



Rebuilding Lives, Redefining Home:

Syrian Refugees and the Return Debate –
(December 2024-January 2025)



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Rebuilding Lives, Redefining Home: Syrian Refugees and the Return Debate – Insights from Focus Group Discussions (December 2024-January 2025)

Association for Solidarity with Refugees

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The **Association for Solidarity with Refugees (Mülteci-Der)** is an independent, rights-based civil society organization established in 2008, dedicated to advocating for the rights of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers in Turkey. As part of its mission, **Mülteci-Der** provides legal aid, supports vulnerable individuals, and works to ensure that Turkey's policies and practices align with international human rights standards. The organization is an active member of several national and international networks, including the **European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE)** and **Türkiye Mülteci Hakları Koordinasyonu (Turkey Refugee Rights Coordination)**.

Mülteci-Der regularly organizes focus group workshops with underrepresented and disadvantaged groups within the migrant, asylum seeker, and refugee communities. These small-scale, in-depth meetings are conducted in private, secure environments, ensuring participants feel comfortable and safe to share their experiences. The primary objective of these sessions is to gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and struggles faced by these vulnerable groups. In addition, the insights gathered from these discussions play a crucial role in shaping and guiding the organization's strategies for providing targeted support and services to migrants and refugees. By fostering an inclusive dialogue, the Association ensures that the voices of the most marginalized individuals are heard, helping to create tailored programs that address their specific needs, advocate for their rights, and promote their well-being. The workshops also serve as a platform for community building, empowerment, and the development of solutions that reflect the lived realities of those often left out of larger conversations.

This thematic report was developed based on the discussions held during these meetings. While the issues covered do not encompass the views or experiences of all focus group participants, similar groups, or individuals across Turkey, the report aims to provide a snapshot of the situation and highlight the challenges faced by the disadvantaged groups in focus.

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1. Introduction

The Syrian conflict, now spanning over a decade and a half, has triggered one of the largest and most protracted displacement crises in recent history. Millions of Syrians, escaping the horrors of war, indiscriminate violence, and systemic persecution, have fled their homes, seeking refuge in neighbouring countries and beyond. Turkey, in particular, has borne a significant and arguably disproportionate responsibility, hosting the largest number of Syrian refugees globally. This influx has strained Turkish resources, impacted social cohesion, and reshaped the nation's demographic landscape.

While the initial focus was understandably on providing immediate humanitarian assistance – shelter, food, medical care – the protracted nature of the crisis necessitated a shift towards longer-term integration and support. However, the dramatic political shifts in Syria, specifically the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, have fundamentally altered the discourse, bringing the fraught question of return to the forefront.

Despite the regime's collapse, the situation in Syria remains exceptionally fragile. Localized conflicts persist, fueled by competing factions and lingering sectarian tensions. Concerns over widespread human rights violations, including arbitrary detention, torture, and extrajudicial killings, remain paramount. The nation's economic infrastructure lies in ruins, with widespread unemployment, rampant inflation, and a collapse of essential services. Furthermore, the destruction of housing, schools, and hospitals has left many areas uninhabitable, creating a daunting obstacle for potential returnees.

The issue of Syrian refugees has become a central and highly politicized topic in Turkish domestic politics. With economic pressures mounting and societal anxieties rising, the presence of millions of refugees has become a lightning rod for political debate. Anti-refugee sentiment has been exploited by various political actors, creating a climate of uncertainty and fear for Syrian communities in Turkey. This politicization has

further complicated the already complex issue of return, making it a highly sensitive and contentious subject.

This report delves into the complex and emotionally charged issue of return to Syria, based on insights gathered from a series of carefully structured focus group discussions with Syrian refugees residing in various regions of Turkey. These discussions, conducted in December 2024 and January 2025, after the fall of the Assad regime, offer a nuanced and deeply personal understanding of the hopes, fears, and multifaceted challenges that Syrian refugees face as they contemplate the possibility of returning home.

2. Methodology

This report draws primarily on qualitative data collected through six focus group discussions conducted with Syrian refugees in Turkey in December 2024 and January 2025. The discussions were designed to create a safe and open environment for participants to share their experiences, perspectives, and concerns. The primary objective of these meetings was to explore the motivations of Syrian refugees in deciding whether to stay in Turkey or return to Syria.

Participants were Syrian refugees, primarily women, residing in Izmir, Turkey. The focus on women was deliberate, recognizing their unique vulnerabilities and the significant role they play in family decision-making. A total of 79 adults, along with 83 children, participated in the discussions.

The discussions were facilitated by a moderator and, where necessary, a translator. The moderator guided the conversation using a semi-structured format, allowing for flexibility while ensuring key themes were explored. The discussions were recorded with the consent of the participants.

Ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to throughout the study. Participants were fully briefed on the purpose of the discussions, how the data would be used, and their right to withdraw at any time. Identifiable information was excluded from the report to

protect participants' identities, and contributions were voluntary. Participants were encouraged to share only what they were comfortable disclosing.

While the methodology ensured a rich collection of data, certain limitations were acknowledged. The focus on migrants and refugees in İzmir may not fully represent the experiences of refugees in rural areas or other parts of Turkey. Despite the use of translators, subtle nuances in communication might have been lost. Additionally, time constraints in focus groups limited the depth of exploration for some issues.

3. Key Themes and Findings

3.1. Mixed Feelings about Return

The focus group discussions revealed a spectrum of opinions regarding the return to Syria. While some participants expressed a longing for their homeland and a desire to rebuild their lives there, others were hesitant or even opposed to the idea. This ambivalence reflects the complex reality of the situation, where the pull of home is intertwined with concerns about safety, economic stability, and social integration.

Longing for Home

Many participants spoke fondly of Syria, reminiscing about their lives before the war and expressing a deep attachment to their homeland. *"Our streets used to smell of jasmine, and every morning falafel was made. I want to see this the most."* shared one participant. This sentiment underscores the emotional and psychological significance of home for many Syrian refugees. Others described the anticipation of returning to their houses, some of which had remained intact, while a few mentioned that their neighbors in Syria were already asking when they would return.

For some, the return was already a reality. A few participants had family members or acquaintances who had returned, primarily those whose properties were not severely damaged. *"In our neighborhood and in Antep, we know people who have gone back."*

These were people whose homes and properties were intact, so they had no hesitation in returning." explained one individual. The idea of rebuilding and reestablishing life in Syria was particularly appealing to those who still had resources or financial means to sustain themselves upon return.

Hesitation and Concerns

Despite the longing for home, many participants expressed serious concerns about the current situation in Syria. One individual emphasized, *"We can't go back. There is no work there, and life is difficult. We will only go when there is electricity and water."* Others mentioned the deteriorating economic situation, with high rental prices and expensive necessities, making it unrealistic to sustain a livelihood. One participant shared, *"Flour, electricity, and even bread were unavailable before. Now, bakeries have reopened, but people don't have money to buy bread."*

Security concerns were also prominent. Several participants mentioned that lawlessness prevailed in certain areas, with reports of kidnappings and ransom demands, particularly targeting returnees from Europe or Turkey. One woman recounted a tragic incident: *"A woman who had returned to Aleppo was shot in the head because people assumed she had money since she came from Turkey."* Others described how displaced people were occupying abandoned homes, making it difficult for original owners to reclaim their property. *"If you don't have proper ownership documents, there is nothing you can do,"* one participant explained.

Women, in particular, voiced apprehensions about returning, fearing increased restrictions on their rights and freedoms. *"In Syria, women used to stay at home and fear what their husbands might do if an argument broke out,"* one participant noted. *"But here in Turkey, even if a woman is alone, she knows what to do. That is why men might want to return, but women do not."* Some worried about the reimplementation of strict social codes, with one woman stating, *"If I go back, I will have to wear a full black veil again. Society enforces these things."*

Opposition to Return

Some participants were adamant about not returning to Syria, citing safety concerns, traumatic experiences, and the new lives they had built in Turkey. *"I will never go back. I have seen too much. Even if they kick me out of Turkey, I will go to a third country, but never back to Syria,"* declared one participant.

For many, their children's future played a significant role in their decision. Parents expressed concerns about the lack of educational opportunities in Syria. *"My child was in primary school when we came here; now they are in high school. They don't even know Arabic properly. How can they start over?"* one parent asked. Another added, *"Even if we return, our children will refuse. They say, 'We are Turkish now. We don't even speak Arabic well.'"*

Some also questioned the long-term stability of the situation in Syria. *"We don't know what will happen next. There is a new president, but can we trust him? What if he turns out like the last one?"* one participant speculated. Others pointed to reports of ongoing political and ethnic tensions, with allegations of discrimination against certain groups. *"In our area, the armed groups have taken over homes. They even charge people to take back their own olive trees,"* a participant shared.

Many also cited the psychological toll of war and displacement. One woman, who had lost a son to a missile strike, expressed her pain: *"I have already suffered once. I don't want to relive that trauma again. Even if they force me to leave Turkey, I will go anywhere but Syria."*

Overall, the discussions highlighted the deeply personal and varied nature of refugees' perspectives on return. While some saw hope in the possibility of rebuilding, others viewed Syria as a place of loss and danger, making return an unviable option for the foreseeable future.

3.2. Concerns about Safety and Security

Despite the change in regime, safety and security remain paramount concerns for Syrian refugees considering return. Reports of ongoing violence, the presence of armed groups, and human rights abuses paint a concerning picture. Participants shared stories of kidnappings, targeted attacks, and the discovery of mass graves, fueling their anxieties about returning to a potentially unsafe environment. Additionally, reports of continued discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, and political affiliations further deterred many from considering a return.

Ongoing Violence

Participants expressed concerns about the persistence of violence in Syria, despite the change in regime. "The situation is still unstable. There are armed groups everywhere, and you never know when something might happen," shared one participant. Others emphasized that power struggles among different factions, including armed militias and opposition groups, had made some areas particularly dangerous. "A region might seem peaceful today, but tomorrow, another group could take control, and everything could change overnight," noted another participant.

For some, specific regions remained completely off-limits due to active conflict or the presence of snipers. "There are still snipers in some areas, especially where certain groups are in control. You cannot even get close," one person warned. Others shared that some regions, such as Kurdish-controlled areas, had become heavily militarized and restrictive, with reports of landmines being placed to prevent movement. "My father still lives in a village controlled by Kurdish forces, and they have mined the entire area so that no one can enter," a participant explained.

Human Rights Abuses

Reports of human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, torture, and extrajudicial killings, have raised alarm bells among Syrian refugees. "They are killing people, even

those returning from Turkey. They think that if you came from Turkey, you must have money," recounted one participant. Several refugees mentioned that returnees were often suspected of having ties to opposition forces or were targeted for ransom.

Mass graves discovered in various locations were another source of distress. "They found mass graves filled with thousands of bodies, and no one even knows who they are," one person shared. Some participants referenced firsthand accounts of brutal treatment, particularly of those who had been imprisoned. "Prisoners who have been released tell horrifying stories of torture, starvation, and abuse. Some of them have aged 20 years in just a few," another participant added.

Others noted that religious and ethnic minorities were at particular risk. A Kurdish participant described how they had been subjected to years of discrimination and oppression, which had not changed under the new regime. "Being Kurdish in Syria means you are a target. They still see us as outsiders, as threats," they explained. Similarly, members of religious minorities expressed concerns about forced conversions and social pressure. "They are trying to enforce their own rules. Women are forced to wear the veil in some areas, and men are punished if they don't comply," one participant noted.

Kidnappings and Ransom Demands

Many participants shared fears about a rise in kidnappings and ransom demands, particularly targeting returnees from Europe or Turkey. "If they find out you have money, you become a target," one man explained. "I heard of a wealthy family who returned, and within weeks, their son was kidnapped. They had to pay a fortune to get him back." Another participant confirmed hearing similar reports: "People disappear, and their families are forced to pay thousands of dollars to armed groups for their release."

Participants also highlighted that armed groups had taken over properties and businesses, extorting former owners for financial gain. "My family's olive trees were confiscated. Now, if we want them back, we have to pay," said one individual. Others mentioned that returnees often found their homes occupied by strangers, with little

recourse to reclaim them. "Even if you have property deeds, it doesn't matter. If someone powerful is living in your house, you cannot do anything," said another.

Lack of Trust

The change in regime has not necessarily translated into a sense of trust and security for many Syrian refugees. "We don't know what will happen. We are afraid that things might go back to how they were before," expressed one participant. Others worried that promises of stability were merely a short-term illusion. "They are saying that everything is fine now, but what if this is just temporary? What if things collapse again?"

Several participants mentioned that the new government had begun reaching out to wealthier Syrians abroad, urging them to return and invest in rebuilding the country. However, many saw this as a trap. "They are calling on the rich to come back, but what happens once they invest? Will they be safe, or will their money be taken from them?" one participant questioned. Another added, "If the rich don't return and build businesses, the poor cannot go back. There are no jobs, no economy."

Some also feared increased surveillance and control over returnees. "If we go back, will they monitor us? Will they question why we left and who we spoke to while we were abroad?" asked one participant. Others speculated that returnees could be pressured into supporting the new regime. "We might be forced to join their ranks, to work for them. If we refuse, we could be arrested," another participant warned.

Despite some reports of improvement in infrastructure and public services, the overwhelming consensus among participants was that Syria remained too unstable and unsafe for a large-scale return. Concerns about ongoing violence, human rights abuses, kidnappings, and lack of trust in the government made many feel that returning was not a viable option. As one participant summarized, "For now, we will stay here. At least in Turkey, we know what to expect. In Syria, everything is uncertain."

3.3. Economic Challenges and Uncertainties

The war has ravaged Syria's economy, leaving many without jobs, homes, or basic necessities. The prospect of returning to a devastated economy with limited opportunities is a major deterrent for Syrian refugees. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of employment opportunities, the high cost of living, and the difficulty of rebuilding their lives in a country still grappling with the aftermath of conflict. Additionally, issues such as property loss, the instability of financial systems, and the absence of social support networks further discouraged many from considering a return.

Lack of Employment Opportunities

Participants repeatedly emphasized that the job market in Syria remains dire, even in areas where some reconstruction efforts have begun. "There are no jobs in Syria. Even those who have returned are struggling to find work," reported one participant. Others mentioned that while certain businesses, such as bakeries and small markets, had reopened, there was little opportunity for stable employment. "People say, 'Come back and start a business,' but with what money? There are no loans, no support, and no safety to even run a shop," another participant noted.

Many who considered return were deterred by the lack of sustainable income sources. "A few people I know went back, hoping to find work. Instead, they are just sitting at home, waiting for something to change," one participant explained. Others pointed out that even those who manage to find jobs often go unpaid for long periods. "A friend of mine got a job, but he hasn't been paid in months. Employers just say 'be patient,' but patience doesn't feed your family," another participant said.

Several participants also raised concerns about the selective nature of employment. They reported that many job opportunities are only available to those with connections to the ruling authorities or those willing to pay bribes. "If you don't know the right people, you won't get work. And even if you do, they can replace you at any time," one individual

warned. Others mentioned that returning refugees were sometimes viewed with suspicion, making it even harder to secure a job.

High Cost of Living

The cost of living in Syria has skyrocketed due to the war, making it difficult for many to afford basic necessities. "Everything is expensive in Syria. Even if you have a job, it's hard to make ends meet," shared one participant. Reports from those who had returned indicated that even essential goods like food, electricity, and water were unaffordable for many.

Rental prices, in particular, were a significant concern. "In Aleppo, rents are \$1,700 a year. Where are we going to find that money?" one participant asked, explaining that housing costs had surged due to the destruction of homes. Others noted that even in smaller towns and villages, prices were unreasonably high compared to the average income. "It's not like before, where you could survive on little. Now, everything is expensive, and salaries—if you even get one—are too low," another participant added.

Electricity and water shortages also contributed to the financial strain. "People say infrastructure is improving, but we still don't have reliable electricity or water. If you want it, you have to pay extra, and not everyone can afford that," one person explained. Another participant mentioned that some landlords had begun charging extra fees for utilities, making it even harder for returnees to secure stable housing.

For many, the overall economic situation in Syria made return seem impossible. "We are barely surviving in Turkey, but at least here, there are social services and aid. In Syria, there is nothing," a participant stated.

Difficulty of Rebuilding

Rebuilding lives and livelihoods in a country devastated by war is a daunting task. Participants expressed concerns about the lack of infrastructure, the difficulty of

accessing basic services, and the psychological toll of starting over. "It's not easy to rebuild your life in a country that has been destroyed by war," stated one participant.

Many reported that homes left behind had either been destroyed or looted. "Even if my house is still standing, it's empty. The doors, windows, and even electrical wiring have been stolen," one individual recounted. Others mentioned that some returnees had been forced to pay to reclaim their own homes. "People are living in our houses, and when we ask them to leave, they say, 'Give us money first,'" a participant said.

Additionally, bureaucratic challenges made it difficult for returnees to access housing or financial assistance. "If you don't have official documents proving your ownership, you might as well forget about getting your home back," explained one participant. Another added, "People who never left Syria might have an easier time, but for us who fled, everything is more complicated."

Beyond physical reconstruction, participants highlighted the psychological difficulties of returning to a country still deeply affected by war. "We left Syria because it was no longer livable. Even if the war has slowed down, the pain and trauma are still there," one woman shared. Others mentioned the emotional difficulty of uprooting their children, many of whom had only known life in Turkey. "Our children don't speak Arabic well. They have grown up here. How can they start over again?" one father asked.

Some also pointed to broader systemic issues, such as the lack of a functioning banking system, unreliable markets, and the absence of government programs to assist returnees. "They are calling on people to come back, but there are no real plans to help them. It's just words," said one participant.

Economic instability remains a significant barrier to return for many Syrian refugees. The lack of job opportunities, high cost of living, and challenges in reclaiming homes and rebuilding lives make the prospect of returning highly uncertain. Even those who wish to return acknowledge that without a functioning economy and financial stability, it is not a viable option. As one participant summarized, "Syria needs years to recover. Right now, going back means going back to nothing."

3.4. Social and Cultural Changes

The war has not only caused physical destruction but has also led to significant social and cultural changes in Syria. Participants discussed these changes, expressing concerns about the increasing conservatism of Syrian society, the potential erosion of women's rights, and the difficulty of reintegrating into a society that has undergone profound transformations. Additionally, shifting gender roles, ethnic and sectarian tensions, and the loss of personal freedoms were highlighted as key concerns that made returning to Syria even more challenging.

Increasing Conservatism

Some participants expressed concerns about the growing conservatism in Syria and the potential impact on personal freedoms. "I am worried about the restrictions on women. I don't want to be forced to wear a veil," shared one participant. Others mentioned that in some areas, new local authorities were enforcing strict dress codes and social behaviors. "We hear that women in certain regions cannot leave their homes without a male guardian, and this scares me," another woman added.

Some participants who had relatives in Syria reported that social norms had shifted dramatically. "Before, women in my family could dress how they wanted. Now, my cousin tells me she has to wear full black clothing just to avoid harassment," one participant shared. Others highlighted the rise of religiously motivated policies, with some regions reportedly imposing restrictions on how people could interact in public. "Some areas are like mini-theocracies now. Women and men cannot even sit in the same café together," another participant observed.

Participants also noted that the generational divide had widened, with younger Syrians who had grown up in Turkey or Europe struggling to understand the cultural shifts back home. "My teenage daughter is used to wearing jeans and going out with her friends. If we return, she will not be able to live the way she does here," said one mother.

Erosion of Women's Rights

The war has had a disproportionate impact on women, and there are concerns that the gains made in women's rights may be reversed. "I have learned that being a woman is not just about housework. I have rights. I don't want to lose those rights if I go back to Syria," stated one participant. Many women expressed fears that returning to Syria would mean losing the freedoms they had gained while living in Turkey.

Some participants discussed how the war had forced women to take on more active roles in society, whether by working or becoming decision-makers within their households. "Here in Turkey, I work, I make my own money. I don't want to go back to being dependent on my husband for everything," one woman shared. Others pointed out that returning to Syria could mean facing renewed social pressure to conform to traditional gender roles. "In Syria, a woman's place is still seen as inside the home. I am afraid I will be forced back into that life," another woman said.

Concerns were also raised about forced and early marriages, which some participants claimed had become more common in post-war Syria. "Before the war, early marriages were less common in my family. Now, because of poverty and insecurity, girls are being married off young. I don't want that for my daughter," one mother explained.

Some women also mentioned the fear of sexual violence and exploitation. "Women in Syria are still vulnerable to violence, especially in areas controlled by different armed groups. If you don't have male protection, you are at risk," one participant warned.

Difficulty of Reintegration

Reintegrating into a society that has been deeply affected by war can be challenging. Participants expressed concerns about the loss of social connections, the difficulty of adapting to new norms, and the potential for discrimination. "I don't know if I can fit in anymore. Syria has changed so much," shared one participant.

Some who had spent over a decade in Turkey or Europe worried that they had become "foreigners" in their own country. "My children barely speak Arabic anymore. How will they go to school in Syria?" one parent asked. Others mentioned that even small cultural

habits, like the way they dressed or the way they spoke, might make them stand out. "People in Syria will see us as outsiders, even though we were born there," another participant said.

Participants also mentioned the fragmentation of social groups and communities. "Before the war, our neighborhood was mixed—different ethnicities and religions lived together. Now, people are divided along sectarian lines," one man noted. Others pointed out that displacement had caused long-term damage to social bonds. "Many of our friends and family have left, scattered across different countries. The Syria we knew doesn't exist anymore," a woman reflected.

Additionally, some feared discrimination against returnees, especially those who had lived in Turkey or Europe for extended periods. "People in Syria think that if you lived abroad, you must be rich. They will expect us to have money, and that can make us a target," one participant warned. Others feared being viewed as traitors or outsiders. "Some believe that those who left abandoned Syria. They might not welcome us back," another participant said.

Loss of Personal Freedoms

Several participants expressed concerns about the loss of personal freedoms if they returned to Syria. "In Turkey, I can go out freely, work, and make my own choices. In Syria, I don't know if I will have the same rights," said one woman. Some worried that the government or local authorities would impose restrictions on personal expression. "There are already rumors that social media is being monitored. If we say something wrong, will we be arrested?" one participant asked.

Participants also noted that some regions were implementing policies that restricted movement, particularly for women and minorities. "In some areas, you cannot leave the house without permission. You are constantly being watched," one individual explained. Others were concerned about censorship and the lack of free speech. "Here, we can criticize things if we don't like them. Back in Syria, speaking out could get you into trouble," another participant added.

The deep social and cultural shifts in post-war Syria have made the prospect of return even more daunting for many refugees. The rise in conservatism, the erosion of women's rights, and the challenges of reintegration into a changed society all contribute to their hesitancy. Many fear that the freedoms they have gained in exile—whether in terms of gender equality, personal choices, or social mobility—could be lost if they go back. As one participant summarized, "We are not just afraid of war. We are afraid of losing ourselves."

3.5. Impact of Experiences in Turkey

The experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey have played a crucial role in shaping their perspectives on return. Many have established lives in Turkey, with children integrated into schools, families forming bonds with local communities, and individuals gaining work experience and a sense of independence. The prospect of leaving behind these established lives and returning to an uncertain future in Syria is a difficult one for many. In addition, concerns about discrimination, bureaucratic obstacles, and the generational gap between parents and children further complicate the decision to return.

Established Lives

Many participants have created new lives for themselves in Turkey, finding stability and a sense of belonging. "I have built a life here. My children go to school here, and I have friends and neighbors. It's not easy to leave all that behind," expressed one participant. Others mentioned that after years of struggle, they had finally achieved a sense of normalcy in Turkey. "It took us a long time to adjust, but now we have routines, jobs, and a home. Returning to Syria would mean starting from zero again," one father explained.

For many, the idea of leaving Turkey was not just about abandoning their physical homes but also about losing the support networks they had built over time. "We rely on our Turkish and Syrian friends here. If we leave, who will help us in Syria?" one woman asked. Some participants also pointed out that they had lost contact with many relatives

in Syria, making reintegration even more challenging. "The people I knew in Syria are either gone or scattered. I would feel like a stranger in my own country," another participant added.

Additionally, some refugees had invested in businesses or property in Turkey, further solidifying their ties. "I opened a shop here. If I go back, I lose everything I worked for," shared one small business owner. Others highlighted that even though they were still financially struggling in Turkey, it was still preferable to the economic instability in Syria.

Integration into Turkish Society

Some participants have integrated well into Turkish society, learning the language and forming relationships with Turkish people. "I have made good friends with my Turkish neighbors. They don't want me to leave," shared one participant. Others mentioned that they felt comfortable in Turkey due to cultural similarities. "We eat the same food, we share some traditions, and our children play together. This has become home," said another participant.

Many children, in particular, had become more accustomed to Turkish society than Syrian culture. "My son doesn't even remember Syria. He only speaks Turkish and doesn't want to leave his school and friends," one mother explained. Others mentioned that their children felt more Turkish than Syrian. "My daughter tells me, 'I am Turkish now. I don't belong in Syria,'" a participant shared.

However, integration has not been without challenges. Some refugees mentioned facing discrimination or difficulties in accessing services. "There are still people who don't want us here. They think we are a burden," one participant admitted. Others described issues with legal status and work permits, which limited their ability to fully integrate into society. "Even after years, some of us still struggle with paperwork and jobs," another added. Despite these challenges, the majority agreed that life in Turkey—while not perfect—still provided more stability than returning to Syria.

Uncertainty about the Future

The uncertainty surrounding the situation in Syria makes it difficult for refugees to make informed decisions about return. "We don't know what the future holds. It's hard to make a decision when you don't know what to expect," stated one participant. Others echoed this sentiment, pointing out that the situation in Syria was constantly shifting. "One day, they say things are improving. The next day, we hear about kidnappings and violence. How can we trust anything?"

Some participants mentioned that even if they wanted to return in the future, they preferred to wait and see how things developed. "Maybe in a few years, if things get better, we will consider going back. But right now, it is too risky," said one participant. Others were skeptical that Syria would ever return to the way it was before the war. "Even if the war is over, the country is broken. It will take years, maybe decades, to rebuild," another participant said.

In addition to the general instability, bureaucratic and legal uncertainties also played a role in discouraging return. "If we go back, will we be able to come back to Turkey if things don't work out? What if our documents are canceled?" one refugee asked. Others mentioned hearing rumors about restrictions on returnees. "I know people who went back and then couldn't leave again. I don't want to be trapped there," said one participant.

Generational Gap and Challenges for Children

One of the biggest concerns for many parents was the impact of return on their children. "Our children have grown up here. They know nothing about Syria. How can we take them back to a place they don't know?" asked one mother. Many children had fully adapted to the Turkish education system and lifestyle, making the prospect of moving even harder. "My son told me, 'If you go to Syria, I will stay here,'" said another participant.

Some parents also worried about their children's ability to reintegrate into Syrian schools. "My daughter doesn't speak Arabic fluently. How will she study there?" one mother asked. Others pointed out that girls, in particular, might face difficulties adjusting

to more conservative gender norms. "Here, my daughter goes to school and has a future. In Syria, she might be pressured to marry early," one concerned father explained.

Fear of Forced Return and Long-Term Uncertainty in Turkey

While many participants preferred to stay in Turkey, some expressed concerns about being forced to leave. "We hear rumors that Turkey might send us back. What will we do then?" one refugee asked. Others mentioned that recent policies had made them feel uncertain about their long-term future. "We have been here for years, but we still don't know if we can stay forever. That fear is always in the back of our minds," said another.

Some participants were actively seeking citizenship or alternative options to secure their futures. "I applied for Turkish citizenship, but it's a long process. If I get it, I will never go back," one participant stated. Others mentioned trying to move to other countries. "If I can go to Canada or Germany, I will. But I won't go back to Syria," another shared.

The experiences of Syrian refugees in Turkey have significantly shaped their perspectives on return. While some still hold onto the idea of one day going back, the reality of established lives, integration into Turkish society, and deep uncertainty about Syria's future make return an unlikely option for many. The generational gap, particularly for children who have grown up in Turkey, adds another layer of complexity to the decision. As one participant summarized, "Syria is our past, but Turkey is our present. We don't know what the future holds, but for now, this is home."

3.6. Influence of Family Ties and Social Networks

Family ties and social networks are powerful forces that influence the decisions of Syrian refugees regarding return. Participants with close family members still in Syria were more likely to consider returning, while those with family members in other countries, such as Europe or Canada, were more likely to seek reunification with their relatives elsewhere. The emotional weight of separation, the influence of relatives who

have already returned, and the impact of fragmented families were key factors in shaping decisions about the future.

Family Ties in Syria

For many participants, the presence of close family members in Syria is a strong pull factor. "I miss my family. I want to be with them," shared one participant. Some mentioned elderly parents or siblings they had not seen in years, making them feel a strong sense of responsibility to return. "My father is old and sick. He asks me when I am coming back. It's hard to live with that guilt," another participant explained.

However, even those with strong family ties in Syria were hesitant to return under the current conditions. "I want to be with my family, but they tell me not to come. They say life is still too hard," said one individual. Others described painful experiences of trying to visit only to be faced with bureaucratic challenges. "I wanted to see my sick mother, but they told me if I go, I won't be allowed back into Turkey," one participant recounted.

Participants also shared that some relatives in Syria had initially encouraged them to return but later regretted their own decision to stay. "At first, my cousin told me to come back, that things were getting better. But after a few months, he called me and said, 'Stay where you are. It's not what we thought it would be,'" another participant explained.

Family Ties Abroad

Some participants have family members in other countries, which significantly influences their decision-making. "My brother is in Canada. He says I should come there," stated one participant. Many expressed a strong desire to reunite with family members who had successfully migrated to Europe, North America, or other stable countries. "My sister is in Germany. She tells me life is good there, that there are opportunities for my children. If I have a chance, I will go," another shared.

For those who had relatives abroad, return to Syria seemed like an increasingly unrealistic option. "If I go back to Syria, I will be even further away from my family in

Europe. It makes no sense," one participant noted. Others mentioned that they were actively seeking family reunification programs or asylum in third countries. "I have two sons in the Netherlands. I applied to join them, but the process is slow," another explained.

However, some faced legal and financial barriers to reuniting with family members abroad. "My husband is in the UK, but I cannot join him because of visa restrictions. We have been apart for five years now," one woman said. Others noted that their family members abroad were struggling as well. "My brother went to Greece, but he is still waiting for asylum. He tells me life is hard there too," another participant shared.

Social Networks

Social networks, both in Syria and Turkey, provide critical support and information to refugees as they weigh their options. "My friends who have gone back to Syria tell me it's not easy. They say I should wait," recounted one participant. Many refugees rely on firsthand accounts from those who have returned to assess whether conditions are truly improving. "One of my neighbors went back to Aleppo. He told me there is no work, no services, and that I should think carefully before deciding," another participant explained.

Social media and messaging apps also play a crucial role in shaping opinions. "We get updates from family and friends through WhatsApp and Facebook. Some say things are fine, others say it's worse than ever," one participant noted. Some participants highlighted that misinformation is common, making it difficult to trust what they hear. "Some people say everything is improving, but then I see videos online showing violence and destruction. Who do we believe?" another asked.

Social networks in Turkey also influence decision-making. Many participants had built strong support systems with other Syrian refugees, as well as with Turkish neighbors and employers. "I have a community here. If I leave, I will be alone again," said one participant. Others feared the impact of separation on their children. "My son's best friend is Turkish. He doesn't want to leave him behind," another shared.

For those in Turkey with weaker social ties, the situation was different. "I don't have anyone here. My husband left me. Maybe it's better to go back to Syria where I at least have relatives," one woman explained. Others who felt isolated in Turkey were considering moving elsewhere rather than returning to Syria. "If I have to leave, I'd rather go to Europe. I don't have anything left in Syria," one participant said.

Fragmented Families and the Pain of Separation

The war has fragmented countless families, forcing difficult decisions about whether to reunite or remain apart. "Some of my family is in Syria, some in Turkey, some in Europe. Wherever I go, I will be leaving someone behind," said one participant. Many described the emotional pain of separation, especially for parents who had been apart from their children for years. "My son is in Germany. I haven't seen him in 10 years. How do I choose between going back to Syria or trying to join him?" one participant asked.

Some families faced dilemmas where different members had different opinions on return. "My husband wants to go back, but my children refuse. How can I choose between my husband and my kids?" one woman shared. Others had relatives who had already returned and were now pressuring them to follow. "My father went back and keeps asking me when I will come. But I know he is struggling, even if he won't admit it," another participant explained.

For families with children, the decision was even harder. "If we go back, our children lose everything they have built here. If we stay, they grow up without their grandparents and relatives," one mother said. Some participants also noted that their children had developed different perspectives. "My son tells me, 'Why would we go back? We are Turkish now,'" said one participant.

Family ties and social networks play a complex and often contradictory role in the decision-making process of Syrian refugees. While the presence of loved ones in Syria pulls some toward returning, the reality of economic instability, security concerns, and shifting social norms makes it a difficult choice. Meanwhile, family members abroad provide hope for alternative futures, but legal and logistical barriers often stand in the

way. Social networks, both in Syria and Turkey, provide vital support and information, but conflicting narratives make it hard to assess the true situation. As one participant summarized, "No matter what we decide, we are leaving someone behind. That is the hardest part of all."

4. Conclusion

The decision to return to Syria is deeply personal and shaped by a complex interplay of factors. The findings of this study indicate that safety and security concerns, economic instability, shifting social and cultural norms, experiences in Turkey, and family ties all play a crucial role in shaping refugees' perspectives on return. While the political changes in Syria have sparked cautious hope for some, significant challenges and uncertainties remain.

Despite reports of improving conditions in certain areas, security concerns continue to be a major deterrent. The presence of armed groups, reports of kidnappings, and ongoing human rights abuses make many refugees hesitant to return. Additionally, the Syrian economy remains fragile, with high unemployment, expensive housing, and unreliable infrastructure limiting opportunities for those considering return.

Social and cultural transformations further complicate reintegration, particularly for women and young people who have adapted to different social expectations abroad. Many fear the loss of freedoms and rights they have gained while living in Turkey. At the same time, years spent in Turkey have led many to build stable lives, integrate into society, and establish strong social networks. Children, in particular, have grown up attending Turkish schools and often feel disconnected from Syria, making return an even more difficult choice for families.

Family connections influence the decision-making process in different ways. While some are drawn to Syria to reunite with relatives, others prioritize reuniting with family members who have settled in Europe or other countries. Social networks, both in Turkey

and Syria, provide critical information about conditions on the ground, with many returnees cautioning against premature decisions.

Any future initiatives aimed at facilitating the return of Syrian refugees must address these complex realities. A successful return process requires guarantees of security, economic opportunities, and the restoration of basic infrastructure. Additionally, social and legal protections, particularly for women and vulnerable groups, must be considered. Without meaningful improvements in these areas, large-scale voluntary return is unlikely. As many refugees weigh their uncertain futures, the need for long-term solutions—whether in Syria, Turkey, or through resettlement in third countries—remains a critical issue that must be addressed with care and inclusivity.

Annex: Focus Group Meetings Details

18 December 2024 – Focus Group Meeting

- **Location:** Bornova, İzmir
- **Participants:**
 - **Total:** 10 women, 5 children
 - **Languages:** Arabic (interpreted into Turkish)
 - **Demographics:** Women-led discussion with children present
- **Key Focus:**
 - Motivations for irregular migration to Europe
 - Changing political landscape in Syria and its impact on return decisions
 - Economic and legal challenges in Turkey

28 January 2025 – Focus Group Meeting

- **Location:** MÜLTECİ-DER, İzmir
- **Participants:**
 - **Total:** 15 participants (13 Syrian, 2 Sudanese), 21 children
 - **Languages:** Arabic (interpreted into Turkish)
 - **Demographics:** Predominantly women and mothers with children
- **Key Focus:**
 - Perceptions of safety and stability in Syria
 - The role of economic conditions in return decisions
 - Impact of social and cultural changes on potential reintegration

29 January 2025 – Focus Group Meeting

- **Location:** Konak Mülteci Merkezi, İzmir
- **Participants:**
 - **Total:** 10 Syrian participants, 14 children
 - **Languages:** Arabic (interpreted into Turkish)
 - **Demographics:** Majority women, including individuals with medical concerns
- **Key Focus:**
 - Healthcare access and the role of chronic illness in return decisions
 - Women's rights and gender norms in post-war Syria
 - Economic struggles and employment opportunities in Syria vs. Turkey

31 January 2025 – Focus Group Meeting

- **Location:** MÜLTECİ-DER, İzmir
- **Participants:**
 - **Total:** 5 Syrian participants, 8 children
 - **Languages:** Arabic (interpreted into Turkish)
 - **Demographics:** Families with school-age children
- **Key Focus:**
 - Educational challenges and the impact of displacement on children
 - Bureaucratic barriers to return and legal uncertainties
 - Differences in women's autonomy in Turkey versus Syria

5 February 2025 – Focus Group Meeting

- **Location:** MÜLTECİ-DER, İzmir
- **Participants:**

- **Total:** 10 Syrian participants, 2 children
- **Languages:** Arabic (interpreted into Turkish)
- **Demographics:** Mixed-gender discussion, including parents considering return
- **Key Focus:**
 - Legal and financial challenges of resettlement in Syria
 - Social reintegration and discrimination concerns
 - Housing and property ownership challenges in Syria

7 February 2025 – Focus Group Meeting

- **Location:** MÜLTECİ-DER, İzmir
- **Participants:**
 - **Total:** 11 Syrian participants, 8 children
 - **Languages:** Arabic (interpreted into Turkish)
 - **Demographics:** Individuals with varied migration backgrounds (e.g., previously detained, those seeking asylum in third countries)
- **Key Focus:**
 - Experiences in Turkey's migration system, including deportation fears
 - Forced return cases and human rights concerns
 - The role of social networks in decision-making about return

Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneđi / Association for Solidarity with Refugees is a civil society organization that has been carrying out rights-based work since 2008 to ensure asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants affected by forced migration can access their rights and services with dignity, in line with universal human rights, as well as international and national law.

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