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THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET *Programme*



Initial Reflections on Voluntary Return

4th Round of Focus Group Discussion Report

Jul'25



KIZILAYKART
Cash Based Assistance
Programmes



Initial Reflections on Voluntary Return

4th Round of Focus Group Discussion Report

Jul' 25



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TABLE OF CONTENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	2
INTRODUCTION	3
Background	3
KEY FINDINGS	4
METHODOLOGY	5
Research Design	5
Data Collection and Sampling.....	5
Geographical Coverage	6
FINDINGS	7
Demographic Characteristics.....	7
Employment Status.....	7
Education Levels.....	8
Patterns of Migration and Resettlement.....	8
Perceptions on Voluntary Return.....	9
Primary Groups Expected to Return	11
Awareness on Voluntary Return and Go-and-See Visits Procedures	11
Access to Relevant Information Regarding Current Situation	12
Factors Behind the Decision to Stay in Türkiye	13
Livelihoods	14
Impact of Cash Assistance.....	14
Education	15
Essential Requirements for Voluntary Return	16
CONCLUSION	18
RECOMMENDATIONS	19
REFERENCES	20



ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

C-ESSN	Complementary Emergency Social Safety Net
ESSN	Emergency Social Safety Net
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
PDMM	Provincial Directorate of Migration Management
SSN	Social Safety Net
SuTPs	Syrians under Temporary Protection
TRC	Turkish Red Crescent (Türk Kızılay)

Executive Summary



Shelter, cash assistance, and livelihood support were identified as priority assistance areas required for enabling safe and voluntary return of families.

This report examines the perspectives of Syrian refugee families in Türkiye on voluntary return following the regime change. The discussion aimed to understand the motivations, concerns, and expectations of individuals regarding their potential voluntary return to their home countries. While a few families have begun planning to return, most remain hesitant due to ongoing instability and unsafe conditions in Syria. Key concerns include insecurity, destroyed housing, unemployment, and limited access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure. Although some participants expressed openness to return if conditions improve, many prefer to remain in Türkiye, where access to livelihoods, education, healthcare, and housing provides a more stable living environment. Yet, the potential loss of temporary protection status was also mentioned as contributing to uncertainties about staying in Türkiye. As participants shared diverse perspectives shaped by their knowledge of the conditions in their home country; shelter, cash assistance, and livelihood support were identified as priority assistance areas required for enabling safe and voluntary return of families. These findings can play a significant role in informing humanitarian strategies, policymaking, and program design.

Introduction

Background

The regime change in Syria on December 8, 2024, marked a turning point for the country's long-standing conflict. The fall of the government triggered a series of rapid political and security developments, transforming despair into cautious hope for the 14 million displaced Syrians worldwide¹. As a consequence, the possibility of large-scale repatriation has entered the global discourse with the possibility of returning to their homes suddenly become imaginable. While some had already return to their motherland, the decision to return is a hard one to give for many.

There are 2.8 million Syrians currently present under temporary protection status,² the Turkish government is engaging in efforts to ensure the voluntary, safe, dignified, and orderly return of Syrian nationals.³ Since the regime change 698,282 refugees have returned to Syria, with 38 per cent departing from Türkiye.⁴ Yet early return patterns reveal complex decision-making dynamics. The main factors influencing the decision to return such as conditions of the origin country and the host country. Individual factors such as social relationships, family as well as personal characteristics such as age and gender influence the decision-making process. Together, these elements determine whether an individual chooses to return to his or her country of origin.⁵

This focus group discussion was conducted to examine perspectives and awareness on voluntary return and go-and-see visit procedures, and analyzing the factors influencing decision-making processes in the aftermath of the recent developments. Findings also present critical information on the perceptions on factors behind the decision to stay in Türkiye, and the required conditions in Syria for voluntary return.

1 UNHCR. (13 March 2025). Syria Refugee Crisis Explained. <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained>.

2 Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of the Interior, Presidency of Migration Management. (13 March 2025). Temporary Protection. <https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638>.

3 Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of the Interior, Presidency of Migration Management. (n.d.). Voluntary, Safe, Dignified and Orderly Return. <https://en.goc.gov.tr/voluntary-safe-and-dignified-return>.

4 UNHCR. (17 July 2025). Syria Governorates of Return Overview. <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/syria-governorates-return-overview-17-july-2025>.

5 Black, Richard, Koser, Khalid, Munk, Karen et al. (2004), Understanding Voluntary Return, Sussex Centre for Migration, Online Report, 50/04. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/242490813_Understanding_Voluntary_Return.

Key Findings

- Due to the lack of minimum safety and living standards in Syria, the majority of respondents do not have immediate plans to return, although some mentioned their intention to return upon the improvement of conditions in the country.
- Safety concerns, limited housing and employment opportunities, and destruction of infrastructure and essential services remain as major barriers for voluntary return.
- Shelter, cash assistance (for transportation, housing repairs, and rent) and livelihood support are mentioned as the priority sectors of assistance for enabling safe and voluntary return of Syrian families.
- Awareness of official voluntary return and go-and-see visit procedures is limited, with only a small number of respondents being familiar with the application process.
- Respondents perceive the stability and standards of life in Türkiye as outweighing the risks associated with returning to Syria.
- Housing appears to be a major challenge, as many homes in Syria have been destroyed, severely damaged, or confiscated.
- Education related concerns, including the Arabic language barrier, differences in curricula, and uncertainty over diploma recognition in Syria, further discourage families from voluntary return.



Methodology

Research Design

Following the developments on December 8th, a series of studies were initiated to explore the perceptions of voluntary return among Syrian refugees living in Türkiye. To complement these ongoing quantitative efforts, this particular study adopted the focus group discussion (FGD) method to gain in-depth qualitative insights from participants in a group setting that encouraged open dialogue and the sharing of diverse perspectives. The overall study design, including the preparation of the discussion guide, data collection, and analysis were led by the Türk Kızılay Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Team.

Data Collection and Sampling

A total of 127 Syrian refugees residing in Türkiye participated in the study. Participants were selected using a simple random sampling technique, including both recipients and non-recipients of the Emergency Social Safety Net (ESSN) and Complementary ESSN (C-ESSN) programs, aged between 18 and 59.

Data collection took place between January 20 and 31, 2025. Prior to fieldwork, an information session was held with Türk Kızılay field staff to review the discussion guide and gather feedback to ensure smooth implementation. Sixteen FGD sessions were held, each consisting of approximately eight participants. All sessions were conducted face-to-face in Arabic by trained moderators and transcribers from the Türk Kızılay field staff. Sessions were organized separately for men and women to promote a safe and inclusive environment for open discussion. The audio recordings were transcribed and subsequently analyzed using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA.



Geographical Coverage

The study was conducted across eight provinces in Türkiye, selected based on the density of Syrian refugee populations: İstanbul, Konya, İzmir, Bursa, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Kilis, and Hatay. This broad geographical scope allowed for the inclusion of varied regional contexts and experiences, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of voluntary return perceptions among Syrian refugees.



Figure 1 Focus Group Discussion Provinces

Findings

Demographic Characteristics

Focus groups discussions were conducted with 127 participants, comprising 65 men and 62 women. The majority of the attendants were married and aged between 30-50, with an average age of 45. Households consisted of approximately seven individuals, with two children attending school.

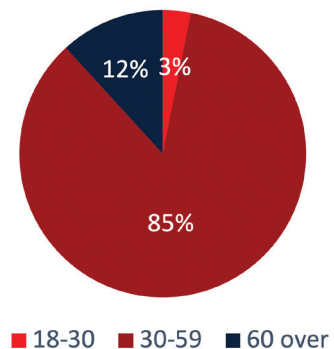


Table 1 Age of Attendants

Employment Status

Unemployment was significantly high among participants, especially women. The majority of the women were reported to be housewives while some engaged in home-based crafting such as sewing or handicrafts. For men, almost half of them were also unemployed while the other half were working in various sectors such as construction, craftsmanship and textiles, including working in irregular jobs.

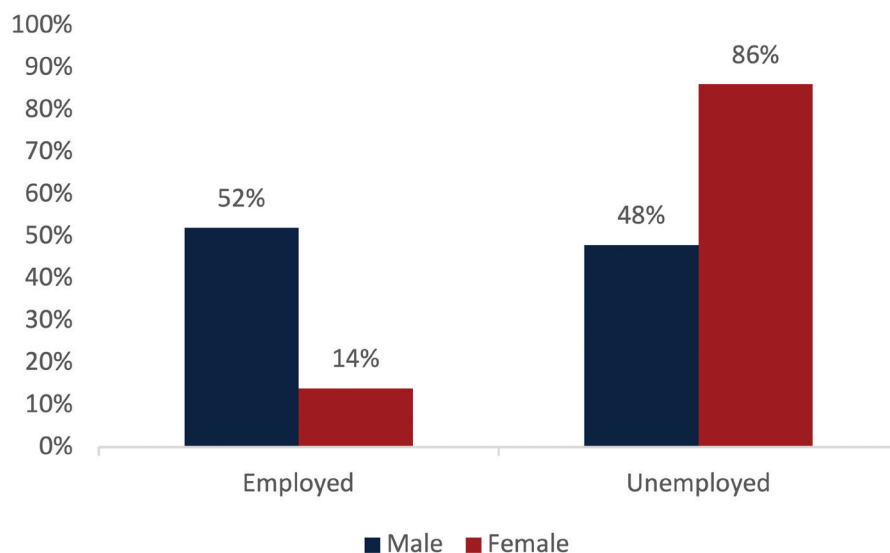


Table 2 Gender Based Employment Status

Education Levels

The education levels of the attendants were densely concentrated in middle school and below. While 11 per cent of the participants were illiterate with no formal education, 23 per cent had completed high school and university.

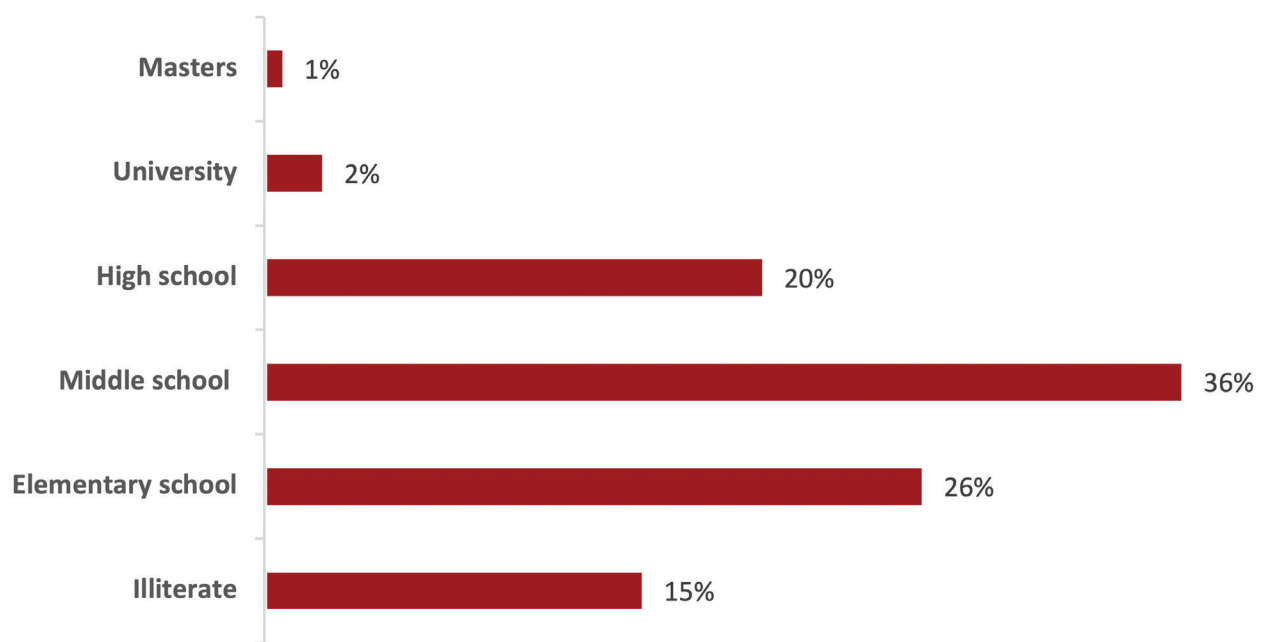


Table 3 Education Levels

Patterns of Migration and Resettlement

The majority of households originated from Aleppo, reflecting broader displacement patterns from war-affected neighboring regions. On the other hand, respondents have been residing in Türkiye for 10 to 12 years, with the shortest recorded stay being 7 years and the longest 14 years.

City of Origin in Syria	
Aleppo	101
Idleb	5
Deyrizor	4
Hama	4
Rakka	4
Haseke	3
Damascus	3
Afrin	1
Homs	2

Table 4 City of Origin in Syria

Perceptions on Voluntary Return

The regime change in Syria was welcomed with joy among Syrian families living in Türkiye. However, despite the initial optimism, only a limited number of individuals expressed intentions to visit or relocate to Syria within the next few months, following the end of the school semester in the summer. Meanwhile, the majority of respondents indicated no immediate plans to return. Prevailing uncertainty around safety and stability, along with limited access to housing, employment, and essential services, appears to be the key factors preventing the establishment of conditions necessary for a sustainable return.

Security concerns appears to be the primary barrier preventing families from voluntarily returning to Syria. Respondents mentioned the active presence and intensification of internal group formations, and conflicts between armed militant groups. This situation is particularly reported for the Aleppo region. Given that over 1.2 million Syrians living in Türkiye originate from Aleppo accounting for 61 per cent of the total Syrian population in Türkiye⁶ most families are reluctant to return to the region. Surveys held at the border gates with go-and-see visitors reveal that those who initially visited to Syria in search of safety found that secure conditions had not yet been established, reinforcing their hesitation to return after witnessing the situation firsthand.⁷



6 Anadolu Agency. (24 December 2024). İçişleri Bakanı Yerlikaya: Son 15 günde Suriye'ye dönenlerin sayısı 25 bini geçti. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/icisleri-bakani-yerlikaya-son-15-gunde-suriyeye-donenlerin-sayisi-25-bini-gecti/3432689>.

7 Türk Kızılay. (March 2025). Evaluation of Voluntary Return and Go-and-See Visits Motivations. (unpublished).



“Who wouldn’t want to return to their country! We want to go back too; after all, those are the places where we spent our childhood. However, life there has completely come to a halt. There is no electricity, no water, and the cost of living is incredibly high.”



Female, İzmir

The absence of livelihood opportunities is the second most significant factor against voluntary return. Respondents mentioned the lack of employment opportunities, job security, temporary or daily jobs with unsatisfactory working conditions. Similar findings were also reported in the surveys held at the border gates by go-and-see visitors who went to Syria due to economic hardships in Türkiye.⁸ In the absence of stable and dignified employment, families are concerned for sustaining their basic needs making voluntary return increasingly difficult. It was reported that most of their relatives or acquaintances in Syria work in mainly agriculture, construction, textiles and animal husbandry sectors, while some others remain unemployed. Additionally, even their civil servant relatives previously working in the government do not have job security as they are currently working in unskilled jobs in order to make a living. This situation raises concerns among skilled professionals and recent university graduates, who fear that upon returning to Syria, they will struggle to secure employment that matches their qualifications.

The lack of housing appears to be the third obstacle over voluntary return. The vast majority of respondents with land or property ownership in Syria stated that their homes in Syria have been destroyed or severely damaged. Additionally, some go-and-see visitors reported that their homes were uninhabitable and their assets had been confiscated upon their visits to Syria.⁹ Although a significant number of people don’t have any land or property ownership, they expressed the hardships of finding a proper place to stay and difficulty to pay rent. Hence, a large segment of the population sees no viable living conditions upon return.

Access to essential services such as education, healthcare and infrastructure is the fourth most concerning factor for Syrian families considering a return. The education system has been severely disrupted due to years of conflict, with schools damaged or destroyed. Many families worry that their children will not receive a quality education or may be forced to drop out due to safety concerns and cultural beliefs. With most children enrolled in school in Türkiye, Arabic language barrier and differences in education curriculum significantly impact the voluntary return decision Syrian families with school-age children. Similarly, the healthcare system is in crisis, with hospitals and clinics lacking medical supplies, equipment, and trained professionals. Many healthcare facilities have been damaged or are non-operational, making it difficult for individuals with special medical needs to access the necessary medical treatment. Many participants also highlighted that the inadequate infrastructure since the conflict has severely damaged electricity and water facilities, resulting in frequent power and water outages, as well as a lack of reliable internet access. Without consistent access to these basic utilities, returning and rebuilding a life seems unfeasible.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Primary Groups Expected to Return

When asked which households are more likely to return to Syria, the vast majority of participants predicted that those who have financial stability and own property in Syria would be the first to return. Additionally, some believe that young men with professional skills, those with existing jobs in Syria, or entrepreneurs planning to start businesses there would return first, as their return is considered crucial for contributing to the country's reconstruction and economic revitalization. On the other hand, some mentioned that those with young children, elderly or disabled family members are unlikely to return before the living conditions are improved.

Awareness on Voluntary Return and Go-and-See Visits Procedures

Regarding procedures of voluntary return, only some respondents are informed about the application procedure which takes place through the Provincial Directorates of Migration Management (PDMM). While several of them are aware of the go-and-see visits, allowed 3 times till July 1st 2025, a few understand the requirement to pay any bills or penalties prior to departure. Notably, a handful of individuals have heard the contingency of go-and-see visits on their permanent return at the end of the permitted period and that their identity cards will be terminated upon leaving the country. Hence, most families are skeptical about visiting Syria through the go-and-see visits as they believe they will not be able to return to Türkiye. Thus, some participants expressed apprehension about opening official SMS from the PDMM, further highlighting their fear for government authorities.



“My children were born and raised here, they will not return to Syria. Among the families who want to return, I think families who do not have a job, families who do not have anyone working will return.”



Male, Hatay

“

“I receive information from social media, television, internet channels, TikTok and my acquaintances living in Syria”



Male, Kilis

Access to Relevant Information Regarding Current Situation

Most respondents access relevant information regarding latest developments in Syria, through social media platforms such as Facebook and TikTok, as well as television news channels and directly from their relatives in Syria. Notably, significant number of people do not actively follow the news as they have no plans to return. Families with sufficient knowledge about the situation of the country are more likely to consider their options more carefully, as they have been cautioned by their relatives and friends about limited access to necessities and ongoing instabilities.

Regarding their knowledge about any assistance provided by the Turkish government, Türk Kızılay or other NGOs, a significant portion of respondents have little to no information. Although, some respondents reported hearsay on distribution of residency permits and citizenship, various cash and shelter assistance for voluntary returnees provided by the UN and Türk Kızılay under KIZILAYKART.



Factors Behind the Decision to Stay in Türkiye

Having lived in Türkiye for 7 to 14 years, many respondent families reported having grown accustomed to the culture and lifestyle of the country, established routines which are hard to give up. 30 per cent of the current Syrian population was born in Türkiye (accounting for 875.000 children)¹⁰, while some others created family ties through marriages, some even lost their loved ones here, further strengthening their attachment to the country. Almost all respondents appear to be satisfied with the favorable living conditions in Türkiye, highlighting the safety and stability in the country. Housing problems is another reason why returnees choose to stay in Türkiye as most properties in Syria are inhabitable. Moreover, possessing temporary protection identity cards and being able to access essential services reinforces their decision to remain in the country. Many expressed gratitude for the free education for their children and the availability of healthcare services, particularly for those with chronic illnesses or disabilities. Consequently, some families choose to remain in Türkiye to maintain their stability, opportunities for themselves and their families.

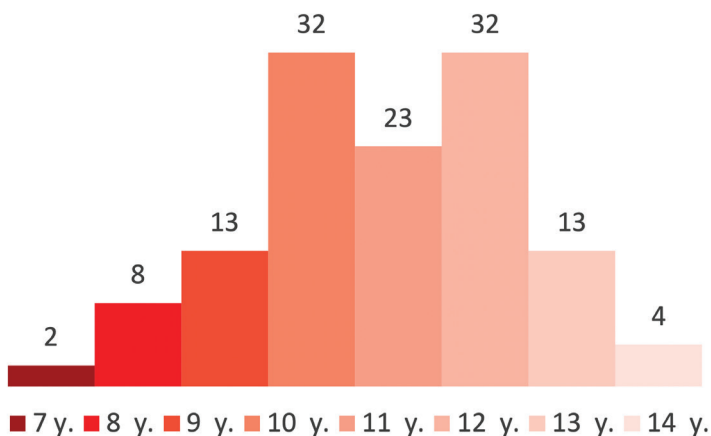


Table 5 Duration of Stay in Türkiye

¹⁰ Anadolu Agency. (24 December 2024). İçişleri Bakanı Yerlikaya: Son 15 günde Suriye'ye dönenlerin sayısı 25 bini geçti. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/icisleri-bakani-yerlikaya-son-15-gunde-suriyeye-donenlerin-sayisi-25-bini-gecti/3432689>.



"I came to Türkiye at a young age from Syria, and I have adapted to the culture here. Türkiye is a safe country, and the living conditions here are sufficient for us. As a woman I can go out alone here, but in Syria I wouldn't be able to go anywhere by myself."



Female, Şanlıurfa

"I have a son with a heart disease and his treatment continues. I have to stay here for the treatment of my son, I cannot take him to Syria in this situation. There is not even electricity and water in Syria now, I cannot imagine the situation in hospitals."



Male, Gaziantep



"I am working in Türkiye, but I am not guaranteed to find a job when I return to Syria, of course this is an important factor."



Male, İstanbul

"I am a beneficiary of C-ESSN. If the assistance stops, it would be bad for me and others in my situation. People with disabilities, the elderly and those who are unable to work will have a hard time."



Male, Şanlıurfa

Livelihoods

Livelihood and employment opportunities are key determinants in the decision to remain in Türkiye. Those who have jobs prefer to stay in Türkiye due to the limited employment opportunities in Syria. Half of the male participants are engaged in the labor force in Türkiye, albeit irregularly, while most of the women are unemployed housewives. In this case, while job opportunities are less influential in the decision to return for unemployed individuals, voluntary return doesn't economically seem feasible for working families. However, a few of the participants indicated they would consider returning if sufficient livelihood opportunities were available, underscoring the lack of employment as a significant barrier to voluntary return.

Impact of Cash Assistance

Ongoing cash assistance has little impact on the voluntary return decisions of most Syrian families. In fact, many participants highlighted the low transfer amount having a neutral effect. Due to escalating prices in Türkiye, they even called for a higher transfer amount to be able to meet their needs. However, the elderly and disabled participants underlined that the termination of the assistance would make them more vulnerable and life in Türkiye more challenging. Although the termination of cash assistance does not lead to voluntary return, it significantly impacts the lives of the most vulnerable individuals.

Education

Education opportunities in Türkiye is another important factor for remaining in Türkiye among most Syrian families. With 819,265 Syrian children enrolled in school, their countrywide attendance rate is at 76.5 percent.¹¹ Children of the participants are mainly attending primary, middle and high school respectively. Notably, only 8 per cent of the children are not attending school due to various reasons such as; disability, peer bullying, economic hardships, identity card or transportation related issues.

The primary concern for families with children is the Arabic language barrier, as many of their children, born and raised in Türkiye do not speak Arabic. Families also fear adaptation challenges due to differences in the education system, bullying, and uncertainty over diploma recognition in Syria. A considerable portion of parents fear their childrens' education will be disrupted, with girls under higher risk of dropping out after middle school. Children are also reluctant to leave their school, friends, and teachers. Hence, most families choose to stay in Türkiye for a more stable future for their children with greater opportunities.

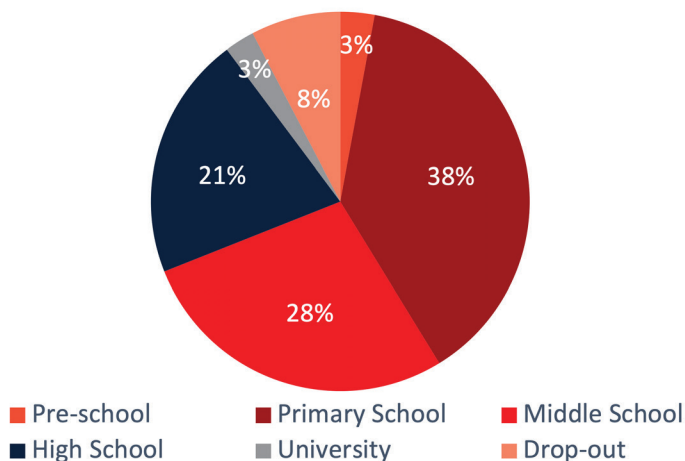


Table 6 School Attendance Rates of Participants' Children

¹¹ Anadolu Agency. (24 December 2024). İçişleri Bakanı Yerlikaya: Son 15 günde Suriye'ye dönenlerin sayısı 25 bini geçti. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/icisleri-bakani-yerlikaya-son-15-gunde-suriyeye-donenlerin-sayisi-25-bini-gecti/3432689>.



“I don't see a future for my children in Syria. We want them to stay here for their education. They themselves want to live here as well.”



Female, İzmir



“For voluntary return to Syria to be possible, the Syrian government must first ensure security and stability. Since currently there is no security or stability in the country, we can’t return yet”



Male, Şanlıurfa

“Who wouldn’t want to return to their home country and live there? If there are job opportunities, we can work anywhere, especially in our country.”



Female, Şanlıurfa

Essential Requirements for Voluntary Return

For voluntary return to Syria to be a viable option, substantial improvements in living conditions are essential.

• Peace and Security

Focus group participants stressed the importance of security and stability, citing ongoing conflicts and the presence of armed groups as critical concerns that must be addressed to facilitate a safe return.

• Economic Stability and Employment Opportunities

Stable employment opportunities must be available for voluntary return to be a sustainable option. Additionally, skilled professionals must have the ability to work in positions that match their qualifications. Some indicated they would consider returning if sufficient livelihood opportunities were available.

• Housing and Infrastructure

Participants indicated they would like to accelerate the voluntary return process when they have access to housing and infrastructure. Homes that were destroyed or severely damaged need to be reconstructed, and property ownership must be ensured. Housing must be available and accessible to those returning voluntarily. Thus, affordable rental housing options should be provided for those without land or property. At the same time, essential infrastructure, including electricity, water, and internet access, must be restored for rebuilding communities and ensuring sustainable living conditions.

• Education and Healthcare Services

Education services must be strengthened to ensure children can continue their education without disruption when they transfer from Turkish schools. The curriculum must accommodate students who were educated in Türkiye, and safe school environments must be guaranteed. Accreditation of Turkish diplomas should be provided for children who graduated in Türkiye to find proper employment in Syria.

Healthcare services must be restored as quick as possible to enable the accessible return of the elderly, disabled and those with chronic illnesses. Hospitals and clinics should be repaired, supplied with trained medical staff and essential medical equipment. Free or affordable healthcare services must be made available, ensuring that families can access maternal healthcare, chronic disease management, and emergency services.

• External Assistance

When participants were asked about the types of assistance needed upon their return, they prioritized shelter as the most critical form of support. This was followed by cash assistance, including cash for transportation, shelter repairs, and rent payments. The third emergency need was livelihood support targeting job creation, followed by access to healthcare and education services. Beyond these top five essential areas of assistance, providing food aid, infrastructure repairs for electricity and water, and measures to ensure peace and security in the region is also essential for a safe and feasible return.



“They should build homes for us to live in, provide schools for our children, build hospitals, and provide essential services like electricity, water, and internet. If they support us financially, similar to the KIZILAYKART cash assistance, covering our rent and bills for a year or two, many of us would return to our country.”



Male, Bursa

Conclusion

The December 8th regime change has resulted in mixed views regarding voluntary return for Syrian families residing in Türkiye. As the instabilities in the country continue, the majority of the families think that it might be too early to return, while few had already started making return plans. The insights gathered from this focus group discussion reveal the diverse and complex factors shaping refugees' perspectives on voluntary return.

There are several reasons behind the skeptical opinions about voluntary return as around 47 per cent of the go-and-see visitors who travelled to Syria do not want to go back.¹² The most important challenge identified was safety and security concerns, particularly for individuals from conflict-affected regions. Housing appears to be the second factor discouraging voluntary return as most houses are damaged or destroyed. The lack of sustainable livelihoods, economic hardships and unemployment in the country was another major deterrent. Additionally, concerns about access to essential services such as education, healthcare and infrastructure prevent Syrian families from returning. Although most families indicated no plans to return just yet, some expressed the possibility of voluntary return when the necessary conditions are provided within the country.



As the developments in Syria have not significantly affected most Syrian families in Türkiye, they appear to be satisfied with their current lives in the host country. Hence, many stated that they prefer to stay in Türkiye to maintain their current living standards. The most important factors behind the decision to stay are the availability of livelihoods, housing, healthcare and education services. SSN cash assistance has a major impact for the most vulnerable groups such as elderly and disabled, while it seems to be less impactful for most of the beneficiaries receiving assistance.

As the long-term future of their homeland remains uncertain, voluntary return appears to be a tough decision for the majority of the Syrian families. For return to become a viable and dignified option, significant progress must be made across key sectors including security, housing, economy, employment, infrastructure, healthcare, and education. Focus group participants expressed a clear willingness to return if these conditions improve, emphasizing shelter, cash assistance, and livelihood support as their top priorities. At this pivotal moment in Syria's recovery, it is imperative for policymakers, humanitarian actors, and governments to work together to address these critical needs. By prioritizing sustainable, people-centered solutions, the international community can lay the groundwork for safe, voluntary, and dignified returns, allowing Syrian families to return home and rebuild their lives, while also ensuring continued protection and stability for those who remain in host countries.

Recommendations

- Continuing essential services and assistance in Türkiye for those not ready to return.
- Strengthening international cooperation and funding to support the basic needs and dignified living conditions for those who return.
- Incorporating refugee feedback into assessments, programming, and policy development.
- Promoting long-term reintegration through job programs, vocational training, small business support, and targeted health and education services.
- Expanding cash-based assistance programs including cash-for-work, shelter, and rent support to help returnees meet their immediate basic needs upon return.



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