Between Hope and Uncertainty:

Syrian Refugees' Perspectives on Voluntary Return and "Go-and-See" Visits

(August - December 2025)

MÜLTECİ-DER
Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneği

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Association for Solidarity with Refugees

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Association for Solidarity with Refugees

Address: Uğur Mahallesi 848 Sokak No:16

Konak / İzmir / Türkiye

Tel : 00 90 232 483 54 21

E-mail: bilgi@multeci.org.tr

Web: multeci.org.tr

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

After more than a decade of conflict and displacement, Syrian refugees in Turkey continue to navigate an uncertain future shaped by shifting political developments, fragile security conditions inside Syria and intensifying social and economic pressures in Turkey. In this context, the question of return, whether truly voluntary, undertaken prematurely out of necessity or effectively compelled by deteriorating circumstances remains deeply personal and highly complex. Decisions are rarely made on the basis of a single factor; rather, they emerge from the interaction of safety, livelihood, family obligations, legal status and the desire for dignity and stability.

The discussions that inform this report took place in August and December 2025, following major political changes in Syria with the fall of Assad regime on 8 December 2024. Across sessions, participants referred to "8 December" as a moment of profound emotional significance; marked by relief, celebration and renewed hope that change might open pathways home. Yet this hope was consistently tempered by grief and unresolved trauma. For many, the same date also revived painful memories and ongoing uncertainty connected to detention, disappearance and the loss of family members, leaving participants caught between longing for return and fear of renewed harm.

At the same time, participants linked their thinking about return to everyday pressures in Turkey. Rising living costs and rents, insecure employment and worries about coping in an increasingly strained economic environment were repeatedly cited as factors shaping household decisions. Alongside these material challenges, participants described heightened anxiety about legal status, the sustainability of temporary protection and the ability to plan for the future. For some, these pressures created a sense of being "pushed" toward return even when conditions in Syria felt unsafe; for others, they reinforced the need for clear information and dependable safeguards before any decision could be made.

This report synthesizes insights from three small-scale qualitative meetings held by Mülteci-Der. It aims to amplify refugees' voices -especially women's perspectives- on

what “voluntary return” means in practice, what reliable information and procedural protections people need and what conditions would make return possible without compromising safety, rights and family unity. In doing so, it highlights not only the factors that encourage or discourage return but also the uncertainty and constrained choices that many refugees experience as they weigh their options.

2. Methodology

This report draws on qualitative data collected through three sessions conducted at the Mülteci-Der office in İzmir. The first was a focus group held in August 2025 with adult Syrian participants from multiple regions of Syria with an age range of 21–52. The second was a focus group held on 11 December 2025 focused on voluntary return and “Go-and-See” (GGD) processes, bringing together nine adult participants, primarily women with children. The third component consisted of three semi-structured interviews, conducted in a mini-group format on 22 December 2025 with three Syrian women aged 21, 37 and 40 whose experiences were shaped by forced family separation, including cases where male family members had been deported, returned or migrated onward.

The sessions were facilitated by Mülteci-Der staff with interpretation provided where needed. Participants were informed about the purpose of the meetings and were encouraged to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing. Notes were taken during the sessions and personal identifiers were excluded from this report to reduce the risk of harm and protect participants’ privacy. All names and potentially identifying details have been removed or generalised. Quotes are attributed only by session and participant code (e.g., FG1-P3) and may be lightly edited for clarity.

These findings reflect the experiences of a small number of participants in an urban setting and are not statistically representative of all Syrians living in Turkey. Focus group dynamics may also influence what participants feel able to share in a group environment. Nevertheless, the patterns that recur across sessions provide a meaningful snapshot of the dilemmas, priorities and information needs refugees face when considering return..

3. Key Themes and Findings

3.1. A turning point marked by hope and grief

Participants described the political developments of 8 December 2024 as emotionally overwhelming. For some, the moment generated a sense of relief and possibility, reopening the idea that return could become thinkable after years of uncertainty. For others, it also brought back painful memories and unresolved grief, particularly for families with relatives who were detained, missing, or killed. In many accounts, hope and sorrow were not separate reactions but intertwined, surfacing at the same time.

"I felt happiness beyond words. We followed the news until morning." (FG1-P1)

"I walked and cried—happy tears." (FG1-P2)

"We were glad the detainees were released from prisons." (FG1-P4)

"I lost many family members. So I also feel anger." (FG1-P5)

This mixture of joy and pain shaped how participants spoke about return in later parts of the discussions. While some wanted to believe that political change could lead to a safer and more stable Syria, many hesitated to trust that conditions would improve quickly or that the risks associated with return would disappear. Several participants implied that emotions alone could not outweigh practical concerns: even if *"8 December"* felt like a historic opening, it did not automatically resolve questions of security, accountability and the ability to rebuild a life.

3.2. Return is imagined, but "voluntary" is questioned

Across sessions, participants consistently distinguished between wanting to return and being able to return. Even those who spoke with strong longing for Syria emphasized that return must remain a genuine choice; based on accurate information, free of

coercion and supported by clear procedures. Participants stressed that "voluntary return" loses meaning if people feel pushed by fear of deportation, by sudden administrative changes, or by rumors that create panic.

A recurring concern was forced return presented as "voluntary" or pressure that effectively removes alternatives:

"We won't be sent back by force, right?" (FG2-P2)

"What will happen to those who want to stay?" (FG2-P3)

Some participants said they would not leave unless compelled, highlighting the importance of legal protection and predictability:

"If they don't expel me, I won't leave." (FG1-P6)

Others framed return as conditional, something that could be considered only if minimum standards of safety and livability were met:

"If Syria became like Turkey, I would return." (FG1-P7)

"Even if security is 70%, that would be enough—I want to go back." (FG1-P8)

These different thresholds reflect diverse risk tolerance, household circumstances and experiences of harm. They also reflect uneven access to resources; for some, return might be feasible if they have housing, savings or family support inside Syria, for others, the same move would mean extreme vulnerability. Yet even among participants who were more open to returning sooner, there was a strong and repeated demand for clear information, legal guarantees and practical support; including clarity about rights in Turkey, the steps involved in any return process and safeguards to protect family unity and prevent irreversible decisions made under pressure.

3.3. Safety and security

Across all sessions, safety and security concerns emerged as the most consistent and immediate barrier to return. Participants described a context in which violence and insecurity remain present in daily life and where the absence of predictable rule of law creates fear and uncertainty. News of explosions, kidnappings and armed actors operating with impunity were frequently cited, especially as risks affecting children and women in public spaces.

"There is still no security in Syria—there are explosions, people are kidnapped." (FG1-P3)

"A wedding was raided by an armed group, and they took the groom." (FG1-P4)

Participants' descriptions suggest that insecurity is not perceived only as the risk of large scale conflict but also as everyday threats such as being stopped, harassed, abducted or exposed to violence without reliable protection or accountability. Several noted that while political change created a sense of hope, it did not translate into confidence that people would be safe after returning. In this sense, "security" was framed not as an abstract condition but as the ability to move, work and live without constant fear.

One participant described how quickly optimism shifted into hesitation as information from Syria and images of instability circulated:

"On 8 December I thought: 'Why am I here? let me return.' But the more we saw there was no security, the more I gave up." (FG1-P2)

Participants also connected insecurity to governance and institutional breakdown. They emphasized that a change in political leadership does not automatically produce

rule of law, functioning institutions or effective policing. For some, the concern was precisely that transitions can create power vacuums where local armed actors gain more control.

"The old regime went, a new one came but there is still no security." (FG1-P1)

For women, security was repeatedly described as inseparable from mobility, autonomy and dignity in everyday life. Participants highlighted fears about moving freely, being outside alone and the broader social environment shaping what women can safely do in public.

"Women can't go out freely... it doesn't feel safe." (FG1-P9)

Overall, participants framed safety as a minimum precondition for return. Security that must be experienced consistently, not promised. Without credible improvements in protection and lawfulness, many felt that returning would expose families to unacceptable risks, even if the desire to go home remains strong.

3.4. Basic services and housing: "No electricity, no water... our homes are destroyed"

Even when participants tried to imagine return under improved security conditions, many described daily life in Syria as structurally unlivable due to widespread housing destruction and the collapse (or unreliability) of basic services. Access to electricity and clean water was repeatedly presented not as a temporary inconvenience but as a defining constraint shaping whether families could survive, care for children and maintain dignity after return.

"There is no electricity, no water." (FG1-P10)

“Our relatives in Syria tell us: ‘There’s no work, no electricity, no water and our homes are destroyed.’” (FG2-P1)

“My mother-in-law returned four years ago. She lives in one room; no electricity, no water.” (FG2-P4)

Participants stressed that conditions described by relatives currently inside Syria often contradicted more optimistic narratives they encountered elsewhere. Reports from family members were treated as highly credible and decisive; several said these messages reduced their willingness to return because they suggested that even “getting by” would require constant improvisation and hardship.

Housing emerged as one of the most concrete thresholds for return. Many participants framed the question in practical terms; without a habitable home, return would mean homelessness, unsafe shelter or dependence on others. For families who lost homes due to conflict or damage, return felt impossible unless reconstruction or adequate housing support was available.

“If there was a house, we could return.” (FG2-P5)

In addition to physical shelter, participants linked housing to safety, privacy and family well-being. A damaged or shared living situation was described as especially difficult for families with children and as a potential source of conflict and stress in already fragile circumstances.

Women participants also highlighted how infrastructure collapse creates gendered burdens in everyday life. In contexts where water must be collected manually or electricity is inconsistent, domestic and caregiving work intensifies, often falling disproportionately on women. This made return feel not only materially difficult but also unequal in impact.

“Even carrying water becomes women’s work.” (FG1-P11)

Overall, participants presented basic services and housing as non-negotiable foundations for sustainable return. Without reliable access to water and electricity and without safe shelter, many felt that return would not be a "new start" but a shift into deeper hardship.

3.5. Economic survival: costs, jobs and "*starting from zero*"

Participants repeatedly described return as an economic gamble; a decision that could quickly become unsustainable if families arrive without savings, housing or a reliable way to earn an income. Many framed return not as "going back to life as it was" but as starting from zero in a context where work opportunities are limited and daily costs can be unpredictable. The prospect of rebuilding, physically and financially, was perceived as overwhelming, particularly for families whose homes were damaged or whose assets were lost during displacement. Several participants noted that relatives or acquaintances who had already returned often discouraged others from following, describing regret and hardship after arrival:

"Many who went regret it. They tell us: don't come." (FG2-P6)

Participants also emphasized the upfront costs of return. Beyond the journey itself, they described immediate expenses linked to repairing homes, securing basic household items and meeting everyday needs in a setting where services are unreliable. For those without intact housing, return was framed as financially unrealistic.

"Returning costs a sack of money. The house is ruined, nothing left." (FG2-P7)

Livelihood concerns were tightly connected to infrastructure collapse. Participants highlighted how the absence of electricity, functioning markets or stable supply chains directly undermines people's ability to work. This made return feel risky not only for professionals but also for tradespeople whose work depends on basic utilities.

“My husband is a welder, but there’s no electricity! How can he earn money there?” (FG2-P8)

At the same time, participants stressed that economic pressure in Turkey is also shaping return discussions. Rising rents, food prices and utility bills combined with insecure, low-paid work, left many families struggling to meet basic needs. For some, these pressures created a sense that they are being squeezed from both sides; unable to build a stable future in Turkey but also unable to survive sustainably in Syria.

“Rent and bills are very high. We pay our husbands’ wages to rent and utilities - we can’t keep up.” (FG2-P9)

For some participants, the dilemma was expressed as a comparison between hardship in both places but with different kinds of risks. In Turkey, the struggle was described as financial strain and uncertainty about long term stability; in Syria, the fear was that economic hardship would be intensified by destroyed infrastructure, weak labor markets and the cost of rebuilding a life without a safety net. This tension between unaffordability in Turkey and unviability in Syria shaped many participants’ cautious stance toward return and reinforced demands for clear information and practical support before any decision is made.

3.6. Children and the “*future question*”

During the meetings, children were repeatedly described as the main reference point in return decision-making. Parents framed return not only as a question of safety and livelihood but as a long-term “future question”. What kind of education will children receive? Where will they belong? What opportunities will they have as they grow older? For many households, these concerns outweighed emotional attachment to place and they often shaped a more cautious approach to return.

A common pattern was that children, especially adolescents and young adults who have spent most of their lives in Turkey, were reluctant to return. Parents described their children as having built their identities, friendships and aspirations in Turkey and some noted that their children see Turkey as the only home they truly know.

"The children don't want to return… teenagers, 17–20 years old." (FG2-P10)

"My son says: 'Mom, I was born here, so I need to stay here.'" (FG2-P11)

Participants emphasized that returning could disrupt schooling at a critical stage with potential long-term consequences. Parents worried that children might lose years of education or be forced into unsafe routes to school. Several also questioned whether schooling in Syria is currently accessible, functional and safe.

Beyond infrastructure, parents raised concerns about transitioning between education systems. Some suggested that even if schools are operating, reintegration would be difficult after years in Turkey due to differences in curriculum, language of instruction, documentation requirements and grade placement.

Language was a particularly significant barrier. Participants noted that many children now speak Turkish more comfortably than Arabic which could make reintegration socially and academically challenging. Parents feared children would struggle to follow lessons, fall behind peers or become isolated.

In several discussions, parents expressed a persistent tension between the emotional pull of "home" and the practical responsibility to protect children's futures. While some parents spoke of wanting their children to grow up connected to Syrian identity and family roots, they also described the difficult reality that return (under current conditions) could mean sacrificing education, stability and opportunity. For many, this created a painful dilemma; the desire to return was often strongest in the parents' generation while the children's sense of belonging and prospects were increasingly tied to life in Turkey.

4. Conclusion

The focus group discussions and interviews underline a consistent message: return is not a single, one-off choice but an unfolding process shaped by safety, access to basic services, economic viability, family unity and the ability to live with dignity. Although the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024 continues to be described as a powerful emotional turning point, participants' reflections show that hope does not automatically translate into readiness to return. Ongoing insecurity, damaged housing, unreliable electricity and water, and uncertain livelihoods remain decisive constraints. For many families, children's education and long term prospects, women's autonomy and safety in daily life are central to decision making, alongside a growing demand for trustworthy information and safeguards so that "voluntary return" remains genuinely voluntary. Across discussions, what participants asked for most clearly was time, clarity and safety: time to assess conditions, clarity on rights and procedures, and safety that includes protection from forced return and preservation of family unity.

Compared to Mülteci-Der's report from one year earlier[1], the broad contours of the debate remain strikingly similar but the emphasis has shifted in important ways. The 2025 report highlighted that while the regime's collapse reshaped the return discourse, Syria remained exceptionally fragile, marked by localized conflict, armed actors, human rights concerns, economic collapse and widespread destruction of housing and essential services. That situation led many refugees to view large-scale return as premature and unsafe. The previous report also stressed that return decisions were deeply influenced by experiences in Turkey, especially the lives built over time, children's integration and schooling, concerns about women's rights and the fear that return without protections could become coercive in practice. The 2025 report highlighted that meaningful progress in security, livelihoods, infrastructure and legal and social safeguards (particularly for women and vulnerable groups) would be necessary before return could be sustainable at scale.

[1] Mukteci-Der, (April 2025), Rebuilding Lives, Redefining Home: Syrian Refugees and the Return Debate – Insights from Focus Group Discussions (December 2024-January 2025) https://multeci.org.tr/en/2025/04/18/rebuilding-lives-redefining-home/

One year on, participants continue to voice these core concerns but they increasingly frame them through immediate, practical questions about procedures, reliable information channels and mechanisms such as “Go-and-See,” alongside sharper anxieties about legal uncertainty in Turkey and the lived consequences of family separation.

Annex: Focus Group Meetings Details

Session	Date	Format	Location	Participants (anonymised)	Main topics
FG1	14 August 2025	Focus group (Q&A)	İzmir (Mülteci-Der office)	Adults (ages 21–52), from multiple regions of Syria	Meaning of voluntary return; emotions after political change; safety; services; women's risks; children's education
FG2	11 Dec 2025	Focus group (notes)	İzmir (Mülteci-Der office)	9 adults, primarily women with children	Voluntary return and "Go-and-See"; conditions for return; costs; livelihoods; women's autonomy; information sources
FG3	22 Dec 2025	Semi-structured interviews / mini-group	İzmir (Mülteci-Der office)	3 Syrian women (ages 21, 37, 40) affected by forced family separation	Impact of forced separation; coping strategies; decision-making about staying/returning; needs for information and support

Mültecilerle Dayanışma Derneği / 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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