation, access to basic services, and heightened safety risks. Economic hardship and rising anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye serve as push factors, while emotional ties, job opportunities, and hopes for political stability act as pull factors. Reintegration challenges, including destroyed infrastructure, economic instability, property disputes, and strained community relations, remain significant.

The findings highlight a complex relationship between integration, social cohesion, and return intentions. High Turkish literacy and children's school enrollment indicate integration to an extent. However, anti-refugee sentiment and economic difficulties in Türkiye influence return decisions.

Notably, 81% of respondents perceive stable or improving societal attitudes toward Syrians since December 8, 2024. Among them, 37% report positive changes. This shift is linked to recent return movements and intensified public discourse about return. Media narratives often frame large-scale returns as imminent or inevitable. As a result, temporary acceptance may replace long-term inclusion, pressuring refugees into premature or involuntary decisions.

If large-scale returns do not happen as expected, public concerns and expectations may evolve. This could lead to renewed social tensions and worsening attitudes toward Syrians. The sustainability of current public sentiment depends on how return policies unfold and whether they align with reality and expectations.

The report outlines four potential scenarios for refugee returns: an optimistic scenario of structured and supported returns, a moderate scenario of gradual and uneven returns, a pessimistic scenario of premature and unsafe returns, and a status quo scenario of prolonged stalemate. Each scenario highlights the critical role of safety, infrastructure rehabilitation, economic opportunities, and political stability in shaping outcomes.

To address these challenges, the report presents targeted recommendations for donors, policymakers, implementing partners, and coordination mechanisms. For donors, sustained long-term funding is essential to support services for Syrians in Türkiye while enabling voluntary and dignified returns. Investments should prioritize safety, infrastructure, and economic recovery in return areas, ensuring access to housing, healthcare, and livelihoods. Funding must also enhance cross-border coordination, support humanitarian logistics, and be equitable and transparent for both international and local actors.

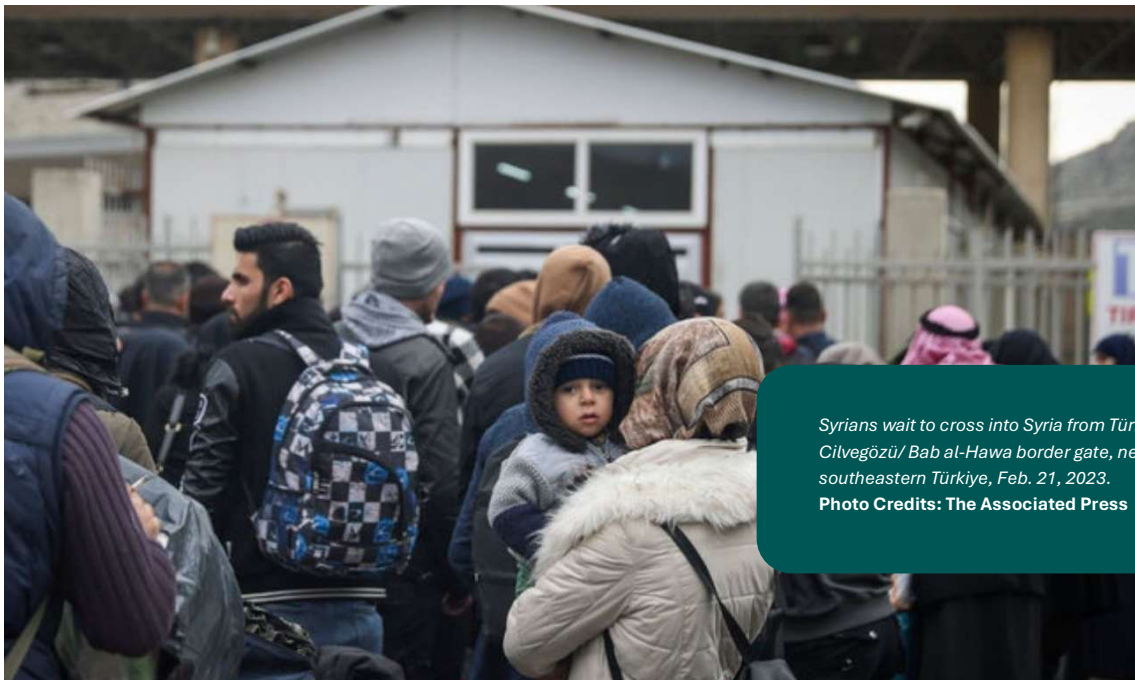
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For policymakers, ensuring legal protection and stability for Syrians in Türkiye is critical, including maintaining Temporary Protection Status until safe reintegration is possible. A phased reintegration plan should prioritize secure return zones with essential services. Strengthening cross-border coordination with international and local actors is key to monitoring security conditions, ensuring safe returns, and preventing human rights violations. Policymakers must also align efforts with donors to close funding gaps.

For implementing partners, priorities include reconstruction, legal aid, psychosocial support, and assistance for vulnerable groups. Partnerships with international agencies should ensure safety standards, while mental health services, property restitution, and employment support are crucial for reintegration. A gender-sensitive approach must be integrated into all return programs. Active participation in coordination platforms is necessary to maximize efficiency and impact.

For coordination mechanisms, an inter-agency platform should track voluntary returns, infrastructure readiness, and reintegration progress. Unified safety guidelines will ensure consistency and reduce service gaps. Transparent feedback mechanisms for Syrians in Türkiye and returnees in Syria are needed to ensure accountability. Strengthening cross-border humanitarian logistics will enable timely aid delivery and sustainable reintegration.

A coordinated, inclusive, and adequately resourced approach is essential to facilitating voluntary, dignified, and sustainable returns while alleviating socioeconomic pressures in Türkiye. Upholding refugee rights, security, and dignity will be crucial for fostering long-term regional stability.



*Syrians wait to cross into Syria from Türkiye at the Cilvegözü/ Bab al-Hawa border gate, near Hatay, southeastern Türkiye, Feb. 21, 2023.*

**Photo Credits: The Associated Press**

# Introduction

## Context & Background

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has triggered one of the largest displacement crises in modern history. Over the past 14 years of conflict, more than 13 million people, half the pre-war population, have been displaced, with over 7 million internally displaced and 6 million living as refugees, primarily in neighboring countries like Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as in Europe and beyond. Recent developments, including the collapse of the Assad regime and escalating regional tensions, have further complicated the crisis, with around 1 million people displaced, many for the second time. Additionally, between late September and November, Syria received over 500,000 people fleeing Israeli airstrikes in Lebanon, including both returning Syrians and Lebanese citizens.<sup>1</sup>

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 has significantly shifted the dynamics surrounding the return of Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). While this political change has raised hopes for stability and reconstruction, it has also revealed a complex and precarious reality. Persistent regional instability, geopolitical tensions, Syria's fragile infrastructure, and gaps in basic needs, including access to healthcare, housing, and education, present serious risks for returnees.

Inside Syria, there are over 7.4 million internally displaced people (IDPs), with over 600,000 newly displaced since November 2024. 680,000 IDPs have returned to their areas of origin<sup>2</sup>, the majority being women and children.<sup>3</sup> UNHCR estimates that over 279,600 Syrians have returned from Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt.<sup>4</sup> The highest number of voluntary returns came from Türkiye, 81,576 individuals returned to Syria since early December, according to the Ministry of Interior in Türkiye,<sup>5</sup> facilitated through five designated border crossings: Cilvegözü/Bab al-Hawa, Yayladagi/Keseb, Oncupinar/Bab al-Salam, Karkamis/Jarablus, and Akcakale/Tel Abyad. UNHCR monitors return processes in 12 provinces and at border crossing points. These gates operate with enhanced capacity

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2024). What do recent events in Syria mean for Syrian refugees? Retrieved from: <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/what-do-recent-events-syria-mean-syrian-refugees>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR. (2025) Regional Flash Update #14: Syria Situation Crisis, 13 February 2025. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-14>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR. (2025) Regional Flash Update #8: Syria Situation Crisis, 2 January 2025. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-8-syria-situation-crisis-2-january-2025>.

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, Regional Flash Update #14: Syria Situation Crisis, 13 February 2025. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-14>

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, Regional Flash Update #12: Syria Situation Crisis, 30 January 2025. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-12-syria-situation-crisis-30-january-2025>



to facilitate voluntary returns, reaching about 19,000 daily capacities. It highlights a shift in refugee movements amidst regional transformations.<sup>6</sup>

Türkiye continues to host the largest population of Syrian refugees globally<sup>7</sup>, with over 2,8 million by 16 January 2025,<sup>8</sup> and Syrians remain the largest refugee population living in Türkiye. Yet, IOM's migration monitoring report<sup>9</sup>, based on Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) data, highlights that Türkiye's Syrian population dropped from 3.6 million in September 2022 to 2.8 million by January 2025 with a decline of over 730,000 people. Notably, significant reductions occurred during COVID-19, and, in the aftermath of the earthquake by 2023, 554,000 Syrians had voluntarily returned. It has reached 625,000 by February 2024.<sup>10</sup> This trend presents an acceleration in the return of Syrians to their homeland or migration elsewhere, even before the collapse of Assad's regime.

Refugees' intentions to return are influenced by a combination of factors, including the political and security situation in Syria, the availability of housing and basic services, economic opportunities, legal and social protections, fear of persecution or conscription, and the overall stability of their home regions. Personal circumstances such as property ownership, length of displacement, family ties, employment opportunities, and children's education play a crucial role in their decision-making process.<sup>11</sup>

In Türkiye, refugees face marginalization due to limited access to stable jobs, education, healthcare, and legal protection. Social discrimination and language barriers further exacerbate their vulnerabilities, increasing the risks of child labor and early marriage.<sup>12</sup> Rising anti-refugee sentiment, fueled by economic challenges and political dynamics, has intensified social tensions. Opportunistic groups and politicians have further manipulated public perceptions, particularly during the 2023 presidential elections, deepening divisions within society.<sup>13</sup>

The devastating earthquakes of February 6, 2023, also played a critical role in prompting returns, especially among refugees in affected regions who sought better living conditions.<sup>14</sup> The disaster, coupled with growing anti-refugee sentiment, exposed systemic vulnerabilities, including unequal access to aid, mobility restrictions, and language barriers, which further compounded hardships during recovery efforts.

The regime change in Syria has reignited international discussions on refugee and internally displaced person (IDP) returns. Under the previous regime, refugees were largely reluctant to return due to

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR (2024). Regional Flash Update #15. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2025-02/250220%20UNHCR%20Regional%20Flash%20Update%2015%20-%20Syria%20situation%20crisis%20-%20final.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Syria Regional Refugee Response. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

<sup>8</sup> Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Interior, Presidency of Migration Management (2025). Statistics on Temporary Protection. <https://en.goc.gov.tr/temporary-protection27>

<sup>9</sup> IOM. (2024) Türkiye- Migrant Presence Monitoring - Situation Report (December 2024). Available at: <https://dtm.iom.int/reports/turkiye-migrant-presence-monitoring-situation-report-december-2024>

<sup>10</sup> European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). (2025). Overview of main changes since the previous report update: Türkiye. Asylum Information Database (AIDA). Retrieved from: <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/turkiye/overview-main-changes-previous-report-update/>

<sup>11</sup> Harmoon Center for Contemporary Studies. (2024). The prospects for Syrians' repatriation. Retrieved from: <https://www.harmoon.org/en/researches/suriyelilerin-ukelerine-geri-donus-olasiliklari/>

<sup>12</sup> 3RP, Social Cohesion: An Overview of Host Community-Refugee Dynamics in the 3RP Context, Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, July 2022, accessed January 24, 2025, [https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Social\\_Cohesion\\_Papers\\_Overview.pdf](https://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Social_Cohesion_Papers_Overview.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Şahin-Mencütek, Z., & Kurt, M. (2023). The politicization of refugees in Turkey's elections is not yet over with local elections on the way. Available at: <https://www.bicc.de/Publications/Other/The-politicization-of-refugees-in-Turkeys-elections-is-not-yet-over-with-local-elections-on-the-way/14470>

<sup>14</sup> Aktuna G, Bahar-Özvarış Ş. (2023) Investigating the aftermath of the Türkiye 2023 earthquake: exploring post-disaster uncertainty among Syrian migrants using social network analysis with a public health approach. *Front Public Health*. 2023 Jul 27;11:1204589. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2023.1204589. PMID: 37663840; PMCID: PMC10469323.

ongoing conflict, the presence of armed actors, fears of military recruitment, and limited access to basic needs, services, housing, and livelihoods.<sup>15</sup>

However, the UNHCR's January 2025 Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey (RPIS) indicates that 80% of refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt aspire to return someday, despite challenges such as debt, damaged homes, and financial constraints. Notably, 27% of Syrian refugees now plan to return within a year—a significant rise from just 1.7% in 2024.<sup>16</sup>

Amid the shifting political landscape, the UN projects up to 1 million returns to Syria within the next six months, contingent on substantial investments in reconstruction and assurances of safety. Since 2016, over 760,000 individuals have returned, with gender distribution among returnees evenly split and children under 18 comprising 45% of returnees as of December 15, 2024.<sup>17</sup>

The recent surge in returns to Syria has introduced new challenges, as both displaced populations and returnees continue to face precarious conditions. An estimated 81% of refugee-owned homes are either destroyed or uninhabitable, while landmine risks and legal documentation challenges further hinder reintegration, making resettlement difficult. Aleppo is particularly affected, with 60% of homes deemed unlivable.<sup>18</sup>

While UNHCR provides legal aid, shelter assistance, and protection measures, it emphasizes that ongoing humanitarian support in host countries remains crucial. Rather than promoting large-scale returns, UNHCR prioritizes safe and dignified repatriation, guided by its Operational Framework for Voluntary Return, released on 6 February 2025.<sup>19</sup>

Reports from various organizations, including ACU,<sup>20</sup> IMC,<sup>21</sup> the Syrian NGO Alliance,<sup>22</sup> Refugees International,<sup>23</sup> IBC,<sup>24</sup> and UNICEF<sup>25</sup>, as well as UNHCR<sup>26</sup>, highlight the complexities of regional return dynamics. These reports stress the need for sustained international support to ensure that returns are safe, voluntary, and dignified.

<sup>15</sup> Alrababah, A., Masterson, D., Casalis, M., Hangartner, D., & Weinstein, J. (2023). The dynamics of refugee return: Syrian refugees and their migration intentions. *British Journal of Political Science*, 53(4), 1108–1131. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000667>

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR (2025). Regional Flash Update #11: Syria Situation Crisis, 23 January 2025. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-11-syria-situation-crisis-23-january-2025>

<sup>17</sup> UNHCR. (2024) Syria Areas of Return Overview – 15 December 2024. Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113301>

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, Regional Flash Update #13: Syria Situation Crisis, 7 February 2025. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-13-syria-situation-crisis-7-february-2025>

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> ACU (2024). Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report: December 14, 2024. Information Management Unit. Retrieved from [https://acu-sy.org/imu\\_reports/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-report\\_2024-dec-english/](https://acu-sy.org/imu_reports/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-report_2024-dec-english/)

<sup>21</sup> International Medical Corps. (2024). Syria emergency response: Situation Report #1 (December 18, 2024). International Medical Corps. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-emergency-response-situation-report-1-december-18-2024>

<sup>22</sup> Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA). (2024). Statement from the Syrian NGO Alliance on the recent changes in Syria (December 12, 2024). Syrian NGO Alliance. Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/statement-syrian-ngo-alliance-sna-recent-changes-syria-12-december-2024-enar>

<sup>23</sup> Refugees International (2024). Ensuring a Safe, Secure, and Dignified Future for Displaced Syrians. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/ensuring-safe-secure-and-dignified-future-displaced-syrians>

<sup>24</sup> IBC. (2024). Syria humanitarian flash appeal: December 2024. International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/international-blue-crescent-ibc-syria-humanitarian-flash-appeal-december-2024>

<sup>25</sup> UNICEF (2024). Syria humanitarian situation report No. 1 (20 December 2024). UNICEF. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unicef-syria-humanitarian-situation-report-no-1-20-december-2024>

<sup>26</sup> UNHCR, Regional Flash Update #11: Syria Situation Crisis, 23 January 2025. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-11-syria-situation-crisis-23-january-2025>



Governments and international organizations, including UNHCR, closely monitor developments and advocate for a peaceful transition, informed decision-making, and continued refugee protection.<sup>27</sup> UNHCR has welcomed Türkiye's new mechanism for temporary "go-and-see" visits. This policy allows heads of households to travel to Syria up to three times within six months. It serves as a key confidence-building measure, helping refugees make informed return decisions. A recent survey revealed that over 60% of refugees consider it important to conduct a "go-and-see" visit before making a final decision to return. This underscores the significance of such initiatives in facilitating informed decision-making among refugees.<sup>28</sup>

This study explores Syrian refugees' perspectives on return and reintegration, as well as their experiences in Türkiye. It examines key factors influencing their decisions, including safety, access to basic services, infrastructure, and economic opportunities. The findings aim to inform policies and humanitarian strategies that support voluntary, safe, and sustainable solutions. The research underscores the need for collaboration among governments, international actors, and host communities to address the complexities of return and reintegration effectively.

## Objectives & Scope

This study examines the experiences, aspirations, and decision-making processes of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, focusing on return and their perceived challenges upon return amid evolving political and social dynamics, particularly the fall of the Assad regime. It explores key factors influencing return decisions, including safety, access to services, economic opportunities, and infrastructure, while also assessing the challenges faced in Türkiye and host communities related to legal, socio-economic, and cultural integration.

Return studies reveal that tensions often arise from perceived inequalities in aid distribution, highlighting the need for balanced reintegration efforts that support both returnees and receiving communities. Evidence indicates that returnees face multidimensional challenges in post-conflict settings, which require short-term intervention strategies linked with long-term development goals. The challenges can arise from the reintegration of returnees into receiving communities as their identities change in the areas to which they return. They compete for limited resources, which can affect social cohesion among the returnees and members of receiving communities.<sup>29</sup> As in the example of South Sudan, the short-term resolution approach can lead to aid dependency and reactivation of violence.<sup>30</sup> Drawing from global lessons, the study underscores the risks of short-term solutions, such as aid dependency and renewed conflict, and advocates for sustainable, development-oriented reintegration strategies.

The scope of the study includes both geographical and thematic dimensions. Geographically, the study focuses on Syrian refugees in Turkey, with primary data collection conducted in the provinces of Gaziantep, Hatay, Kilis, and Sanliurfa. Additionally, surveys were administered across 13 provinces, capturing a diverse representation of refugees from both urban and rural areas. The population studied includes Syrian refugees, representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs), local authorities, and international stakeholders. Particular attention was given to vulnerable groups,

<sup>27</sup> Ertuna Lagrand, T. (2025, February 26). Facilitating the informed and sustainable voluntary return of Syrian refugees. Refugee Law Initiative Blog. Retrieved from: <https://rli.blogs.sas.ac.uk/2025/02/26/facilitating-the-informed-and-sustainable-voluntary-return-of-syrian-refugees/>

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR (2025) Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (February 2025). Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/flash-regional-survey-syrian-refugees-perceptions-and-intentions-return-syria-february-2025>

<sup>29</sup> Isabel Ruiz, Carlos Vargas-Silva, Refugee return and social cohesion, Oxford Review of Economic Policy, Volume 38, Issue 3, Autumn 2022, Pages 678–698, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/grac016>

<sup>30</sup> Dusenbury, Ashley S. "Post-conflict returnee reintegration: a case study of South Sudan and the livelihood approach." Thesis, Monterey, California: Naval Postgraduate School, 2013. <http://hdl.handle.net/10945/37619>

including women, children, and those displaced from conflict-affected regions, to ensure an inclusive understanding of the refugee experience.

Thematically, the study examines refugee return and reintegration dynamics in the context of recent political changes, the lived experiences of refugees in host communities, and their aspirations for the future. By addressing these multifaceted objectives within the defined scope, the study offers a nuanced perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing Syrian refugees and provides practical recommendations to inform policy and humanitarian responses.

The findings provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, donors, coordination mechanisms, and implementing partners. They emphasize collaborative strategies to ensure voluntary, safe, and sustainable solutions for refugees while fostering social cohesion in host and return communities.



*The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 has reshaped the dynamics of return to Syria, which makes it a selective and conditional process driven by economic hardship, political shifts, and security risks.*  
Rural areas of Idlib, Syria. Dec 17, 2022

**Photo Credits: Euronews**

# Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both primary and secondary data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics surrounding Syrian refugees. The secondary data included a review of key documents to establish contextual insights and inform primary data collection. Primary data comprised 20 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 320 online surveys targeting a diverse range of stakeholders and Syrian community members.

**KIIs** were conducted with purposely sampled local authorities, Syrian CSOs, UN agencies, and Syrian community leaders in the provinces of Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis, and Sanliurfa. The 20 interviewees included four CSO representatives, three UN agency representatives, five local authorities, and eight Syrian community leaders. These interviews provided critical qualitative insights into the perspectives of key stakeholders across the study regions.

Stakeholder Category	Gaziantep	Hatay	Kilis	Sanliurfa	Total
CSO	1	1	-	2	4
UN Agencies	1	-	-	2	3
Local Authorities	1	2	1	1	5
Syrian Community Leaders	3	3	1	1	8

**Online Surveys** were conducted between December 19, 2024, and January 2, 2025, with 320 Syrian community members from 13 provinces, namely Gaziantep, Hatay, Adana, Sanliurfa, İstanbul, Mersin, Kilis, Adiyaman, Diyarbakir, Mardin, Ankara and İzmir. The sample is randomly selected through online and offline networks. The sample included 53% males and 46% females, and 1% “preferred not to say”. Most respondents (79%) held a Temporary Protection Identification Document (TPID), while 17% did not possess one, and 4% declined to disclose their documentation status. Many respondents originated from conflict-affected regions such as Aleppo (23%), Idlib (17%), and Hama (16%).

These regions face numerous challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, safety concerns, and limited access to essential services. The high representation from Aleppo is particularly noteworthy, given its history as a conflict hotspot and a major source of displacement. Similarly, Idlib and Hama are regions with significant refugee outflows due to prolonged conflict and instability. The concentration of people from these regions points out the complex structural and safety issues that continue in these regions, which will influence refugees’ experiences and long-term considerations regarding return or integration.

Province	Respondents (#)	Percentage (%)
Gaziantep	134	42%
Hatay	70	22%
Adana	35	11%
Sanliurfa	16	5%
İstanbul	24	8%
Other Cities	41	12%

In terms of employment, 25% of respondents were engaged in informal work, 23% in formal employment, and 13% were unemployed but actively seeking jobs. Additionally, 22% identified as domestic workers, reflecting the varied socioeconomic statuses of the surveyed population.

## Ethical Standards

This study adhered to rigorous ethical standards to safeguard participants' rights and well-being. Informed consent was obtained following a detailed explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature. Participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. Consent forms were made available in Arabic for refugees and Turkish for stakeholders to ensure clarity and accessibility.

Confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. Data from KIIs was anonymized, and survey responses were securely stored in compliance with established data protection protocols. Participation was entirely voluntary, with respondents free to skip questions or discontinue their involvement at any time.

## Limitations

Several limitations were encountered during the research process:

1. **Age and Gender Representation Bias:** The reliance on **online surveys** due to logistical constraints introduced a potential bias, as refugees with limited internet access or digital literacy were excluded. While efforts were made to mitigate this by distributing the survey through trusted community networks and employing targeted outreach strategies, the sample remains unrepresentative of the most marginalized groups, such as the elderly without digital literacy. However, due to anonymity, it could also enable to reach gender minority groups, as an advantage of online structure.

The survey primarily reflects feedback from working-age adults at 87%, with the majority falling within the 25-44-54 age range. The lack of representation from younger and elderly populations may have skewed the survey findings toward the experiences and perspectives of adults over 25 years old. Younger refugees may face distinct emotional and social challenges in return and reintegration, such as language barriers and adaptation difficulties, as some of our findings suggested. These generational differences must be acknowledged in the interpretation of results.

This methodological limitation makes the quantitative data less reliable for generalizing findings across the refugee population. As a result, the findings prioritize **qualitative results** derived from in-depth key informant interviews (KIIs), providing richer insights into diverse refugee groups' experiences and perspectives. These qualitative findings offer a more nuanced understanding of the challenges and aspirations of refugees, addressing gaps that the survey methodology could not capture.

2. **Urban vs. Rural Representation:** The survey did not capture urban versus rural differences, which limits our ability to distinguish variations in return intentions and livelihood prospects, including agricultural activities. This limitation is particularly relevant when interpreting responses to questions about preferred return locations and economic opportunities, which are likely to differ based on geographical context.
3. **Stakeholder Availability:** Conducting KIIs with public authorities posed challenges due to limited availability and competing priorities. Flexible scheduling and engagement with other knowledgeable individuals within institutions helped to address this limitation.
4. **Sample Representation:** Practical constraints affected the sample size and representativeness in certain provinces. Strategic prioritization of key provinces with significant refugee populations, such as Gaziantep and Hatay, ensured comprehensive coverage while including diverse representation from other regions.
5. **Cultural Sensitivity:** Survey instruments and interview protocols were designed with sensitivity to cultural and contextual realities, promoting trust and encouraging participation.

Despite these challenges, the research adhered to ethical standards, ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, and robust data protection. These measures enhanced the validity and integrity of the study while capturing valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of Syrian refugees.



*Syrians heading back to Syria from Türkiye at the Cilvegözü/ Bab al-Hawa border gate, near Hatay, southeastern Türkiye, Dec 27, 2024."*

**Photo Credits: The Associated Press**



# Findings

## Refugee Perceptions on Return

### *Refugees' Willingness or Hesitation to Return*

The collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024 has shifted the dynamics of refugee return, raising both hopes for stability and concerns over ongoing risks. Before this shift, studies highlighted that Syrian refugees were largely reluctant to return due to persistent challenges such as active conflict, the presence of armed actors, fears of military conscription, and inadequate access to essential services, basic infrastructure, and livelihood opportunities.<sup>31</sup> Remarkably, safety was consistently being prioritized over economic or social factors. However, UNHCR's Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey (RPIS)<sup>32</sup> in January 2025 with 3,400 Syrian refugees across Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt indicates that 80% of respondents expressed the hope of returning eventually, up from 57%.

The willingness or hesitation among Syrian refugees to return home reflects a complex interplay of safety concerns, economic challenges, and emotional ties. The fall of the Assad regime and subsequent political changes have heightened discussions around the possibility of return, but sentiments remain varied across different regions and demographics.

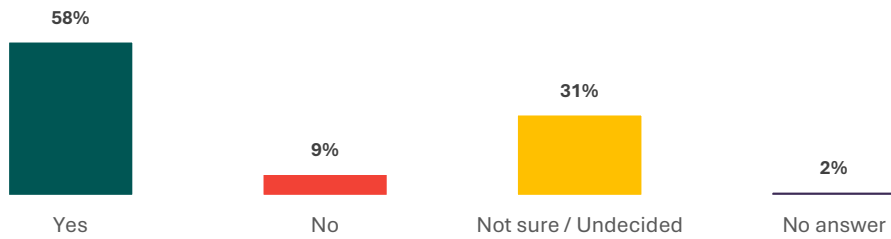
Building on the findings of this study, the survey indicates that **58%** of refugees expressed a willingness to return, contingent on improved conditions, while **31%** remain undecided due to uncertainties about safety, infrastructure, and economic stability. Conversely, **9%** of respondents outright refused to return, with hesitations particularly pronounced among youth and professionals. These findings highlight how evolving political developments interact with enduring structural challenges, underlining the complex factors influencing refugees' decisions to return and rebuild their lives.

<sup>31</sup> Arababah, A., Masterson, D., Casalis, M., Hangartner, D., & Weinstein, J. (2023). The dynamics of refugee return: Syrian refugees and their migration intentions. *British Journal of Political Science*, 53(4), 1108–1131. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000667>

<sup>32</sup> UNHCR. (2025) Regional Flash Update #11: Syria Situation Crisis, 23 January 2025. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-11-syria-situation-crisis-23-january-2025>

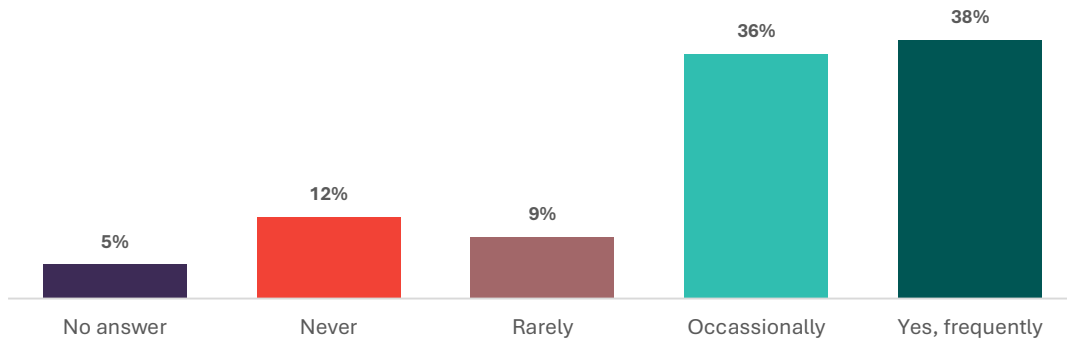


### Willingness to Return to Syria N=320



Expanding on the above findings, we further explored respondents' thoughts on returning to Syria **prior to the recent developments** by asking, "Have you ever considered returning to Syria?" The results indicate that **a significant majority (74%) had contemplated a return, with 38% frequently and 36% occasionally considering it.** In contrast, 9% reported rarely thinking about returning, 12% had never considered it, and 5% did not respond to the follow-up question. This suggests a continued emotional or practical connection to their home country, likely influenced by cultural ties, hopes for stability, or dissatisfaction with the conditions in Türkiye.

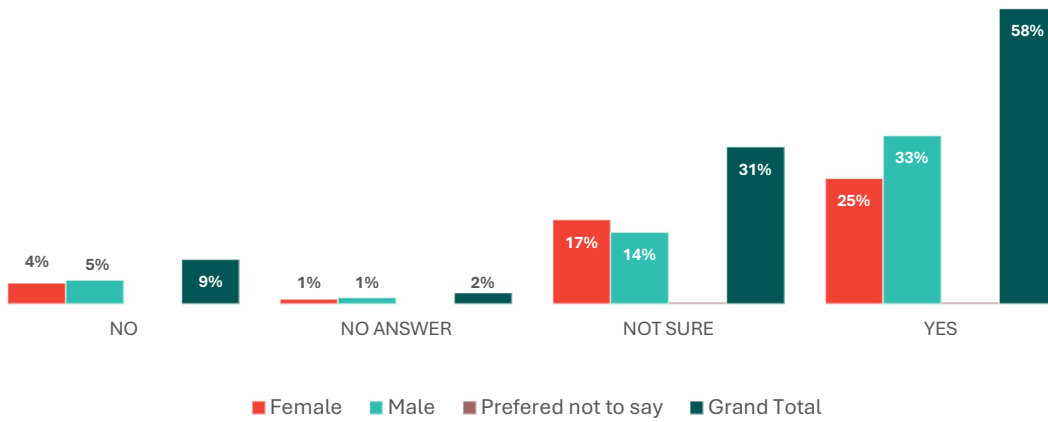
### Considerations of Return to Syria Before the Regime Change N=320



Following the regime change, a notable increase in refugees' willingness to return has emerged. While many previously expressed a conditional willingness under improved conditions, political transformation alone has not led to immediate readiness to return. Persistent concerns over governance, security, and infrastructure leave many uncertain. Though the fall of the Assad regime removed a key barrier for some, economic instability and safety concerns still deter definitive return plans. This highlights that political shifts, while influential, do not operate in isolation but are intertwined with economic, social, and security factors in shaping return decisions.

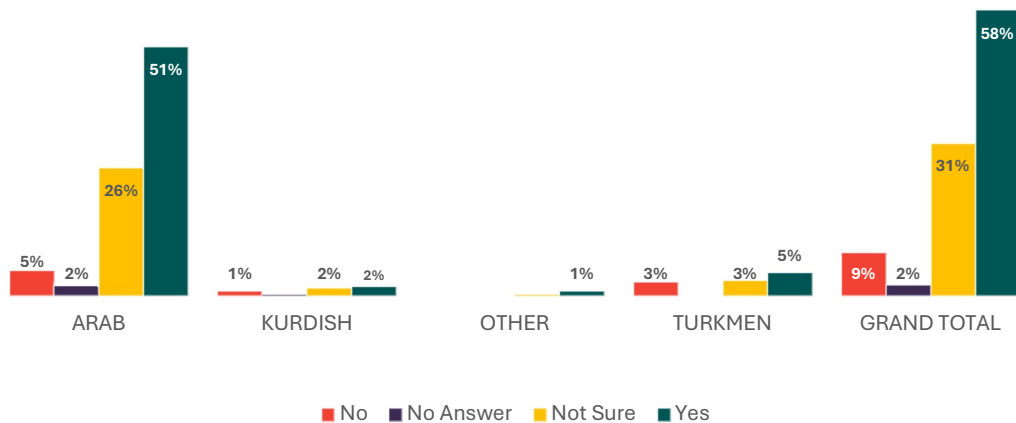
The graph on willingness to return upon gender identity highlights variations in willingness to return based on gender and ethnicity. In the gender identity breakdown, **males show a higher willingness to return at 33% compared to females at 25%**, while **a significant portion of females remain undecided at 17%**, possibly due to concerns about security, rights, and economic opportunities.

### Willingness to Return Upon Gender Identity



The ethnicity-based analysis shows **significant differences in willingness to return**, with **Arabs having the highest rate at 51%**, while **Kurds, Turkmen, and other groups show lower enthusiasm and higher uncertainty**. This suggests that **historical, political, and security concerns shape return decisions**, particularly for minorities who may face **discrimination or instability** in post-conflict Syria. Many non-Arab groups remain undecided rather than outright refusing. It indicates that their return depends on **future political and security developments**. These findings highlight the need for **inclusive return policies** that address the distinct concerns of different ethnic communities.

### Willingness to Return Upon Ethnicity



In conclusion, the findings reveal that willingness to return among Syrian refugees is shaped by a complex mix of political, economic, and security factors, with notable variations based on gender and ethnicity. While men are more inclined to return than women, concerns about safety and economic opportunities contribute to significant hesitation, particularly among female refugees. Similarly, ethnic differences play a crucial role, with Arabs expressing the highest willingness to return. However, Kurds, Turkmen, and other minority groups display greater uncertainty due to historical and

security-related concerns. These insights underscore the importance of tailored and inclusive return policies that address the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of different refugee communities, ensuring that return decisions are informed, voluntary, and sustainable.

### **Regional and Origin-Based Variations**

A deeper analysis highlights how the region variations and the place of origin influence their decisions to return. Refugees from **stable regions such as Damascus and Latakia** demonstrate a markedly higher willingness to return, with **over 60–70% expressing optimism about rebuilding their lives**. Stability improved in Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo, contrasting with instability in Tartus, Latakia, and other areas. Increased return movements to Aleppo, Idlib, and Homs due to improved stability.<sup>33</sup> This sentiment is driven by perceived safety, existing infrastructure, and emotional connections to their homeland. These areas, largely spared the brunt of the conflict, provide a more predictable and stable environment. It fosters confidence among potential returnees.

In contrast, those originating from **conflict-affected regions like Idlib, Deir ez-Zor, and Raqqa** are far **less willing to consider returning**, with only **25–40% expressing interest**. Barriers to return include infrastructure destruction in rural areas as high as **90%, severely affecting housing**, roads, schools, and health facilities.<sup>34</sup> Persistent insecurity, fear of renewed violence, and significant destruction of homes and infrastructure are major deterrents. For example, Idlib's unstable governance and proximity to conflict zones create an environment of uncertainty, while the extensive damage in Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa makes them largely uninhabitable. Respondents also cited limited access to basic services, economic opportunities, and distrust in local authorities as significant barriers.

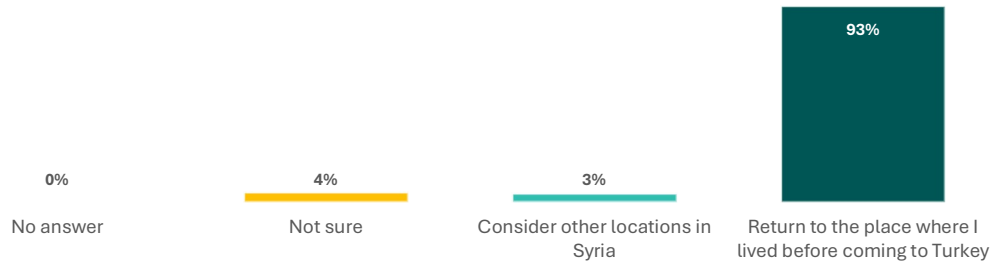
Statistical analysis further underscores these dynamics, revealing a moderate to strong correlation ( $r = -0.65$ ) between the stability of the place of origin and willingness to return. Refugees from stable regions are more likely to view a return as viable due to the relative predictability of conditions, whereas those from conflict-affected areas remain hesitant amid ongoing challenges.

Besides these regional variations, an overwhelming majority, 93% of respondents, prefer to return to their original homes. Only a small percentage are open to relocating elsewhere within Syria 3% or are uncertain about their return destination (4%), reflecting a strong sense of attachment and belonging to their hometowns. These findings align with recent field studies and UNHCR reports, which highlight a concentration of returnees moving to areas that have seen relative stabilization, such as Aleppo and Homs. However, these regions still face ongoing challenges, including limited infrastructure, restricted access to basic services, and the need for extensive community rebuilding, which hinder sustainable reintegration.

<sup>33</sup> Olive Branch. (2024). Situational report: Syria (December 18, 2024). Olive Branch Organization. Retrieved from: <https://www.syria-hr.com/en/352320/>

<sup>34</sup> SARD MEAL Department. (2024). Syria rapid needs assessment report: December 2024. Syrian Association for Relief and Development. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/sard-rapid-needs-assessment-and-response-plan-syria-december-2024>

### Preferred Destinations of Return



Seasonal factors also play a role in return dynamics. The expected increase in returnee numbers during warmer periods, after the school semester, and over the summer months,<sup>35</sup> adds urgency to addressing the needs of returnees and the communities on the receiving end. Warmer weather facilitates travel and logistics, leading to higher return movements during these times. When coupled with recent political and security developments, these trends suggest that both local and international stakeholders must be prepared for surges in returnees. Proactively addressing these challenges is essential to supporting sustainable returns that adhere to international standards and uphold the dignity of those returning. For many, the return to their hometowns is not just a physical relocation but a symbolic step toward the restoration of their lives and restoring their communities in post-conflict Syria.

### Demographic Influences

Within these broader trends, demographic factors play a critical role. **Elderly populations**, particularly in regions like Gaziantep, exhibit optimism about returning, driven by emotional ties and a desire to spend their remaining years in familiar surroundings. Conversely, **youth and professionals** are more cautious, with concerns centered on economic opportunities, job security, and the recognition of qualifications acquired abroad. The needs of young people are discussed in the context of guarantees of employment and educational equivalence to facilitate their reintegration.

*“Many students have graduated here in Türkiye. During an NGO meeting with the Ministry of Interior, I raised the issue of ensuring their qualifications are recognized.”*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Key informants (KIs) noted that many minors, especially those born in Türkiye, do not speak Arabic. This creates challenges for reintegration into Syrian schools. Additionally, many children have faced prolonged disruptions in education due to displacement. To bridge this gap, access to accelerated learning programs is essential upon return.

Survey data from 320 respondents, representing 1,000 individuals, highlight a predominantly family-oriented population. Among them, **77% are married**. This suggests that many refugees will return

<sup>35</sup> UNHCR. (2025, January 23). UNHCR Regional Flash Update #11 - Syria Situation Crisis. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-11-syria-situation-crisis-23-january-2025>

with their spouses and children. As a result, family-related needs such as housing, education, and healthcare are crucial for sustainable reintegration.

Cultural dynamics, particularly gender roles, also influence return decisions. In male-dominated households, differing opinions can lead to disagreements, especially when women are more hesitant or undecided about returning. The survey results reflect this divide, underscoring the importance of considering household dynamics alongside regional and structural factors when planning support strategies.

**High literacy rates (99%) and Turkish proficiency (72%)** indicate strong integration, yet return intentions remain significant. Education plays a key role in decision-making, **with 502 children enrolled in school** and most households having school-aged children attending. Families often weigh access to education, childcare, healthcare, and infrastructure when deciding whether to stay in Türkiye or return to Syria.

UNHCR reports suggest many families may delay returning until after the school semester, balancing integration with conditions in Syria.<sup>36</sup> Ensuring voluntary, safe, and dignified returns with adequate support in both Türkiye and return areas is essential for sustainable solutions.

The demographic findings reveal a complex relationship between integration and return intentions. High Turkish literacy and children's school enrollment indicate integration. However, factors such as anti-refugee sentiment and economic challenges in Türkiye influence the desire to return.

Marginalized groups, such as the **Roman and Dom communities**, face unique challenges and express strong reluctance to return. Many cite systemic discrimination in Syria as a major barrier, alongside the better living conditions and job opportunities they currently enjoy in Türkiye. One respondent explained:

*“Syrian Roman and Dom community living here do not think to return since they have better life conditions and job opportunities.”*

**Kil, Community Leader in Hatay, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

These perspectives underscore the additional barriers faced by minority groups in considering reintegration into Syrian society.

### **Administrative and Legal Challenges**

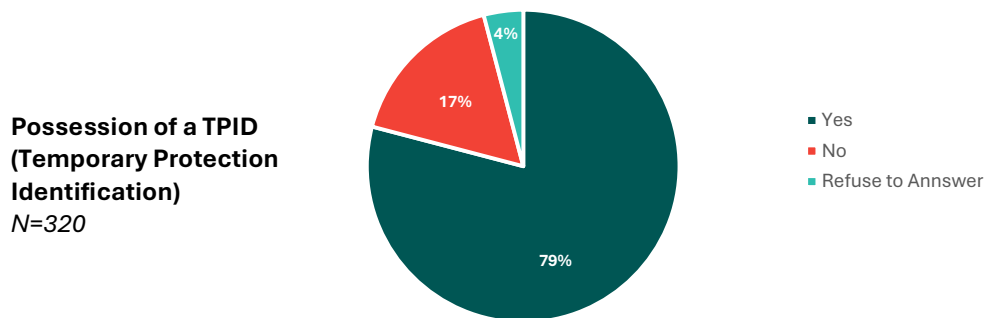
Türkiye’s new temporary "go-and-see" visit mechanism allows heads of households to visit Syria up to three times within six months. UNHCR has welcomed this initiative as a key confidence-building measure, helping refugees make informed return decisions.<sup>37</sup>

Documentation challenges remain a major barrier to return, complicating legal status and reintegration in Syria. Among those intending to return, **79% possess legal identification of Temporary Protection Status**, while **17% lack proper documentation**. An additional **4% did not respond**, indicating potential issues such as fear-driven avoidance of registration, lack of awareness,

<sup>36</sup> UNHCR, Regional Flash Update #13: Syria Situation Crisis, 7 February 2025. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-13-syria-situation-crisis-7-february-2025>

<sup>37</sup> UNHCR. (2024, December 27). Regional flash update #7: Syria situation crisis. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-7-syria-situation-crisis-27-december-2024>

or barriers to accessing registration services. Without proper documentation, returnees face administrative hurdles, especially given Syria’s unclear legal frameworks and support systems. UNHCR report<sup>38</sup> on voluntary return of Syrian refugees and IDPs highlights that many refugees have questions related to practical issues around return, including accessing travel documents and procedures for crossing the border. These reports underscore the administrative hurdles and complexities that refugees encounter in the repatriation process.



Key informants (KIs) report increasingly strict border identity checks, heightening legal and administrative burdens, particularly for vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors and families lacking full documentation. The lack of proper documentation puts unaccompanied minors at heightened risks of trafficking and exploitation.

Legal experts highlight systemic gaps in dispute resolution, legal counseling, and identity reactivation services. As a result, many returnees remain in legal limbo, struggling to reclaim property, secure legal status, or access protection mechanisms.

### *Hopes and Fears Regarding Return:*

A significant driver of hope among refugees is the anticipation of improved safety and governance. Many view the upcoming **March 2025 elections** as a pivotal moment, inspiring cautious optimism about political reforms and the potential for stable governance. One respondent noted:

*“Many people wait for elections which will be held in March 2025... to make their decisions to return.”*

**KII, Community Leader in Gaziantep, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Security, political changes, and economic stability are primary motivators for return. Refugees commonly express a desire to reunite with family and reclaim pre-conflict residences in cities such

<sup>38</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2025). Operational framework: Voluntary return of Syrian refugees and IDPs. UNHCR. Retrieved from: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/2025-operational-framework-voluntary-return-syrian-refugees-and-idps>



as Aleppo, Idlib, and Damascus. However, many remain hesitant due to lingering safety concerns.<sup>39</sup> As another community leader in Sanliurfa emphasized:

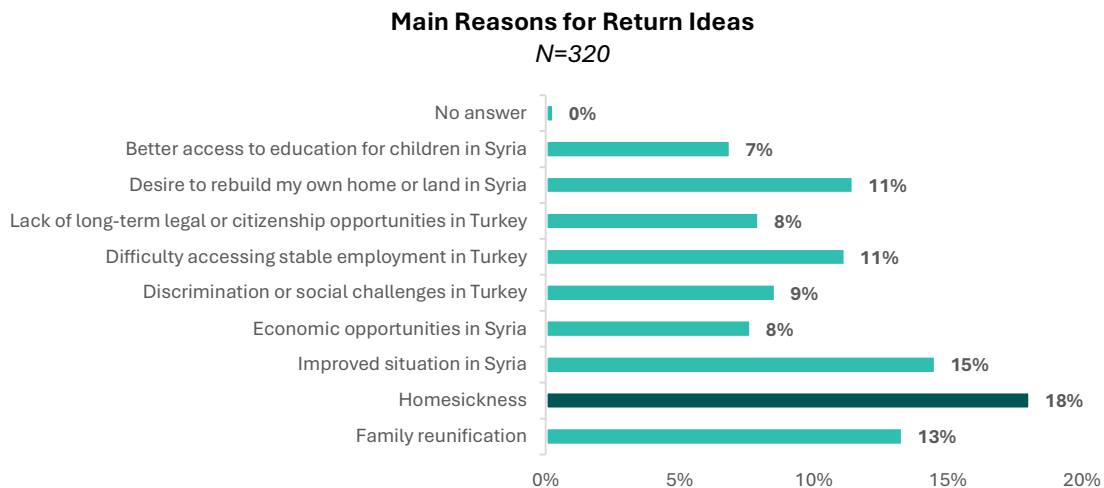
*“Rebuilding Syria will create more jobs, so if such job opportunities happen, people will be willing to return. Until then, most families will stay here, waiting for stability and the chance to rebuild their lives with some security.”*

**KII, Community Leader in Sanliurfa, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Infrastructure deficiencies further complicate return decisions. The widespread destruction of homes, schools, roads, and healthcare facilities, especially in rural areas where up to **90%** of infrastructure has been damaged, remains a major obstacle.<sup>40</sup> This concern was echoed by **22%** of respondents, who cited inadequate infrastructure as a key reason for not returning.

Despite these challenges, emotional and cultural ties to Syria remain strong. Older refugees express a deep longing to reconnect with their homeland. Homesickness and the desire to preserve Syrian traditions are powerful factors, with **18% of respondents** highlighting these as central to their return considerations.

The graph highlights that emotional and familial ties, security improvements, and economic factors shape refugees’ return decisions. **Homesickness (18%)** and **family reunification (13%)** are the strongest motivators, particularly among older refugees. **Improved conditions in Syria (15%)** also play a key role, while economic struggles in Türkiye, including difficulty **accessing stable employment (11%)** and **discrimination (9%)**, push some toward return. However, younger individuals prioritize education in Türkiye over returning, as seen in the lower percentage citing **better access to education in Syria (7%)**. These findings underscore the complex interplay between emotional, security, economic, and legal factors in shaping return intentions.



<sup>39</sup> UNHCR. (2024, December 27). Regional flash update #7: Syria situation crisis. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-7-syria-situation-crisis-27-december-2024>

<sup>40</sup> SARD MEAL Department. (2024). Syria rapid needs assessment report: December 2024. Syrian Association for Relief and Development. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/sard-rapid-needs-assessment-and-response-plan-syria-december-2024>

The findings reveal a balance between hope and concern. Many wish to return home, but instability and poor infrastructure in Syria create hesitation. In Türkiye, discrimination and legal uncertainties further complicate their decisions.

### *Fears of Safety and Inadequate Infrastructure*

Security and inadequate infrastructure remain the most critical factors influencing refugee return decisions. Returnees state enhanced security conditions in Syria and the removal of compulsory military service as primary reasons for their decision to return.<sup>41</sup> However, security remains a major concern due to the presence of various armed groups, the threat of retaliation from former regime supporters, and extensive landmine contamination. Landmine contamination and unexploded ordnance further hinder the safe movement of returnees in key urban and rural areas.<sup>42</sup>

These risks exacerbate anxieties among displaced populations, as highlighted in UNHCR’s **Regional Refugee Community Feedback Report**,<sup>43</sup> where safety was the most cited concern among respondents from Lebanon, Jordan, and Türkiye. These concerns disproportionately affect male returnees, as well as female-headed households who fear gender-based violence and lack of legal protection in post-conflict Syria. As one noted:

*“Basic safety guarantees are lacking, making it impossible for many families to contemplate a return.”*

**KII, Community Leader in Kilis, conducted as part of this study, 2024**



Infrastructure destruction further worsens challenges for returnees. In Aleppo, **33%** of shelters are damaged, while **47%** of the population lacks healthcare access, and water networks remain unreliable.<sup>44</sup> Many refugees struggle to validate land ownership due to missing records and damaged municipal archives.<sup>45</sup> Weak legal frameworks and inconsistent enforcement further hinder property restitution. Refugees highlighted these challenges, with one participant stating:

*“My home is in ruins, so I have no choice but to stay here for another 1–2 years.”*

**KII, Community Leader in Gaziantep, conducted as part of this study, 2024**



<sup>41</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2024, December 27). Syria situation: Crisis regional flash update #7. UNHCR Global Focus. Retrieved from <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-7>

<sup>42</sup> Yüksel, U., & Gökalp-Aras, N. E. (2024). Preliminary reflections on post-Assad Syria: Emerging dynamics and the complex reality of refugee returns from Türkiye. GAPS Blog. Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (SRII). Retrieved from: <https://www.returnmigration.eu/gapsblog/preliminary-reflections-on-post-assad-syria>

<sup>43</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024). Regional refugee community feedback about developments in Syria. UNHCR. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113358>

<sup>44</sup> Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). (2024) Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report. Retrieved from: [https://acu-sy.org/imu\\_reports/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-report\\_2024-dec-english/](https://acu-sy.org/imu_reports/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-report_2024-dec-english/)

<sup>45</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2024). Syria situation crisis - Regional flash update 5. UNHCR. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-5>

The IBC Situation Report on Voluntary Return to Syria <sup>46</sup>states that many returnees have reported discovering their properties occupied or seized by third parties. Many are left without viable housing options and without a functioning legal system to address these disputes. Furthermore, the study<sup>47</sup> highlights that bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining identification and residency documents restrict access to employment, education, and public services. These burdens disproportionately impact female-headed households, individuals without birth records, and young men facing conscription laws, complicating reintegration. A community leader explained:

*“Land ownership remains a nightmare. Many families have no documentation, and legal mechanisms are either unclear or inaccessible. This leaves people in limbo, unable to start over.”*

**KII, Community Leader, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

For many families, the prospect of returning to areas without basic services such as clean water, electricity, and healthcare makes sustainable living conditions unachievable. <sup>48</sup> A community leader described the reality:

*“Basic services like healthcare and education are still dreams for many families returning to rural Syria. Without these, no one can truly resettle or rebuild.”*

**KII, Community Leader in Gaziantep, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

The destruction of essential infrastructure has severely limited job opportunities and economic activities, which makes it difficult for returnees to secure sustainable livelihoods. According to SARD’s Syria Rapid Needs Assessment Report, <sup>49</sup>approximately 1 million people were displaced, with 155,000 experiencing secondary displacement. It further strains local economies. The Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report<sup>50</sup> highlights that infrastructure damage has disrupted both government (52%) and private sector livelihoods (43%), with unemployment surging due to the collapse of industries and services. Agriculture, which once played a vital role in Syria’s economy, has suffered significantly due to damaged farmland, lack of irrigation, and supply chain disruptions. The SARD Syria Rapid Needs Assessment Report and UNICEF’s Syria Humanitarian Situation Report<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation. (2024, December 8). Situation report: Voluntary return to Syria. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/situation-report-voluntary-return-syria#:~:text=As%20of%20December%208%2C%202024,%2C%20documentation%2C%20and%20financial%20support>

<sup>47</sup> Return Migration and Development Platform. (2024). Preliminary reflections on post-Assad Syria. Available at: <https://www.returnmigration.eu/gapsblog/preliminary-reflections-on-post-assad-syria>

<sup>48</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024). Syria situation crisis – Regional flash update #10. UNHCR. Retrieved from: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/syria-situation-crisis-regional-flash-update-10>

<sup>49</sup> SARD (2024). Rapid Needs Assessment and Response Plan – Syria (December 2024). Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/sard-rapid-needs-assessment-and-response-plan-syria-december-2024>

<sup>50</sup> Assistance Coordination Unit. (2025) The Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report (December 2024). Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-dec-2024-enar>

<sup>51</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund. (2024, December 20). Syria humanitarian situation report No. 1. UNICEF. Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/media/166681/file/Syria%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.1%20%2020%20December%202024.pdf>

indicate that damaged infrastructure has restricted agricultural production, leaving many rural communities without means of subsistence. Farmers lack access to seeds, equipment, and financial resources to rebuild their production.

The cost of living has soared sharply. Food prices have increased at different rates across the country, higher in government-controlled areas and lower in the northeast.<sup>52</sup> These circumstances further pressure vulnerable households. One farmer highlighted the difficulty:

*“Even if I return to my land, I don’t have the resources to make it productive again.”*

**KII, Farmer, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

The reintegration of Syrian children who were born or raised abroad presents a major obstacle for returning families. According to UNICEF’s Syria Humanitarian Situation Report<sup>53</sup> widespread school destruction and lack of educational infrastructure in Syria make it difficult for children to resume their studies. Additionally, many returning children do not speak Arabic fluently or have been educated in different curricula, which makes it challenging for them to integrate into Syrian schools. The Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report<sup>54</sup> further highlights that 31% of children are not attending school due to safety concerns, and 17% experience psychological distress, which hinders their ability to return to formal education. Many returnees cite concerns over discrimination, limited social acceptance, and lack of peer networks for their children. A community leader explained:

*“Children who grew up in Türkiye often speak little or no Arabic. They need language programs to adapt to Syrian schools, but these are rare.”*

**KII, Community Leader in Kilis, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Beyond education, cultural differences and social stigmas add further barriers. Many Syrian children raised in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, or Europe adopt different languages and customs, making social reintegration difficult. The UNHCR Regional Refugee Community Feedback Report notes that parents worry their children may face exclusion or bullying due to their accents, foreign mannerisms, or differing educational backgrounds.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> FAO (2024) Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS) Country Brief for Syria. Retrieved from: <https://www.fao.org/giews/countrybrief/country.jsp?code=SYR>

<sup>53</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund. (2024, December 20). Syria humanitarian situation report No. 1. UNICEF. Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/media/166681/file/Syria%20Humanitarian%20Situation%20Report%20No.1%20%20%20December%202024.pdf.pdf>

<sup>54</sup> Assistance Coordination Unit. (2025) The Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report (December 2024). Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-dec-2024-enar>

<sup>55</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2024). Regional refugee community feedback about developments in Syria. UNHCR. Available at: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113358>

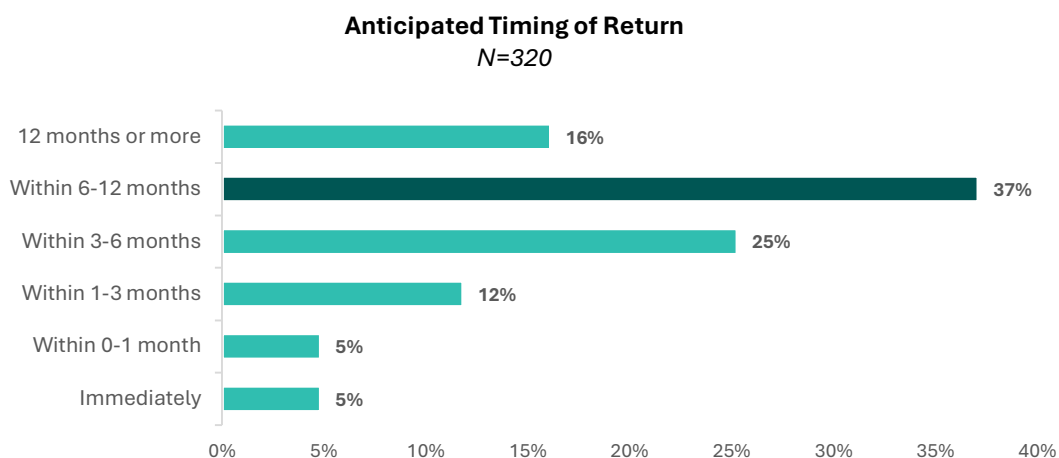
## Timelines and Perspectives

The timeline for return among Syrian refugees reveals significant variation, reflecting differing levels of confidence in the conditions necessary for a safe and sustainable return. Survey data indicates that **5%** of respondents would return immediately if conditions improved, while another **5%** planned to return **within the next 0-1 month**. These groups represent those who are eager to return, driven by hopes for immediate stability and personal circumstances that make returning a priority.

A slightly larger proportion, **12%**, anticipated **returning within 1-3 months**, reflecting cautious optimism tied to gradual improvements in governance and safety conditions. **25%** of respondents planned to return within 3-6 months, expressing a belief that tangible progress in rebuilding efforts and security could make a return feasible within this timeframe.

The majority of respondents, **37%**, indicated an intention **to return within 6-12 months**. These individuals are likely waiting for further developments, including enhanced infrastructure, economic opportunities, and governance reforms, before making the decision to return. This group's timeline reflects a more measured approach, balancing the desire to return with realistic concerns about ongoing challenges.

Finally, **16%** of respondents stated that they would wait **at least 12 months** or more before considering a return. This group's hesitancy is rooted in persistent fears and uncertainties surrounding safety, economic opportunities, and the availability of essential services in Syria. Their cautious stance underscores the need for sustained efforts to address these barriers to reintegration.



These findings demonstrate the varied timelines for return among Syrian refugees, influenced by personal circumstances, perceptions of progress in Syria, and the current conditions in host countries. While some are prepared to return immediately, others require more assurances of safety, stability, and access to critical services before making such a life-altering decision.

## Voices of Vulnerable Groups

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) reveal that vulnerable groups, especially women, children, and unaccompanied minors, face significant legal and documentation challenges during the return process. They risk forced return or legal limbo without proper documentation. Female-headed

households are particularly vulnerable to poverty and isolation, with limited support to rebuild their lives.<sup>56</sup>

Returnees encounter legal, social, and economic barriers, disproportionately affecting women, children, the elderly, and minority groups. Stricter identity verification at borders adds administrative burdens, leaving unaccompanied minors and undocumented families struggling to meet requirements. In disputed cases, DNA testing is required, yet costly and time-consuming, delaying family reunification.

Legal experts stress that the absence of dispute resolution, legal counseling, and identity reactivation worsens vulnerabilities. Many returnees remain in limbo, unable to reclaim property, secure legal status, or access protection. Property disputes are widespread due to lost or outdated land records, with no functioning legal system to resolve claims.

Social reintegration challenges significantly influence return decisions, particularly for families with children born abroad. Many children, especially those born in Türkiye, Lebanon, or Jordan, do not speak Arabic fluently, making it difficult for them to integrate into the Syrian school system. Additionally, years of displacement have disrupted formal education, requiring many children to undergo accelerated learning programs upon return.

### **Gendered Vulnerabilities**

Women face unique barriers, particularly in healthcare, economic opportunities, and psychosocial support. The healthcare system in return areas is severely under-resourced, with maternal and reproductive health services critically lacking (IBC Situation Report on Voluntary Return to Syria). Women and children are especially vulnerable to violence and exploitation at border crossings, while pregnant women and those with pre-existing conditions face limited medical care.<sup>57</sup>

KIIs from the UN agencies emphasized that local institutions often lack the resources and personnel to scale healthcare services in return areas, making it difficult for women to receive essential medical care. As noted by a UN Representative:

*“Local institutions often lack the resources and personnel to scale health services in return areas.”*

**KII, UN Representative, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Women returnees, especially survivors of gender-based violence (GBV) and forced displacement need psychosocial support, yet mental health services remain severely underfunded.<sup>58</sup> Women in return areas lack access to trauma counseling, safe spaces, and medical care for gender-based violence survivors. PTSD, anxiety, and depression are rising, but funding constraints limit access to trauma counseling and safe spaces.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>56</sup> World Bank. (2024) The Welfare of Syrian Households after a Decade of Conflict (English). Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. Retrieved from: <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099051624114042163/p1787061921ca30fc187161b7d84a5e4532>

<sup>57</sup> International Blue Crescent Relief and Development Foundation. (2024, December 8). Situation report on voluntary return to Syria. IBC. Retrieved from: <https://ibc.org.tr/userfiles/files/Situation-Report-on-Voluntary-Return-to-Syria.pdf>

<sup>58</sup> UNICEF. (2024). Syria situation reports. Retrieved from <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syria/situation-reports>

<sup>59</sup> International Blue Crescent (IBC). (2024, December). Syria humanitarian flash appeal. Retrieved from <https://ibc.org.tr/userfiles/images/files/IBC-SYRIA-HUMANITARIAN-FLASH-APPEAL-DECEMBER-2024-EN.pdf>



Economic empowerment is also a challenge. Vocational training programs are essential for self-sufficiency, while some women seek to engage in governance and rebuilding. It means a shift towards greater political engagement of women, as said:

*“Syrian women who support the revolution want to have their voices in the new Syria management”*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**

The absence of legal documentation for second marriages creates significant barriers to legal protection, custody claims, and property rights for returning women. According to the UNHCR Regional Refugee Community Feedback Report,<sup>60</sup> many female returnees face bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining documentation for themselves and their children, particularly when marriages are not officially registered in host countries or Syria. Women in such circumstances struggle to secure legal recognition of their children, as Syrian authorities often require official marriage documentation for birth registration and nationality claims. This lack of documentation places children at risk of statelessness and denies them access to basic rights such as education and healthcare. Legal experts among KIs interviewed highlight that property disputes, inheritance rights, and custody issues disproportionately impact women, underscoring the need for stronger legal frameworks and counseling services. As a legal expert noted:

*“Many families who returned without proper documentation or whose voluntary return was questioned now find themselves in legal limbo*

**KII, Legal Expert, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

### **Challenges Faced by the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities**

Elderly individuals are often more willing to return than younger populations, as they seek to rebuild their lives in familiar environments. However, many face severe challenges due to the lack of healthcare and social support. Those with chronic illnesses or age-related conditions struggle to access essential treatment, as healthcare services remain limited.<sup>61</sup> Many older returnees choose to return alone, expecting their families to follow later:

<sup>60</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024). Regional Refugee Community Feedback about Developments in Syria. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113358>

<sup>61</sup> International Blue Crescent (IBC). (2024). Situation report on voluntary return to Syria. Retrieved from <https://ibc.org.tr/userfiles/files/Situation-Report-on-Voluntary-Return-to-Syria.pdf>

*“Some elderly people are saying, ‘Let us go, and our children can join us later once they finish their responsibilities here.’”*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Healthcare infrastructure in return areas is fragile, with understaffed or non-operational clinics and hospitals.<sup>62</sup> Elderly individuals with pre-existing health conditions struggle to receive the specialized care they require. The absence of geriatric care, health screenings, and vaccination campaigns further heightens risks for elderly returnees and makes them highly vulnerable.

Persons with disabilities also face serious reintegration barriers, as Syria’s healthcare infrastructure remains inadequate to meet their needs. Accessible medical services, rehabilitation centers, and assistive devices are largely unavailable. This leaves individuals with disabilities without the necessary support for independent living.<sup>63</sup> Infrastructure challenges and the lack of tailored social services further isolate returnees with disabilities.<sup>64</sup> Many require long-term care, but such support remains scarce.

### **Minority Communities: Fear of Discrimination and Persecution**

Minority returnees often struggle with reintegration due to cultural barriers, social exclusion, and distrust in local governance. They face cultural differences, language barriers, and social exclusion.<sup>65</sup> KIIs also raised concerns that Syrian Dom and Roman communities, historically marginalized, fear continued discrimination and limited economic opportunities upon return. These communities often find better living conditions and job opportunities in Türkiye compared to Syria, despite facing challenges. Marginalized groups, such as the Roman and Dom prefer to stay in Türkiye due to better living conditions and job opportunities. As one respondent explained:

*“We have better opportunities here. Returning to Syria would bring back the same discrimination we faced before.”*

**KII, Respondent, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

A major concern among minority returnees is the fear of imprisonment or retaliation in politically unstable areas. Analysis by Yüksel and Gökalp-Aras<sup>66</sup> emphasizes that those perceived to have ties with the former regime supporters may be at higher risk of retaliation upon return. The absence of trust in local governance and ongoing social tensions further discourages the return of marginalized communities. UNHCR’s Syria Return Overview<sup>67</sup> highlights that minority groups are

<sup>62</sup> SARD (2024). Rapid Needs Assessment and Response Plan – Syria (December 2024). ReliefWeb. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/sard-rapid-needs-assessment-and-response-plan-syria-december-2024>

<sup>63</sup> International Blue Crescent (IBC). (2024). Situation report on voluntary return to Syria. Retrieved from: <https://ibc.org.tr/userfiles/files/Situation-Report-on-Voluntary-Return-to-Syria.pdf>

<sup>64</sup> UNICEF. (2024, December 24). Syria humanitarian situation report. Retrieved from: <https://www.unicef.org/documents/syria-humanitarian-situation-report-24-december-2024>

<sup>65</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024). Regional Refugee Community Feedback about Developments in Syria. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113358>

<sup>66</sup> Yüksel, U., & Gökalp-Aras, N. E. (2024). Preliminary reflections on post-Assad Syria: Emerging dynamics and the complex reality of refugee returns from Türkiye. Swedish Research Institute in Istanbul (SRII). Retrieved from: <https://www.returnmigration.eu/gapsblog/preliminary-reflections-on-post-assad-syria>

<sup>67</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2025, January 23). Syria governorates of return overview. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/114076>

disproportionately affected by governance failures and the absence of protection mechanisms, making reintegration more difficult.

Psychosocial support (PSS) is critical, particularly for children and youth affected by displacement and conflict. The psychological toll of war and reintegration challenges require urgent attention. As stated by a KI:

*“PSS services should be in place for returnees. This is a must because our people have suffered a lot.”*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and civil society organizations (CSOs) highlighted significant challenges for returnees with disabilities, chronic illnesses, and minority groups. Limited healthcare infrastructure in Syria poses severe risks for those needing specialized care. Syrian Dom and Roman communities remain reluctant to return due to historical discrimination, despite facing challenges in Türkiye, where they still find relatively better living conditions and job opportunities. Minority returnees struggle with reintegration due to cultural and language barriers, fear of imprisonment, and distrust in local governance. Social tensions, discrimination in accessing services, and fears of persecution, particularly for those with political or military affiliations, further hinder their return. KIIs emphasized the urgent need for social cohesion programs to rebuild trust and reduce discrimination.

## Push and Pull Factors

### *Push Factors in Host Countries*

As discussed in the different sections of the report, economic, social, and political pressures in host countries, particularly Türkiye, have increasingly influenced Syrian refugees’ decisions to consider returning to Syria. The rising cost of living, labor market instability, stricter migration policies, and the absence of legal status are significant drivers of this trend.

**Economic pressures** are among the most cited reasons for contemplating a return. Refugees in Türkiye face escalating costs for housing, food, and utilities, which have made sustaining livelihoods increasingly difficult. Survey data indicates that **11%** of respondents identified economic hardships in Türkiye as a primary reason for considering a return. A community leader in Sanliurfa summarized this sentiment:

*“Life in Türkiye has become too expensive for many families, and they are considering returning to Syria, where they believe the cost of living will be more manageable”*

**KII, Community Leader in Sanliurfa, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

**Labor market challenges** further compound these economic difficulties. Refugees are often confined to informal employment, characterized by low wages, long hours, and minimal job security. Syrians in Türkiye frequently take on low-wage, informal jobs characterized by long hours and minimal job security, leaving them vulnerable to economic instability. Inflation and high unemployment rates exacerbate these issues, leaving many refugees uncertain about their ability to achieve financial stability in Türkiye.<sup>68</sup>

**Social and political pressures** have also significantly influenced refugees' decisions. Stricter migration policies, such as the requirement to update addresses and renew residency permits, have created an atmosphere of insecurity. Human Rights Watch reported that Turkish authorities arbitrarily arrested, detained, and deported hundreds of Syrian refugee men and boys back to Syria between February and July 2022.<sup>69</sup> Deportation fears are common, as highlighted by a respondent in Gaziantep:

*"Many Syrians were deported because they couldn't meet these legal obligations, even for reasons as small as failing to update their addresses."*

**KII, Community Leader in Sanliurfa, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Political rhetoric and anti-refugee campaigns have further intensified social tensions, with opportunistic politicians scapegoating refugees for broader economic and social challenges. This has contributed to feelings of alienation among Syrian refugees.

Finally, the **legal status** has added to the uncertainty faced by refugees. With no clear pathways to permanent residency or citizenship in Türkiye, many refugees see return as a potentially more stable alternative. A community leader in Hatay described the growing tensions:

*"The atmosphere has grown more tense in recent years, with Syrians often scapegoated for broader economic and social issues."*

**KII, Community Leader in Hatay, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

The lack of clear pathways to permanent residency or citizenship in Türkiye has heightened uncertainty for Syrian refugees. Many view return as a potentially more secure option without long-term legal stability in Türkiye.

### *Pull Factors Encouraging Return to Syria*

While push factors in host countries create significant pressures, pull factors rooted in opportunities and emotional connections to Syria play an equally important role in influencing refugees' decisions to return.

<sup>68</sup> International Blue Crescent (IBC). (2024). Situation report on voluntary return to Syria. Retrieved from: <https://ibc.org.tr/userfiles/files/Situation-Report-on-Voluntary-Return-to-Syria.pdf>

<sup>69</sup> Human Rights Watch. (2022,). Turkey: Hundreds of refugees deported to Syria: EU should recognize Turkey is unsafe for asylum seekers. Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/10/24/turkey-hundreds-refugees-deported-syria>

**Reconstruction and Job Creation** are among the most compelling pull factors for many refugees.<sup>70</sup> Refugees perceive these reconstruction projects as opportunities to reestablish livelihoods and find employment.<sup>71</sup> Survey data indicates that **11%** of respondents identified economic opportunities in Syria as a motivating factor for their return. Therefore, one respondent from UN Agencies stated the role of employment in voluntary returns:

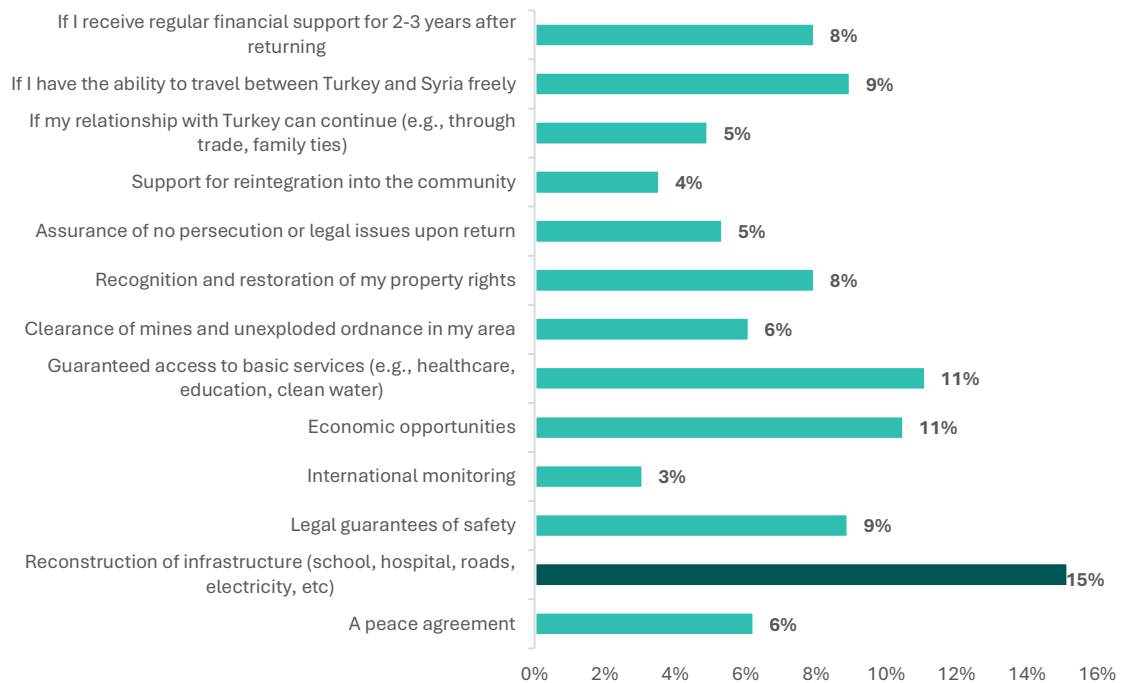
*“Without viable job opportunities or economic support in Syria, returnees face significant hurdles in rebuilding their lives. This socioeconomic uncertainty discourages larger waves of voluntary return, as individuals weigh the risks of returning to an unstable environment against the challenges of remaining in host communities.”*

**KII, Representative from UN Agencies, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Among the **key factors influencing Syrian refugees' decisions to return**, the most significant motivator is the **reconstruction of infrastructure (15%)**, followed by **economic opportunities and access to basic services (11%)**. Other notable factors include **legal guarantees of safety (9%)**, the ability to **travel freely between Turkey and Syria (9%)**, and **financial support upon return (8%)**. The findings underscore that while economic and infrastructural improvements are crucial, legal security and basic needs also play a major role in shaping return decisions.

### Factors Encouraging Return to Syria

N=320



<sup>70</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024). Situation report on Syrian refugees. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113630>

<sup>71</sup> International Blue Crescent (IBC). (2024, December). Syria humanitarian flash appeal. Retrieved from: <https://ibc.org.tr/userfiles/images/files/IBC-SYRIA-HUMANITARIAN-FLASH-APPEAL-DECEMBER-2024-EN.pdf>

**Emotional and Cultural Ties** also exert a strong influence, particularly for older refugees, with many expressing a deep longing to reconnect with their roots and rebuild their communities.<sup>72</sup> Many individuals feel deeply connected to their homeland and long to reunite with family members, rebuild their homes, and preserve their cultural traditions. This emotional pull is a significant driver for those with strong ties to Syria's history and identity. A key informant in Reyhanli articulated this sentiment:

*"We dream of going back to rebuild our homes and reconnect with our families. Syria is where our roots are."*

**KII, Respondent in Reyhanli, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

**Hope for Political Stability** is another factor encouraging refugees to consider returning. The upcoming **March 2025 elections** have inspired cautious optimism among many, as they view this event as a potential turning point for Syria's governance and security. Refugees believe that political reforms resulting from these elections could pave the way for a more stable and secure environment, reducing the risks associated with returning.

These pull factors illustrate the powerful role that opportunities, emotional ties, and political developments play in shaping refugees' decisions. However, these factors must be supported by tangible improvements in safety, governance, and infrastructure to ensure voluntary, safe, and sustainable returns.

### *Considering the Complexity of Return*

The experiences of Syrian refugees captured through case studies and narratives highlight the complex factors influencing their decisions to return to Syria or remain in host countries. These stories provide a humanized perspective on the challenges and aspirations shaping their lives. These are similarly experienced in the other regional examples, as in Yemen, as key considerations for IDPs and returnees include security conditions, housing availability, and the need to reconnect with family and friends.<sup>73</sup>

For some, **"go-and-see" visits** provide a way to make informed decisions about the return. Refugees in Kilis have utilized this newly introduced policy to assess conditions in Syria before committing to return. Heads of households evaluate safety, housing, and economic opportunities during these visits, enabling families to make better-informed decisions. A community leader emphasized:

*"This process gives families the opportunity to weigh their options and determine if conditions are suitable for return."*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**

<sup>72</sup> UNHCR. (2024, December 27). Regional flash update #7: Syria situation crisis. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-regional-flash-update-7-syria-situation-crisis-27-december-2024>

<sup>73</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), (2017). DTM Yemen – TFPM Multi-Cluster Needs Assessment of IDPs, Returnees and Host Communities (February 2017). IOM, Yemen. Available at: <https://dtm.iom.int/fr/reports/yemen-%E2%80%93-tfpm-multi-cluster-needs-assessment-idps-returnees-and-host-communities-february>

There are efforts to rebuild infrastructure in certain areas of northern Syria, which aim to create conditions conducive to such dignified returns.<sup>74</sup> According to the KIIs, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), which is central to managing the process of voluntary return with administrative, logistical, and capacity-building efforts, currently introducing a "**gold rap**" system at border crossings to minimize waiting times during peak periods, demonstrating a commitment to enhancing the efficiency and dignity of the return process.

## Reintegration Challenges

### *Infrastructure and Services*

The extensive destruction of essential infrastructure and public services severely hinders reintegration into post-conflict Syria.<sup>75</sup> Housing, healthcare, and utilities remain significant barriers for returnees, particularly in regions like Aleppo, Homs, and rural areas.<sup>76</sup> The level of devastation forces families to live in makeshift accommodations, relying heavily on humanitarian aid while awaiting reconstruction efforts.<sup>77</sup>

During the post-conflict reconstruction phase in heavily affected areas, the urgent need for **housing** arises as a critical challenge. Healthy shelters and adequate housing serve as an immediate response to address urgent needs, providing displaced individuals with essential protection and stability.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, long-term housing projects play a vital role in ensuring sustainable recovery and the restoration of communities by addressing both immediate shelter needs and broader reconstruction challenges. A successful approach must integrate economic, social, legal, and governance factors, drawing from Syria's past experiences while balancing human rights considerations with financial realities to foster inclusive recovery.<sup>79</sup>

Access to civil documentation plays a crucial role in this process as it guarantees full citizenship and protects individuals from marginalization, enabling them to access essential services and exercise their rights.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, **housing, land, and property (HLP) rights** become vital for equitable recovery, as they help prevent disputes and ensure that affected populations can rebuild their lives with security and stability.<sup>81</sup>

The best practices from the region, cash for work for stabilization in post-ISAS Iraq funded by IOM,<sup>82</sup> and Cash for Work in Yemen<sup>83</sup> to rebuild infrastructure funded by UNDP combine the reconstruction process with social protection. It can then aim at community participation in rebuilding while providing short-term conflict-affected populations.

<sup>74</sup> Şahin Mencütek, Z. (2020). Voluntary returns of refugees: Whose commitment counts? *Forced Migration Review*, 64, 18–20. Retrieved from: <https://www.fmreview.org/return/sahinmencutek>

<sup>75</sup> SARD (2024) Rapid Needs Assessment and Response Plan, Syria (December 2024). Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/sard-rapid-needs-assessment-and-response-plan-syria-december-2024>

<sup>76</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024). UNHCR Syria: Syria governorates of return overview- 31 December 2024. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113630>

<sup>77</sup> Assistance Coordination Unit. (2025) The Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report (December 2024). Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-dec-2024-enar>

<sup>78</sup> International Blue Crescent (IBC). (2024, December). Syria humanitarian flash appeal. Retrieved from: <https://ibc.org.tr/userfiles/images/files/IBC-SYRIA-HUMANITARIAN-FLASH-APPEAL-DECEMBER-2024-EN.pdf>

<sup>79</sup> Aita, A. (2020). Urban recovery framework for post-conflict housing in Syria. *Cercle des Economistes Arabes*. Retrieved from: <https://hlp.syria-report.com/hlp/urban-recovery-framework-for-post-conflict-housing-in-syria/>

<sup>80</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2024, December 23). UNHCR Syria: Internal displacement within Syria as of 18 December 2024. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113401>

<sup>81</sup> ESCWA. (2025) Syria at the Crossroads: Towards a Stabilized Transition [EN/AR]. Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-crossroads-towards-stabilized-transition-enar>

<sup>82</sup> IOM Iraq (2019). *Community Stabilization in Iraq: Cash-for-Work as a Catalyst for Recovery*.

<sup>83</sup> NDP Yemen (2020). *Cash-for-Work Programmes in Yemen: Building Resilience and Strengthening Livelihoods*



The state of **healthcare** is similarly dire. Based on the Assistance Coordination Unit's (ACU) Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment after the collapse of the Assad regime, nearly 47% of Aleppo's population **lacks access to healthcare**, with facilities operating under severe resource constraints.<sup>84</sup> Medical infrastructure, already strained by years of conflict, is insufficient to meet the needs of returnees and local communities. A representative from Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality highlighted these needs, stating:

*"Many homes have been completely destroyed, leaving people without a place to return to. The restart of production is essential. People in Syria still struggle to access critical necessities like healthcare, basic food supplies, and clean water."*

**KII, Representative from Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Utilities, including water and electricity, are unreliable or non-existent for significant portions of the population. In Aleppo, 34% of residents lack access to piped water, while electricity grids remain non-functional in many areas.<sup>85</sup> The lack of these essential services exacerbates vulnerabilities as families struggle to meet their basic needs in an already fragile environment.

These challenges underscore the significant barriers faced by returnees attempting to reintegrate into their communities. The slow pace of reconstruction and limited availability of basic services leave many returnees dependent on humanitarian assistance, unable to achieve self-sufficiency.

### *Economic and Social Barriers*

Economic instability and social tensions present significant barriers to reintegration for Syrian returnees. These challenges, rooted in disrupted livelihoods, unresolved legal issues, and strained community dynamics, hinder the ability of returnees to rebuild their lives.<sup>86</sup>

**Employment challenges** are a critical obstacle for many returnees. High unemployment rates and disrupted agricultural production limit economic opportunities. It results in high poverty rates and difficulty in meeting the household's basic needs.<sup>87</sup>

**Agricultural workers** form **26%** of Syria's economically active population.<sup>88</sup> FAO emphasizes that the protracted crisis has weakened agricultural production, with inflation, high food prices, and a declining economy pushing over half the population into acute food insecurity. A community leader in Gaziantep expressed these struggles:

<sup>84</sup> Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU). (2024) Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report. Retrieved from: [https://acu-sy.org/imu\\_reports/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-report\\_2024-dec-english/](https://acu-sy.org/imu_reports/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-report_2024-dec-english/)

<sup>85</sup> Assistance Coordination Unit. (2025) The Aleppo City Rapid Needs Assessment Report (December 2024). Available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/aleppo-city-rapid-needs-assessment-dec-2024-enar>

<sup>86</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2024). Regional refugee community feedback about developments in Syria. Retrieved from: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/113358>

<sup>87</sup> World Bank. Syria Economic Monitor, Spring 2024: Conflict, Crises, and the Collapse of Household Welfare. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

<sup>88</sup> FAO (2017). Counting the cost: Agriculture in Syria after six years of crisis. Available at: [https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b9c4f6d8-4fb8-42bb-a2c9-e018e38b1167/content?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b9c4f6d8-4fb8-42bb-a2c9-e018e38b1167/content?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

*“In rural areas, returning farmers need agricultural support to reclaim their lands and prepare for upcoming planting seasons. Farmers are going back to their fields, and some have returned to areas such as Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Hama, and their surrounding countryside.”*

**KIIs, Community Leader in Gaziantep, conducted during this study, 2024**

**Property disputes** further complicate reintegration. Destroyed or outdated land registries prevent many returnees from reclaiming their homes or businesses<sup>89</sup>. These legal challenges leave families in limbo, unable to reestablish ownership or begin rebuilding.<sup>90</sup> A key informant described the frustration:

*“Uncertainty over property rights and legal frameworks creates significant insecurity for returnees, who may face disputes over land or housing previously abandoned or occupied during the conflict*

**KII, Community Leader in Kilis, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

**Economic pressures** also weigh heavily on returnees. The cost of living has soared sharply, with the Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) increasing by 92% annually and more than tripling compared to 2022. Internal conflicts, poor economic conditions, energy scarcity, and regional conflicts trigger these inequalities. These problems drive up costs and disrupt supply chains, exacerbating economic pressures.<sup>91</sup>

The International Labor Organization (ILO) has highlighted the challenges returnees face in securing stable employment and generating income in Syria's fragile economic environment. In its brief titled "The ILO's Engagement in Syria: Advancing Decent Work within the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus," published in December 2024, the ILO notes that the accelerated return of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) has created pressures on fragile labor markets and social systems.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to economic difficulties, **social barriers** complicate reintegration. Returnees often encounter resentment from those who remained in Syria during the conflict, creating tension and division within communities. Resource competition and cultural shifts are the main stressors for the community. Despite existing community-based structures, they remain under-resourced and lack representation of marginalized groups in decision-making processes. Persisting gender inequality leads to a higher prevalence of poverty in female-headed households due to limited work opportunities for women<sup>93</sup>

<sup>89</sup> SARD (2024) Rapid Needs Assessment and Response Plan, Syria (December 2024). Retrieved from:

<https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/sard-rapid-needs-assessment-and-response-plan-syria-december-2024>

<sup>90</sup> Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA). (2024, December 12). Statement of the Syrian NGO Alliance (SNA) on recent changes in Syria. ReliefWeb. Retrieved from: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/statement-syrian-ngo-alliance-sna-recent-changes-syria-12-december-2024-enar>

<sup>91</sup> FAO (2024) Global Information and Early Warning System (GIEWS) Country Brief for Syria. Retrieved from:

<https://www.fao.org/giews/countrybrief/country.jsp?code=SYR>

<sup>92</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO). (2024). ILO Brief: The ILO's Engagement in Syria: Advancing Decent Work within the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus. Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/resource/brief/ilo-engagement-syria>

<sup>93</sup> Syria Community Consortium, Multi-Sectoral Needs Assessment, available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-community-consortium-multi-sectoral-needs-assessment>

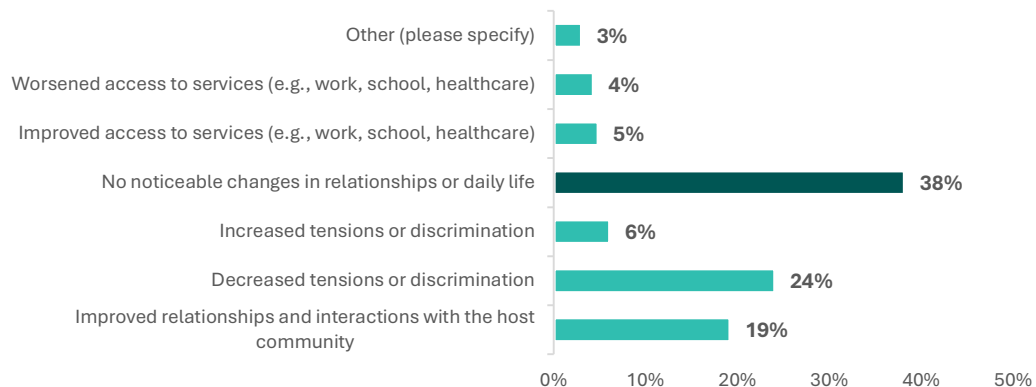
# Impact on Host Communities

## Social Cohesion

Refugee returns have had a multifaceted impact on social cohesion in host communities, bringing both positive and negative consequences. In regions where Syrians had been well-integrated, their departure has disrupted cultural exchanges and personal bonds that had developed over time. Younger generations who attended schools alongside Syrian peers have expressed a sense of loss, as reduced diversity in their educational and social environments has diminished opportunities for intercultural interaction. These disruptions underscore the cultural contributions refugees made to host communities during their stay.

Conversely, in areas where anti-refugee sentiments were prevalent, tensions have eased following refugee returns. Competition for shared resources, such as humanitarian aid and employment, had previously been a source of conflict in some host communities. Survey findings reflect this dynamic: while **38% of respondents reported no noticeable change in their relationships with local neighbors**, **19% noted improvements in social interactions** as pressure on communal resources diminished. Additionally, **24% of respondents observed a decrease in tensions or discrimination**, suggesting that economic and social pressures had contributed to previous grievances.

**Changes in relationships with the host community and in your daily life (e.g., at work, school, or hospital) since recent developments in Syria**  
N=320



Despite these shifts, there remains a risk of framing refugee returns as a straightforward "solution" to societal challenges. This narrative, often perpetuated through media and political discourse, risks reinforcing discriminatory attitudes and overlooking deeper structural issues within host communities. A respondent in Hatay expressed this concern:

*“Media narratives often frame returns as solving societal issues, which risks reinforcing stereotypes and hindering long-term harmony.”*

**KII, Representative from Legal Clinic in Hatay, conducted as part of this study, 2024**

## Housing

The departure of refugees influences housing in host communities, particularly in urban areas. In cities like Istanbul, the reduced demand for housing and public services has the potential to ease the pressure, making resource distribution more efficient and improving access for host communities. This shift can be especially beneficial in densely populated areas where competition for housing and services has been a persistent challenge.

Housing prices and rental costs are predominantly affected by the arrival of Syrians. A study analyzing the period from 2010 to 2017 found that the arrival of Syrian refugees led to a rise in house prices in Türkiye. This effect was more pronounced in low-priced housing segments and tended to diminish after 2014.<sup>94</sup> However, another research examining rental costs indicates that refugee inflows resulted in a 2-5% increase in housing rents, primarily affecting high-quality housing units. There was no significant impact on the rents of lower-quality units. This suggests that the increased demand from refugees influenced the rental market, especially in higher-end housing.<sup>95</sup> It is also phrased by a representative of a Syrian CSO in a way that:

*“In urban areas like Istanbul and border provinces such as Hatay, the reduction in refugee populations has been noted as a relief for local residents who have long expressed frustrations over housing shortages and increased living costs.”*

**Kilis, Representative from a Syrian CSO, conducted as part of this study, 2024.**

Although a relief on housing is prospective, it mainly depends on the scale of departures. On the other hand, 12% of employed Syrians are in the construction sector, according to livelihood survey findings in 2019.<sup>96</sup> Therefore, their contribution to construction cannot be underestimated.

## Economic Implications

The return of Syrian refugees has had significant economic consequences for host communities, producing both positive and negative outcomes. Syrian refugees play a vital role in Türkiye’s economy, especially in low-skilled and semi-skilled jobs. According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), many Syrians work as manufacturing laborers, machine operators, and garment workers. Around 32% are in low-skilled roles, 60.9% in semi-skilled jobs, and only 7.2% in high-skilled positions. Syrian refugees often take on jobs that may not attract the local workforce. Most Syrians work informally, especially in larger companies, with a focus on the manufacturing sector.<sup>97</sup> Their return to Syria could therefore disrupt productivity in these industries, exacerbating labor shortages and increasing production costs.

Survey findings show that **48% of respondents are employed**, with informal work at **25%, slightly exceeding formal employment**. This aligns with common refugee employment trends. Additionally, **22% are domestic workers, 13% are unemployed and seeking work, 6% are students, 7% fall into other categories, and 2% represented unemployed, and not looking for work**. The high proportion

<sup>94</sup> Yusuf Emre Akgündüz & Yavuz Selim Hacıhasanoğlu & Fatih Yılmaz, 2023. "Refugees and Housing: Evidence from the Mortgage Market," *The World Bank Economic Review*, World Bank, vol. 37(1), pages 147-176.

<sup>95</sup> Balkan, Binnur & Tok, Elif Özcan & Torun, Huzeyfe & Tumen, Semih (2018). Immigration, Housing Rents, and Residential Segregation: Evidence from Syrian Refugees in Turkey, IZA Discussion Papers 11611, Institute of Labor Economics (IZA).

<sup>96</sup> Turkish Red Crescent, WFP (2019). *Refugees In Turkey: Livelihoods Survey Findings 2019* [EN/TR]

<sup>97</sup> Pinedo Caro, L. (2020). Syrian Refugees in the Turkish Labour Market: A Socio-Economic Analysis. *Sosyoekonomi*, 28(46), 51-74. <https://doi.org/10.17233/sosyoekonomi.2020.04.03>

of domestic workers highlights traditional family roles, potentially limiting women's access to employment.

These figures highlight the precarious nature of employment among Syrians and raise questions about the feasibility of formalizing their positions should they remain in Türkiye. This has sparked concerns among local business owners and community leaders, who fear long-term economic consequences if these gaps remain unfilled. A local leader in Kilis expressed this concern:

*"If Syrians decide to return, there will be a huge human resource gap in terms of employability."*

**Kilis, conducted as part of this study, 2024.**

Beyond urban employment, the rural areas also depend heavily on Syrian labor which will create new challenges. In regions like Kilis, sectors such as agriculture and construction are experiencing labor shortages due to the absence of low-wage refugee workers.<sup>98</sup> A community leader from Kilis expressed concern over the economic repercussions:

*"The local economy here relies on Syrian workers. Their absence might result into a slowdown in production and higher labor costs."*

**Kilis conducted as part of this study, 2024.**

While some segments of the host community view refugee return to alleviate pressure on resources and social services, the economic impact tells a more complex story. The departure of Syrian workers could create significant challenges, particularly in sectors that have come to rely on their labor. Addressing this issue requires strategic policies to manage labor shortages, promote formal employment opportunities, and ensure that both host communities and returning refugees can navigate these economic transitions effectively.

### *Perceptions and Attitudes*

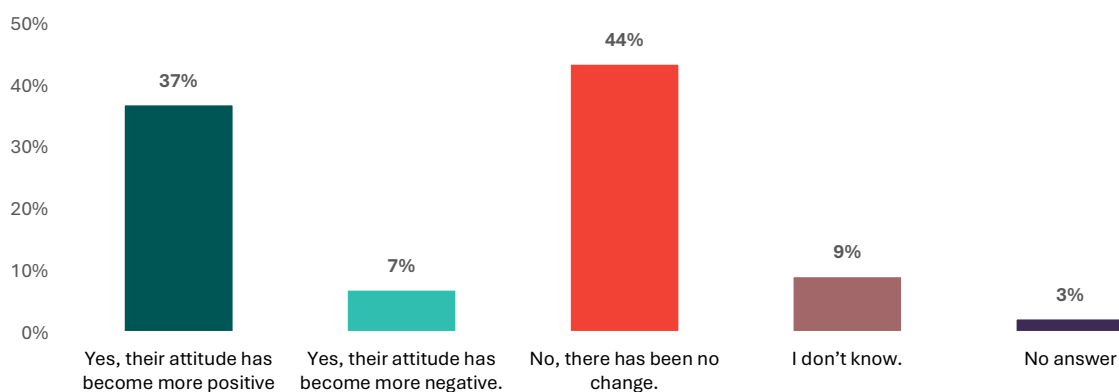
The perceptions and attitudes toward Syrian refugees within host communities are multifaceted and continue to evolve. Many respondents reported stable or improved interactions with local populations. However, **7%** observed worsening societal attitudes, particularly in workplaces, schools, and public services. As a minority group, they perceived increased hostility or discrimination. These negative shifts are often linked to political rhetoric and media narratives that portray refugees as contributors to societal challenges. Those reinforce stereotypes and fuel resentment. Additionally, **9%** of respondents were uncertain, possibly due to limited interaction or mixed experiences. Meanwhile, **3%** provided no answer.

Conversely, **37%** of respondents observed improved societal attitudes, driven by increased social interactions and cultural adaptation. These efforts have fostered understanding between refugees and host communities. However, some positive shifts may stem from repatriation talks, with locals

<sup>98</sup> Dođramaciođlu, H. (2022). The effects of refugees on Kilis culture and economy. Black Sea Journal of Public and Social Science, 5(2), 56–61. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.52704/bssocialscience.1067142>

expecting Syrians to leave. This raises concerns about whether these attitudes will last if returns are delayed. The findings highlight the complex and evolving relationship between Syrian refugees and host communities, shaped by personal experiences, politics, and media narratives.

**Change in Turkish Society's Attitudes towards Respondents**  
N=320



The shift in aid distribution has also become a contentious issue. As refugees return to Syria, public discourse around resource allocation has intensified. Some Turkish citizens have called for an end to aid programs targeting Syrians, arguing that resources should now focus solely on local populations. This growing sentiment raises concerns about the sustainability of support systems for the remaining refugees, potentially leaving the most vulnerable without access to critical assistance.

## Coordination and Collaboration

### *Successes and Gaps*

The findings from KIs and stakeholders on coordination and collaboration efforts, in the voluntary return and reintegration of Syrian refugees, indicate a mixture of progress and critical challenges. Across municipalities, UN agencies, CSOs, and legal entities, Key Informant (KI) perspectives highlight common themes of funding inequities, limited local engagement, trust deficits, etc. which may have been undermining the efficiency of initiatives like the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP).<sup>99</sup> These platforms provide a structured framework for aligning efforts in managing refugee support and voluntary return initiatives. According to KI findings, CSOs' representatives feel that the 3RP's coordination structure is dominated by international agencies, leaving local organizations marginalized. Larger organizations do not sufficiently engage local actors in decision-making processes, which limits effective collaboration and on-the-ground impact.

Municipalities play an essential role in resource mobilization and service delivery for returnees. For example, Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality collaborates with Syrian community leaders and international partners but struggles with shrinking budgets, inadequate long-term planning, and unequal funding allocations. As noted by one KI:

<sup>99</sup> The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) is a coordinated, multi-agency response led by UNHCR and UNDP to address the needs of Syrian refugees and host communities in neighboring countries. It focuses on humanitarian aid, resilience-building, and development support to promote stability and long-term solutions.

*" Different actors such as the UN, NGOs, and municipalities receive unequal amounts for the same type of work, hindering efficiency."*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Similar coordination gaps were cited by Hatay Metropolitan Municipality, which emphasizes the need for return-specific platforms to streamline cross-sector collaboration. Funding limitations and insufficient mechanisms for direct resource transfer hinder the municipality's ability to scale services effectively.

Gaziantep Municipality referenced plans to reconstruct infrastructure in Syria, including drilling water wells and building bakeries, but cited funding constraints as a limiting factor. Despite municipal efforts, KIs pointed out that these initiatives require stronger collaboration with international donors for scalability. Cross-border coordination is highlighted in Urfa and Kilis. However, KIs also emphasized the challenges posed by unsafe border crossings, particularly near Tel Abyad.

The impact of funding limitation or declining funding was also cited by CSO representatives, reflecting a broader concern across UN agencies that reduced donor contributions hinder their ability to shift from short-term emergency aid to sustainable, long-term reconstruction and integration efforts. As one of the representatives noted:

*" Declining trends in donor support threaten the sustainability of existing coordination mechanisms and long-term initiatives"*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**

Fragmented governance in Syria and trust issues with local partners are also emphasized by UN representatives and others that complicate program implementation. Other KIs also raised concerns regarding trust deficits in collaboration efforts, particularly with local partners.

The political and administrative divisions within Syria controlled by various groups in different regions, hindering the efforts to implement a unified strategy for returnee support such as cross-border initiatives and services coordinated between Turkish municipalities and organizations operating in Syria face bureaucratic, logistical, and security-related obstacles.

CSO representatives feel that local actors are not sufficiently included in the current coordination structure, and their influence in decision-making processes remains limited. This situation can negatively impact the effectiveness of collaboration and the impact on the ground. The lack of full integration and multi-level coordination weakens efforts to provide tailored support for returnees, especially in areas with fragmented governance. These concerns highlight the need for stronger partnerships and inclusive decision-making frameworks.

CSO representatives also highlighted their efforts in economic empowerment, social cohesion, and vocational training but expressed frustration with fragmented coordination structures. Key informants consistently highlighted the need for enhanced inclusivity, local capacity-building, and adaptable strategies to meet evolving challenges. Effective coordination mechanisms require



deliberate efforts to integrate smaller organizations, ensure their meaningful participation, and leverage their on-the-ground expertise to achieve sustainable outcomes.

Plans to rebuild infrastructure in Syria face financial constraints, requiring stronger collaboration with international donors. Cross-border coordination issues, unsafe border crossings, and fragmented governance in Syria further complicate efforts. Trust deficits between local and international actors also hinder implementation, while CSOs feel sidelined in decision-making within the 3RP framework, reducing on-the-ground impact.

Limited capacity in legal services, inadequate infrastructure, and declining donor support threaten sustainable returns. Essential services like healthcare, education, and employment remain insufficient in return areas, with high costs and poor facilities adding to returnees' struggles. Despite efforts like the **"gold rap"** system to improve border processing, logistical and administrative obstacles persist. Many returnees face legal challenges, particularly in identity verification and property rights, with a lack of clear communication on the consequences of voluntary returns causing distress. Addressing these gaps requires stronger partnerships, inclusive coordination, and sustainable funding mechanisms.

### Stakeholder Roles

Municipalities, UN agencies, and CSOs play a crucial role in supporting voluntary returns, but challenges such as funding inequities, limited local engagement, and coordination gaps hinder efficiency. Gaziantep and Hatay municipalities struggle with shrinking budgets and unequal resource distribution, limiting their ability to scale services. KIIs' findings and stakeholders on coordination and collaboration efforts in the voluntary return and reintegration of Syrian refugees indicate a mixture of progress and critical challenges. Across municipalities, UN agencies, CSOs, and legal entities, Key Informants' (KIs) perspectives highlight common themes of funding inequities, shortage, limited local engagement, and trust deficits, which may have been undermining the efficiency of initiatives like the 3RP. Furthermore, the lack of full integration and multi-level coordination weakens efforts to provide tailored support for returnees, especially in areas with fragmented governance.

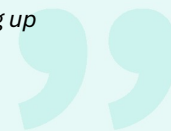
*"For these efforts to be fully effective, there must be a deliberate effort to include all relevant actors in decision-making processes, ensuring that interventions are both comprehensive and inclusive."*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**

**Municipalities** are at the forefront of coordinating local services for returnees, including housing, transportation, and access to basic amenities. Municipalities like Gaziantep and Kilis have demonstrated proactive engagement with refugee communities. For example, Gaziantep regularly collaborates with Syrian leaders to ensure that local services align with community needs. However, these municipalities face persistent funding shortages that limit their capacity to transition from emergency response to long-term recovery efforts. A representative from Kilis highlighted this constraint:

*"Our budgets are stretched thin, and without sustained donor funding, scaling up services is impossible."*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**



**CSOs** provide essential support in areas like legal aid, community outreach, and capacity-building for vulnerable populations. Partnerships with organizations such as the Turkish Bar Association have streamlined administrative processes, including identity verification and legal compliance for returnees. However, smaller CSOs face significant barriers to meaningful participation in coordination platforms. Limited resources and representation in decision-making forums hinder their ability to contribute to collective efforts.

These examples underscore the importance of strengthening coordination mechanisms among stakeholders. Ensuring adequate funding, expanding mental health services, and enhancing the inclusion of smaller CSOs in decision-making processes are essential steps toward addressing the challenges faced by Syrian refugees and returnees. Collaborative and inclusive approaches are critical for building a more effective and sustainable response framework.

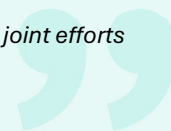
### *Cross-Border Collaboration*

Cross-border operations play a critical role in addressing the needs of Syrian returnees, yet they also present significant challenges. Maintaining trust among stakeholders and ensuring operational efficiency are key areas requiring attention.

**Mistrust and inefficiencies** are pervasive issues in cross-border collaborations. Partnerships are often strained by skepticism regarding the neutrality and intentions of certain organizations, particularly those with perceived political affiliations. This mistrust undermines joint efforts and hinders the effectiveness of collaborative initiatives. One respondent emphasized this challenge:

*"Some actors question the neutrality of their counterparts, which slows down joint efforts and diminishes trust."*

**KII conducted as part of this study, 2024**



**Operational Challenges** further complicate cross-border efforts. Disparities in regulatory frameworks between jurisdictions create obstacles to seamless coordination. Municipalities frequently face delays in approvals and struggle to align their operations with those of international stakeholders. These misalignments result in bottlenecks that impede the delivery of essential services to returnees and vulnerable populations.

# Discussion

## Interpretation of Findings and Scenarios for Refugee Returns to Syria

### Scenarios for Refugee Returns to Syria

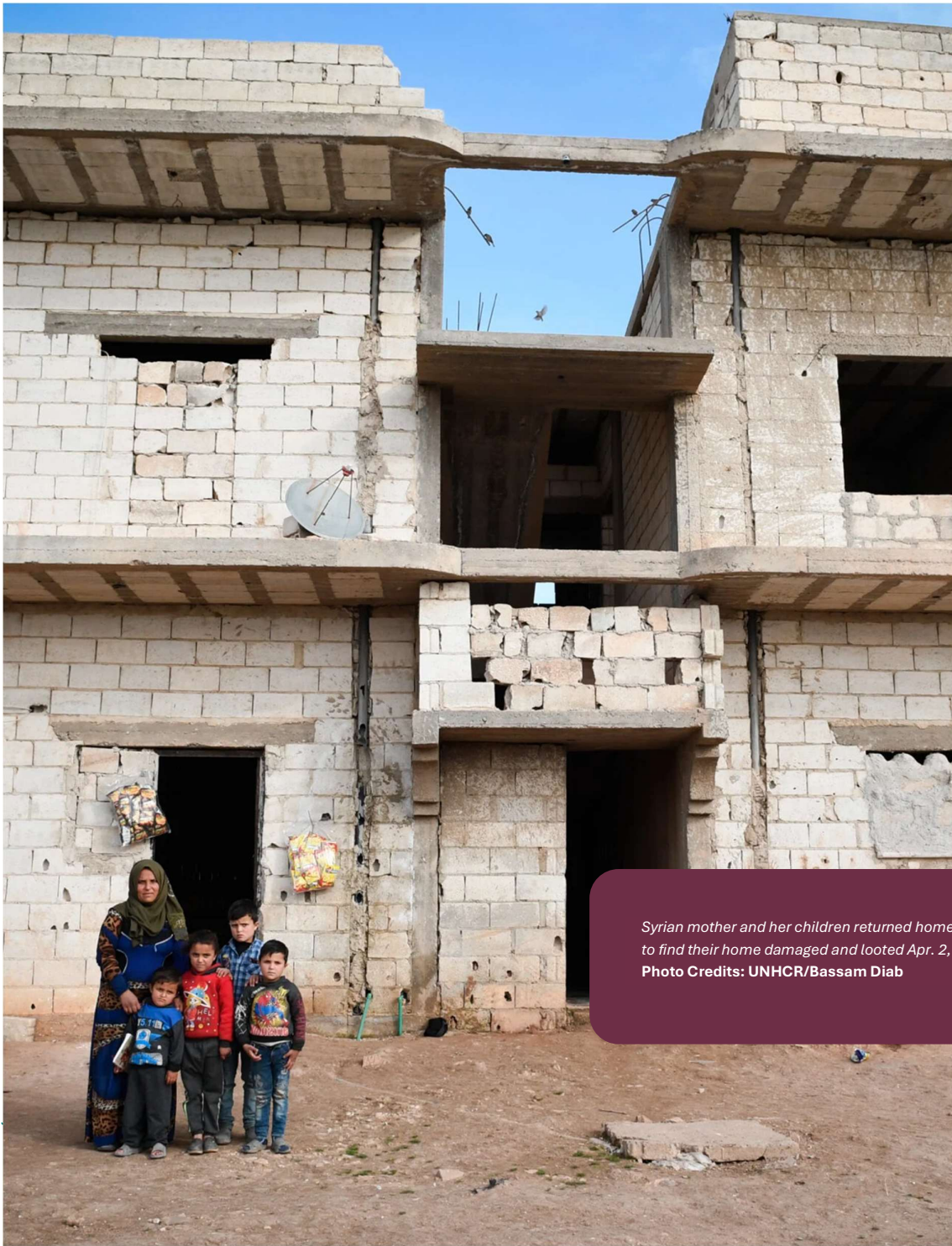
In an **optimistic scenario**, the transitional government stabilizes rapidly, ensuring safety and promoting inclusive governance. International actors, including the UN and donor countries, provide substantial support for rebuilding critical infrastructure such as housing, healthcare, and education. Economic opportunities emerge as reconstruction projects take shape and investments flow into key sectors. The reconstruction process targets rural and urban areas to prevent overcrowding and the creation of informal settlements. In this scenario, refugees return voluntarily and in increasing numbers, driven by improved living conditions and economic prospects. The spatial redistribution of populations is facilitated by smooth and effective governance structures. Coordination mechanisms between Turkish authorities and Syrian stakeholders facilitate smooth logistical transitions, while social cohesion programs reintegrate returnees into communities. Targeted interventions address the unique needs of vulnerable groups. However, this scenario requires significant international cooperation, robust financial commitments, and sustained political will, all of which may face delays or resistance.

A **moderate scenario** envisions the new Syrian government making progress in selected regions while instability persists in others. Reconstruction efforts proceed but are hampered by limited funding and fragmented coordination. Refugees begin returning to areas where conditions are more favorable, such as urban centers with better infrastructure and economic activity. However, these returns are selective and uneven, often favoring wealthier or less vulnerable refugees. Many refugees remain in host countries, awaiting broader improvements in Syria. While host countries continue to face socio-economic pressures, targeted programs help alleviate some of the burden. Incremental improvements in coordination between Türkiye and Syria enable phased returns, but disparities in return conditions create inequalities, and the slow pace of progress may lead to frustration among both refugees and host communities.

In a **pessimistic scenario**, economic and political pressures in host countries lead to accelerated refugee returns without ensuring adequate safety or infrastructure in Syria. The transitional government struggles to establish control, leaving many regions insecure and vulnerable to sporadic violence or governance issues. Refugees returning to such unstable environments face heightened risks, particularly women and children, while inadequate infrastructure exacerbates humanitarian crises. Many returnees experience secondary displacement as they are unable to sustain themselves

in Syria. Host countries also face challenges, as some refugees fail to reintegrate and remain reliant on external aid. This scenario violates international principles of voluntary, safe, and dignified returns, undermining regional stability and exacerbating long-term crises.

Finally, a **status quo scenario** reflects a prolonged stalemate in which conditions in Syria improve only marginally. Reconstruction efforts remain limited, and insecurity persists in key areas. Host countries continue current refugee policies, providing basic services but facing growing domestic opposition to their presence. International support remains fragmented and insufficient to drive meaningful change. In this scenario, only small-scale returns occur, with refugees remaining in host countries and unable to fully integrate or return home. Tensions within host communities increase as resources become strained while refugees remain in a state of limbo, caught between two uncertain futures. This scenario perpetuates the humanitarian and socio-economic pressures on both refugees and host countries, with limited pathways to durable solutions.



*Syrian mother and her children returned home to Dayr Hafir to find their home damaged and looted Apr. 2, 2021.*  
Photo Credits: UNHCR/Bassam Diab

# Recommendations

## For Policy Makers

Recommendations	Cautions
<p>Ensure returns are <b>voluntary, safe, and dignified to Syria</b>, preventing forced deportations and mitigating <b>security risks at border crossings</b>.</p>	<p>Coercive policies or unsafe conditions could undermine voluntary returns.</p>
<p><b>Develop a phased reintegration plan</b> that prioritizes safe zones with sustainable infrastructure, healthcare, and education to encourage voluntary and informed returns.</p>	<p>Returning people to areas without functioning services could lead to secondary displacement or further vulnerabilities.</p>
<p><b>Strengthen cross-border coordination mechanisms</b> with international and local actors to monitor security conditions and ensure safe and dignified returns.</p>	<p>Weak coordination may result in returnees facing insecurity, lack of services, or arbitrary detention upon arrival.</p>
<p><b>Ensure legal protection and stability for Syrians in Türkiye</b> by maintaining <b>Temporary Protection Status</b> and preventing premature returns until safety, services, and reintegration mechanisms in Syria are secured.</p>	<p>Premature withdrawal of protection status may expose Syrians to coercion, forced returns, or legal limbo.</p>



## For Donors

Recommendations	Cautions
<b>Ensure sustainable and long-term funding for essential services</b> (healthcare, education, and legal aid) for Syrians in Türkiye to prevent premature and unsafe returns.	Short-term funding cycles may disrupt essential services, increasing vulnerabilities.
<b>Support voluntary return programs with livelihood and housing assistance</b> to ensure returnees can access jobs, shelter, and economic opportunities in Syria.	A lack of economic opportunities in return areas may lead to re-displacement or increased dependency on aid.
<b>Fund community cohesion programs in Türkiye and in Syria</b> to address tensions between host communities and Syrians through social integration initiatives.	Social cohesion programs may be ineffective or fuel further polarization, without proper engagement.
<b>Invest in returnee monitoring systems</b> to track reintegration progress and identify protection risks post-return.	Lack of transparent reporting may hinder the ability to adjust programs based on returnees' evolving needs.

## For Implementing Partners

Recommendations	Cautions
Work with international organizations to push for <b>adherence to safety protocols</b> in all return-related activities.	Programs that do not address both urban and rural needs may be ineffective.
<b>Ensure access to psychosocial support (PSS) and mental health services</b> for returnees, particularly for survivors of trauma, violence, or displacement-related stress.	Insufficient mental health services may exacerbate trauma and affect reintegration success.
<b>Expand legal aid services for returnees</b> to navigate property claims, labor rights, and civil documentation issues upon return.	A lack of legal assistance may result in land/property loss, discrimination, or economic instability.

<p><b>Strengthen gender-sensitive return programs</b> by ensuring tailored support for female-headed households and survivors of gender-based violence.</p>	<p>Ignoring gender-specific vulnerabilities may leave women and children without adequate protection or livelihoods.</p>
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## For Coordination Mechanisms

Recommendations	Cautions
<p><b>Establish an inter-agency coordination platform</b> for Türkiye and Syria to track voluntary returns, infrastructure readiness, and reintegration progress.</p>	<p>Weak data-sharing among agencies may lead to mismanagement, inefficiencies, and duplication of efforts.</p>
<p>Develop unified <b>guidelines for safety measures</b>, ensuring consistency across return areas.</p>	<p>Inconsistent safety guidelines could create disparities across return areas.</p>
<p><b>Create transparent feedback and complaint mechanisms for Syrians in Türkiye and returnees in Syria</b> to ensure accountability in the return process.</p>	<p>Without feedback mechanisms, grievances may go unaddressed, discouraging future returnees.</p>
<p><b>Improve cross-border humanitarian logistics</b> to facilitate the delivery of essential aid and services in return areas.</p>	<p>Delays in service delivery may create further vulnerabilities for early returnees.</p>



This report was produced by Innovation Consulting and Solutions in partnership with the Humanitarian Consultancy Group.

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