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RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Stability as Threshold: Return, Stay or Onward Migration among Highly Educated Syrian Refugees in Türkiye after the Fall of Assad

Bir Eşik Olarak İstikrar: Esad'ın Düşüşünün Ardından Türkiye'deki Yüksek Eğitimli Suriyeli Mülteciler Arasında Geri Dönüş, Kalış veya Başka Bir Ülkeye Göç

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Abstract

In this article, we examine determinants of return, stay, and onward migration intentions among Syrian refugees in Türkiye, focusing on a highly educated subgroup whose skills are often viewed as crucial for post-conflict reconstruction. Combining a pre-December 2024 survey (N=510) with post-December 2024 semi-structured interviews (n=20), we analyze how perceived stability—security, livelihoods, services, and institutional predictability—structures future plans. Quantitative analysis first situates the broader survey sample and then focuses on university – and postgraduate-educated respondents, showing that return aspirations among this highly educated subgroup are strongly associated with property ownership in Syria and positive perceptions of security and living conditions, while Turkish citizenship and longer duration of stay in Türkiye are associated with lower return propensity. The interview phase provides interpretive depth by showing how highly educated Syrians understand "stability" through credential recognition, legal status, professional mobility, and the infrastructure required for skilled work. Many rule out return because volatility in Syria threatens long-term career and family projects; others contemplate return or onward migration when legal precarity, discrimination, and blocked mobility in Türkiye undermine stability. The article contributes to debates on durable solutions by showing how education reshapes the meaning of voluntariness and why policies that ignore highly educated refugees' institutional and professional requirements are unlikely to enable sustainable reintegration.

Keywords: Immigration, Syria, Türkiye, Temporary Protection, Highly Educated Refugees, Return

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Öz

Bu makalede, Türkiye'de yaşayan Suriyeli mültecilerin geri dönüş, Türkiye'de kalma ve üçüncü bir ülkeye göç etme niyetleri, çatışma sonrası yeniden inşa süreçlerinde vasıfları kritik önem taşıyan yüksek eğitimli bir alt gruba odaklanarak incelenmektedir. Aralık 2024 öncesinde gerçekleştirilen anket çalışması (N=510) ile sonrasında yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler (n=20) bir araya getirilerek, algılanan istikrarın (güvenlik, geçim koşulları, hizmetlere erişim ve kurumsal öngörülebilirlik gibi unsurların) geleceğe yönelik planları nasıl şekillendirdiği analiz edilmektedir. Nicel analiz önce genel örneklemi ortaya koymakta, ardından lisans ve lisansüstü eğitim almış katılımcılara odaklanmaktadır. Bulgular, bu yüksek eğitimli alt grup içinde geri dönüş eğilimlerinin özellikle Suriye'de mülk sahibi olmak ve güvenlik ile yaşam koşullarına dair olumlu algılarla güçlü biçimde ilişkili olduğunu; buna karşılık Türk vatandaşlığına sahip olmanın ve Türkiye'de daha uzun süre yaşamış olmanın geri dönüş eğilimini azalttığını göstermektedir. Derinlemesine görüşmeler ise yüksek eğitimli Suriyelilerin "istikrar" kavramını diploma denkliği, hukuki statü, mesleki hareketlilik ve nitelikli çalışma için gerekli altyapılar üzerinden nasıl anlamlandırdığını ortaya koyarak analize yorumlayıcı bir derinlik kazandırmaktadır. Katılımcıların önemli bir bölümü, Suriye'deki belirsizlik ve kırılganlığın uzun vadeli kariyer ve aile projelerini tehdit etmesi nedeniyle geri dönüş ihtimalini dışlamaktadır. Buna karşılık bazıları, Türkiye'de yaşadıkları hukuki güvencesizlik, ayrımcılık ve kısıtlanan hareketlilik deneyimleri nedeniyle geri dönüşü ya da üçüncü bir ülkeye göçü değerlendirmektedir. Makale, eğitimin gönüllü geri dönüş kavramının anlamını nasıl yeniden şekillendirdiğini ve yüksek eğitimli mültecilerin kurumsal ve mesleki ihtiyaçlarını göz ardı eden politikaların sürdürülebilir yeniden entegrasyon sağlamada neden yetersiz kalacağını göstererek kalıcı çözümler tartışmalarına katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göç, Suriye, Türkiye, Geçici Koruma, Yüksek Eğitimli Mülteciler, Geri Dönüş

1. Introduction

Syria entered a new political phase with the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2024, reopening debates over refugee return while leaving conditions on the ground fragile and uneven. After thirteen years of conflict, economic collapse and severe infrastructure damage—compounded by the February 2023 earthquakes—access to basic services remains inconsistent and security risks continue (OCHA, 2024). In this context, Türkiye, which hosted the world's largest refugee population between 2014 and 2024, has become a central arena for social and political debates on return, which are politically pressured and practically uncertain.

This article examines how Syrian refugees[1] in Türkiye—particularly a highly educated subgroup—navigate three competing trajectories: return to Syria, long-term stay in Türkiye, or onward migration to a third country. Educational level matters not only because skilled refugees are often viewed as potential contributors to reconstruction, but also because higher education reshapes

1 **Conceptual and terminological note:** In the Turkish legal context, Syrians displaced by the conflict are protected under the Temporary Protection Regime rather than formally recognized as refugees under the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, due to Türkiye's geographical limitation. In this article, our use of the term "Syrian refugees" is therefore not merely terminological, but also an analytical and normative choice. We use it as an umbrella category for individuals who fled the Syrian conflict and reside in Türkiye under temporary protection or related humanitarian statuses, while recognizing that this does not correspond exactly to their formal legal classification in Turkish law. This usage follows a broader academic convention that foregrounds displacement experience and protection needs, while still acknowledging the legal and political distinctions embedded in national asylum regimes.

how stability is evaluated: through institutional reliability, professional mobility, and expectations of governance and services.

Empirically, the article draws on a two-phase, sequential design combining a survey conducted between October and December 2024 (N=510) with semi-structured interviews conducted after the political rupture (n=20). The survey maps broader patterns of return, stay, and onward migration intentions among Syrians in Türkiye, while the interview phase provides interpretive depth on how highly educated Syrians understood these options after the fall of the regime.

Rather than treating the two phases as directly comparable data collected under identical conditions, the article uses them in a complementary way to examine how migration orientations and the meaning of stability were articulated across a period of major political change. We ask the following research questions: (1) What factors shape intentions to return, stay, or migrate onward? (2) How do living conditions and legal status in Türkiye influence these intentions? (3) How are security, livelihoods, and services in Syria perceived from Türkiye? (4) What policy implications follow for governments and humanitarian actors seeking sustainable pathways?

We argue that stability operates as a threshold condition rather than one factor among many: without a minimum perception of safety, services, and institutional predictability in Syria, return remains unlikely, while instability and exclusion in Türkiye can redirect aspirations toward onward migration or conditional, strategic return.

2. Conceptual Framework on Refugee Return

Return is widely described as one of the three durable solutions for refugees, alongside local integration and third-country resettlement. The UNHCR conceptualizes voluntary return as a process conducted in "safety and dignity" (UNHCR, 1996), while scholarly critiques highlight the complex constraints that shape return decisions, particularly in contexts of protracted displacement (Black & Koser, 1999; Long, 2013; Şahin-Mencütek, 2024). "Voluntariness" is best understood as a continuum shaped by agency, constraints, and policy environments rather than a simple voluntary–forced dichotomy (Omata, 2013). This perspective highlights multiple typologies — sustainable vs. unsustainable (Black & Gent, 2006), assisted vs. spontaneous (Hammond, 2004), and temporary vs. permanent return (Cassarino, 2014). Historical cases such as Bosnian and Afghan repatriations show that return is rarely linear or irreversible; reintegration challenges often lead to cycles of re-migration (Van Houte & Davids, 2008; Cassarino, 2014).

In this article, we use *return* as the broader analytical term referring to refugees' movement back to their country of origin, whether imagined, intended, spontaneous, assisted, temporary, or permanent. By contrast, *voluntary repatriation* is used only in the narrower policy and protection sense associated with refugee law and UNHCR's durable-solutions framework, where return is expected to occur in conditions of safety, dignity, and informed consent (UNHCR, 1996; Long, 2013). This distinction is well established in the literature, which emphasizes that repatriation is

a normatively loaded and institutionally framed process, often shaped by states and international organizations, whereas return encompasses a wider range of practices, including spontaneous, partial, circular, or strategically timed movements (Black & Gent, 2006; Cassarino, 2004; Hammond, 2004). As several scholars have noted, in contexts of protracted displacement, the boundary between voluntary and involuntary return is often blurred, and decisions are shaped by a combination of constraints, pressures, and limited alternatives rather than purely free choice (Omata, 2013; Şahin-Mencütek, 2024). We therefore use these terms in a differentiated but complementary way, reserving *repatriation* for its formal legal meaning while adopting *return* as a broader analytical category that better captures the diversity and ambiguity of contemporary refugee mobility.

Theoretical approaches to return migration offer different lenses on refugees' decision making, especially for those with higher education. The neoclassical economic model frames return as a rational cost-benefit calculation based on economic opportunities and living conditions in host and origin countries (Massey et al., 1993). In contrast, the New Economics of Labor Migration (NELM) shifts the focus to household strategies, highlighting family expectations, remittances, and transnational livelihoods (Stark & Bloom, 1985). For highly educated refugees, return thus involves not only economic reasoning, but also familial obligations and collective well-being.

Beyond economic factors, structural and social dynamics strongly shape return decisions. Structuralist approaches stress the role of legal frameworks, state policies, and institutional constraints (Goss & Lindquist, 1995). Restrictive residency rules or limited recognition of qualifications in the host country may push highly educated refugees toward return, while political instability in the country of origin may deter it. Transnational and social network theories further show how diaspora ties influence return aspirations (Levitt & Glick Schiller, 2004). Such networks can facilitate access to employment, information, and knowledge transfer across borders. However, these same transnational ties may also encourage circular mobility or prolonged stays abroad, as highly educated refugees strategically navigate opportunities in multiple localities rather than committing to a definitive and permanent return.

In his seminal paper on return migration, Cassarino (2004) argues that classical migration theories, when taken in isolation, remain insufficient to fully explain return dynamics, as they tend to privilege specific dimensions—such as economic rationality or structural constraints—while overlooking the broader contextual and processual nature of return. To address these limitations, he proposes an alternative conceptual framework centered on two key dimensions: resource mobilization and preparedness. Resource mobilization refers to the accumulation and use of both tangible (financial) and intangible (skills, knowledge, networks) assets throughout the migration experience. Preparedness, in turn, combines migrants' willingness to return with their actual readiness, that is, their capacity to translate intentions into action under specific conditions. This perspective highlights that return is best understood as a process shaped by varying degrees of agency, resources, and structural conditions.

Building on this process-oriented perspective, recent return migration scholarship further emphasizes that return is a heterogeneous and often politicized phenomenon rather than a purely voluntary act (King & Kuschminder, 2022; Şahin-Mencütek, 2024). Particularly in the context of refugee return, the distinction between voluntary and forced return is better understood as a continuum shaped by legal constraints, policy frameworks and unequal power relations (Black & Gent, 2006; Leerkes et al., 2017; Um, 2023). Moreover, return decisions are complex and multi-layered, often involving a combination of security concerns, family considerations and social ties rather than purely economic reasoning (Black et al., 2004; Al Husein & Wagner, 2023). Finally, return intentions do not necessarily translate into actual return, as aspirations are mediated by migrants' abilities, resources and conditions in both host and origin countries.

Building on this theoretical framework, the return of Syrian refugees in Türkiye can be understood as a highly contextual and multidimensional process, shaped above all by perceptions of stability and security in the country of origin.

3. The Return of Syrian Refugees in Türkiye: Stability as the Central Determinant

The return of Syrian refugees in Türkiye is best understood as a complex and context-dependent process shaped primarily by conditions in the country of origin, rather than by host country dynamics alone. A growing body of research consistently shows that perceived security, political stability, and access to basic services in Syria constitute the central determinants of return decisions (İçduygu & Nimer, 2020; Kayaoğlu et al., 2021; Kaya, 2022; Idlebi & Omaish, 2024). In the absence of meaningful improvements in these areas, most refugees remain reluctant to return, even in the face of increasing socioeconomic pressures in Türkiye. Comparative evidence across different host country contexts similarly confirms that return aspirations are driven less by adverse conditions in exile than by the perceived feasibility and safety of return, underscoring the decisive role of origin-country conditions (Alrababah et al., 2023).

The centrality of safety and stability is rooted in both the history of displacement and refugees' lived experiences of violence prior to exile. Before the fall of Assad, internally displaced Syrians were reluctant to settle in northern Syria due to persistent insecurity and inadequate infrastructure (Idlebi & Omaish, 2024). While host country conditions—such as economic hardship, social exclusion and discrimination—shape the broader context of return debates, they rarely constitute sufficient motivation in the absence of tangible improvements in Syria (Kaya, 2022). This asymmetry challenges conventional push-pull models, which assume a more balanced weighting between origin and host country factors. In practice, the structural conditions in Syria—ongoing conflict, repression and economic collapse—overwhelmingly outweigh potential incentives to return (Idlebi & Omaish, 2024).

Moreover, the so-called "integration paradox" further complicates return dynamics in Türkiye. Research shows that refugees who are more socially and economically integrated often become more aware of discrimination, which may either increase return aspirations or encourage onward

migration to third countries (Kayaoğlu et al., 2021; Özkan et al., 2023). Highly educated refugees, in particular, tend to view other countries as offering greater professional and social mobility (Dereli, 2022). Al Husein and Wagner (2023) find that educated Syrian refugees in Germany and Türkiye display lower return intentions, prioritizing better educational and future prospects for their children. Refugees who experienced direct threats to their safety, however, are influenced primarily by the restoration of stability (Kaya & Orchard, 2020). This heightened awareness among highly educated refugees discourages return to an unstable homeland and contributes to prolonged displacement and circular mobility.

Within this conceptual framework, stability is treated as a threshold condition encompassing not only the cessation of conflict, but also predictable governance, access to basic services, and credible livelihood opportunities (Black & Koser, 1999; Long, 2013). For highly educated refugees, this notion of stability is further filtered through a human-capital lens, including the recognition of credentials, opportunities for professional mobility, and the institutional and infrastructural conditions necessary for skilled employment. Return decisions thus become linked to long-term life projects rather than short-term survival strategies. In the absence of a minimum perception of stability, other considerations—such as political change, economic prospects, or family ties—tend to carry limited weight (Alrababah et al., 2023).

4. The Role of Education in Return Studies

Education shapes return aspirations through several interrelated mechanisms. First, higher educational attainment expands access to information, professional networks, and transnational opportunities, thereby increasing the feasibility of strategic staying or onward mobility. Second, education tends to raise expectations regarding institutional predictability, public services, and the recognition of qualifications, making unstable return contexts less attractive. Third, more educated refugees are often more sensitive to labor–market mismatch, deskilling, and bureaucratic barriers in the host country, which may weaken attachment but does not necessarily translate into a greater propensity to return, instead redirecting aspirations toward alternative destinations. Finally, from a preparedness perspective (Cassarino, 2004), education can enhance the capacity to evaluate return strategically, yet it does not increase the likelihood of return unless the origin context offers conditions in which human capital can be effectively utilized. Taken together, these mechanisms suggest that education shapes return aspirations not simply through income or status, but by structuring how refugees assess opportunity across origin, host, and third-country settings (Carling & Pettersen, 2014; Van Houte & Davids, 2008; Al Husein & Wagner, 2023; Bygnes, 2021; Hannafi & Marouani, 2023).

Existing research suggests that return aspirations are not uniform across social groups but are structured by differences in life aspirations and transnational positioning. Müller-Funk and Fransen (2023) show that for more educated refugees, return is less likely to be framed as a strategy of immediate necessity and more as a long-term life project, evaluated in relation to

future opportunities and trajectories. At the same time, studies on transnationalism highlight that access to cross-border networks and resources can expand the range of available options, often reducing the likelihood of return by enabling onward mobility or sustained settlement in the host country (de Haas & Fokkema, 2011). Taken together, these approaches suggest that education reshapes return aspirations by situating them within a broader field of possibilities, rather than as a singular or inevitable outcome.

Highly educated refugees occupy a distinctive position within these dynamics. While their skills and knowledge position them as potential contributors to post-conflict reconstruction, their expectations regarding governance quality, professional opportunities, and institutional reliability often make them more hesitant to return to contexts marked by uncertainty and instability (Van Houte & Davids, 2008; Bygnes, 2021). This tension places highly educated refugees at the intersection of reconstruction potential and return reluctance.

These dynamics are particularly salient in the Syrian case in Türkiye, where individuals with higher levels of education constitute a relatively small and demographically distinct group. Educational attainment among Syrians in Türkiye remains generally low: only 9% of women and 11% of men aged six and above have completed high school or higher education, while the median years of schooling are 4.5 for women and 5.1 for men (HUNEE, 2019). This indicates that Syrians with at least a high school education constitute a demographically exceptional group, making education level a particularly important variable when analyzing return aspirations. Their trajectories are further shaped by differentiated legal statuses, including access to exceptional citizenship, which creates divergent integration and mobility pathways. In this context, education does not operate as a simple driver of return, but as a structuring factor that shapes how refugees interpret stability, evaluate risks, and navigate future possibilities across multiple settings (Carling & Pettersen, 2014; Hannafi & Marouani, 2023; Al Husein & Wagner, 2023). Despite this empirical reality, relatively few studies explicitly examine how education restructures return aspirations. Existing research tends to explain return primarily through security conditions, host-country policies, and economic constraints, without systematically examining how highly educated refugees evaluate these same conditions through a distinct interpretive lens (Black & Koser, 1999; Long, 2013). This omission is especially consequential for understanding post-conflict recovery. If highly educated refugees are simultaneously among those most essential for reconstruction and those least willing to return under unstable conditions, then their decision-making processes become analytically and politically central.

By focusing explicitly on highly educated Syrian refugees in Türkiye, this study moves beyond treating education as a peripheral variable and instead places it at the core of analysis. It examines how education shapes perceptions of stability, legal status, professional expectations, and transnational strategies in ways that fundamentally reconfigure return aspirations. In doing so, the article advances a more differentiated understanding of refugee return—one that foregrounds the interplay between human capital, institutional trust, and life aspirations within contexts of protracted displacement and political transition.

5. Methodology

This study adopts a sequential mixed-method design consisting of two analytically linked phases. The first phase involved a structured online survey administered to Syrians residing in Türkiye between October and December 2024 (N=510), with a concentration in Gaziantep and Istanbul. The second phase comprised semi-structured interviews (n=20) conducted after the political rupture of December 2024.

While we fully recognize that developments on the ground have evolved rapidly, with the unexpected fall of Bashar al-Assad rendering the findings inherently time-sensitive, we argue that capturing return aspirations immediately before and after this rupture offers a valuable snapshot of a critical moment within an ongoing transformation. In this sense, the study contributes to the emerging literature on Syrian refugee return by documenting perceptions and intentions at a moment of profound uncertainty and transition. The research design also reflects methodological discussions emphasizing the need for flexible and adaptive approaches in rapidly changing contexts (McArdle, 2022; Koro-Ljungberg, 2015, p. 74). As McArdle (2022) notes, qualitative research on lived realities rarely unfolds in a linear or fully predictable manner, since the social worlds under investigation are themselves dynamic, unstable, and often contradictory.

Accordingly, the study follows a sequential explanatory logic in which the survey identifies broad patterns and key correlates of return, stay, and onward migration intentions, while the qualitative interviews serve to interpret and contextualize these findings. This design reflects a degree of methodological flexibility in response to evolving field conditions. The survey was conducted prior to the fall of the Assad regime, when large-scale return was not yet anticipated. Following this unexpected political rupture, a qualitative phase was incorporated to capture how return aspirations were being reinterpreted in real time. Six interviews were conducted in December 2024, followed by fourteen additional in-depth interviews in May-June 2025, a period identified by authorities as critical due to expected return movements after the end of the school year.

The first phase of the study consisted of a survey designed to identify broader patterns in future migration intentions—return to Syria, long-term stay in Türkiye, or onward migration—and their association with selected demographic, socio-economic, and perceptual variables. The questionnaire collected data on respondents' demographics, socio-economic status, perceptions of security and living conditions in Syria, integration-related experiences in Türkiye, and future migration intentions. It was distributed via social media and Syrian-focused networks using purposive and snowball sampling, with screening items to ensure eligibility. Associations between migration intentions and key factors were examined using chi-square analysis. Although the survey was widely circulated among Syrians in Türkiye, the achieved sample was disproportionately educated. In the analysis, we therefore distinguish between the full sample and a subgroup of university – and postgraduate-educated respondents (n=350), in order to assess whether the main patterns also hold within the highly educated segment that constitutes the primary focus of the qualitative phase.

The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews conducted after the political rupture of December 2024 (n=20). Participants represented three broad orientations: those considering return, those intending to stay, and those planning onward migration. The purpose of this phase was not to statistically replicate the survey under unchanged conditions, but to provide interpretive depth regarding how highly educated Syrians understood return, stay, onward migration, and, in particular, the notion of stability after the fall of the regime. The interviews were conducted in two waves: six in December 2024, immediately following the political rupture, and fourteen in MayJune 2025. These are therefore treated as post-transition reflections rather than as directly comparable counterparts to the pre-transition survey data.

All interviews were conducted and transcribed in Arabic and subsequently translated into English by a native Arabic-speaking research assistant fluent in English and Turkish; the English transcripts constituted the primary corpus for coding and analysis, with meaning-based translation used for culturally specific expressions.

The qualitative data were analyzed using a thematic analysis approach. Following transcription and translation, an iterative coding process was employed, combining deductive codes derived from the research questions and conceptual framework (e.g., stability, return, onward migration) with inductive codes emerging from the data. Coding was conducted by the research team, with regular discussions to refine the coding scheme and resolve ambiguities. Rather than relying on formal inter-coder reliability measures, consistency was ensured through iterative comparison of coded segments and review of selected excerpts. Through this process, themes were progressively developed, leading to the identification of distinct migration orientations that structure the presentation of the findings.

Rather than seeking direct convergence or validation, the two phases are analytically linked through a set of shared dimensions—particularly perceptions of security, legal status, living conditions, and stability—which are first identified in the survey and then explored in depth through interview narratives. In this sense, the qualitative material does not simply illustrate the quantitative findings but provides insight into how these dimensions are interpreted, negotiated, and prioritized by highly educated refugees in a rapidly changing context.

Because the two phases were conducted in different political moments, they are not treated as directly comparable data of the same attitudes. The survey captures migration intentions prior to the political rupture of December 2024, whereas the interviews reflect posttransition interpretations shaped by altered conditions. While this temporal difference constitutes a limitation, it also clarifies the distinct contribution of each phase: the survey maps broader pretransition patterns, while the interviews illuminate how these issues are reinterpreted and narrated in the posttransition context. Taken together, the two datasets are used in a complementary rather than strictly comparative way to examine how migration orientations and the meaning of stability evolve across a major political transition.

5.1. Validation and Reliability

To enhance the validity and reliability of the survey instrument, the questionnaire was developed through a combination of theoretical grounding and contextual adaptation. At the theoretical level, the design drew on migration-decision frameworks that emphasize aspirations, capabilities, and perceived opportunity structures, especially de Haas's (2021) aspirations-capabilities approach, as well as scholarship on refugee return, voluntariness, and durable solutions (UNHCR, 1996; Black & Koser, 1999; Long, 2013; Omata, 2013). At the contextual level, the instrument was adapted to the specific situation of Syrians in Türkiye, with attention to legal status, employment and economic pressures, rent and living costs, discrimination, family considerations, perceptions of security and living conditions in Syria, property ownership, and possible onward migration alternatives. These dimensions were translated into six survey blocks covering demographic characteristics, current living conditions in Türkiye, perceptions of conditions in Syria, factors shaping return considerations, alternative migration plans, and broader future intentions. This design aimed to ensure that the tool captured both conceptually relevant and context-specific factors shaping return, stay, and onward migration intentions.

The initial version of the survey was reviewed by three subject-matter experts: one academic researcher, one representative from a local NGO, and one from an international NGO—all with over five years of experience working on refugee and humanitarian issues in Syria and Türkiye. Their feedback contributed to ensuring the content validity, contextual appropriateness, and clarity of the instrument.

A pilot test was conducted with a small sample of respondents (n=7) to evaluate question clarity, response timing, and technical functionality. Based on the feedback from the pilot, minor adjustments were made to improve wording and sequencing. Additionally, the survey items were reviewed for coherence, redundancy, and clarity, and ambiguous or overlapping questions were revised or removed to strengthen the overall reliability of the instrument.

5.2. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the survey component of this study was obtained from the Hasan Kalyoncu University Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee. The application was reviewed in the committee meeting dated 09.07.2024 (Meeting No. 2024-24) and received a positive decision under official document number E-97105791-050.04-60848.

All participants were informed about the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences. No personal identifiers were collected, and full confidentiality was assured. Screening questions were incorporated at the beginning of the survey to exclude respondents who did not meet the study criteria. Consent was obtained digitally before participants proceeded with the survey. The interview phase was

likewise conducted on a voluntary basis, with informed consent, confidentiality protections, and the option to withdraw at any stage.

6. Results and Discussion

We begin by presenting the findings from the survey, which provide an overview of migration intentions and their key correlates. The aim is not to achieve statistical representativeness, but to identify and explore the relationships between migration intentions and selected socio-economic and perceptual factors.

Before turning to the detailed analysis, it is important to situate the profile of the survey sample. The respondents are predominantly highly educated and stably employed Syrians, a group that is not statistically representative of the broader Syrian population in Türkiye. Notably, one-fifth of participants hold dual Syrian–Turkish citizenship, indicating a level of legal and social integration well above the national average. Rather than aiming for general representativeness, the survey offers valuable insight into the attitudes and motivations of a specific and socially significant subgroup. Because the article places particular emphasis on highly educated Syrians, the quantitative analysis is presented in two steps: first, the full survey sample is used to map broader associations; second, a subgroup analysis is conducted for respondents with university and postgraduate education only, in order to assess whether the main patterns remain visible within the more educated segment.

Among the participants, 80% of respondents hold only Syrian citizenship, while 20% possess dual Syrian and Turkish citizenship. The gender distribution is 61% male and 39% female, indicating a male majority within the sample. These characteristics should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings that follow.

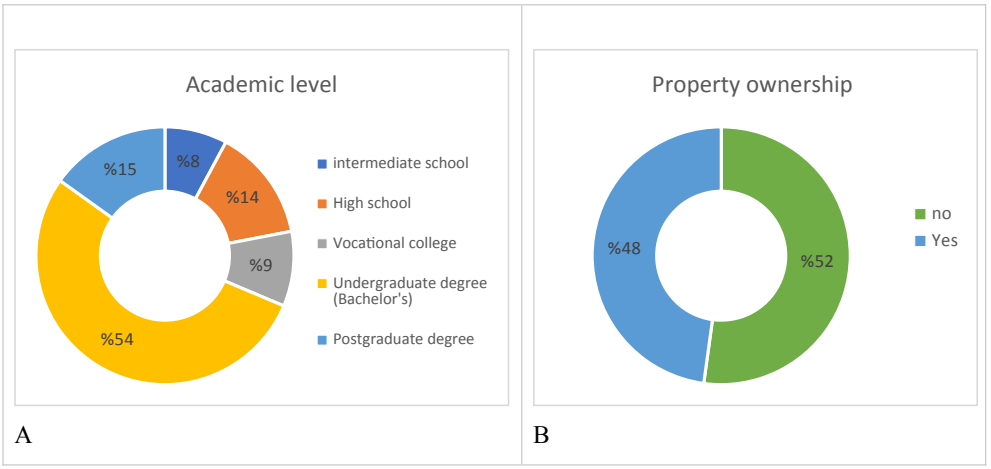
The survey examines the duration of stay and employment status among Syrian respondents in Türkiye. Most participants, 61.57%, have been in Türkiye for 6 to 10 years, followed by 29.02% who have resided for more than 10 years, and a smaller proportion, 9.41%, who have been in the country for 2 to 5 years. The employment status of respondents shows that 70.98% are employed, 18.82% work temporarily, and 10.2% are currently unemployed.

The age distribution of respondents shows that the largest group is aged 31–35 years (148 participants), followed by 36–40 years (114 participants) and 41–50 years (100 participants). Smaller age groups include 26–30 years (52 participants), more than 50 years (52 participants), and 18–25 years (44 participants). The distribution of respondents across various cities in Türkiye shows that the majority reside in Gaziantep (276 participants), followed by Istanbul (106 participants). Other cities include Mersin (36 participants), Bursa (28 participants), Adana (21 participants), Ankara (19 participants), Hatay (12 participants), and smaller representations in Izmir, Konya, and Maraş (4 participants each).

The survey results show that the majority attended university (273 participants, 54%), followed by smaller groups with postgraduate studies (77 participants, 15%), and high school education

(72 participants, 14%). In terms of property ownership, respondents are nearly evenly divided with 266 participants owning property in Syria while 246 participants do not own any as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Education Level and Property Ownership among Respondents



6.1. Security and Living Condition Perspectives among Syrians

Regarding living conditions, the largest share of respondents (197 participants, 39%) believed that the situation was worse than before, indicating substantial dissatisfaction with current conditions. Similarly, regarding the security situation, the largest share of respondents (155 participants, 30%) felt that there had been partial improvement, but that it was still not safe, reflecting continued concern over insecurity despite some perceived progress. Figures 2 and 3 focus on security and living conditions in Syria from Syrians' perspective in Türkiye. These insights underscore the significant challenges perceived by Syrians regarding the viability of returning to their home country.

Figure 2. Perceptions on Current Living Conditions in Syria

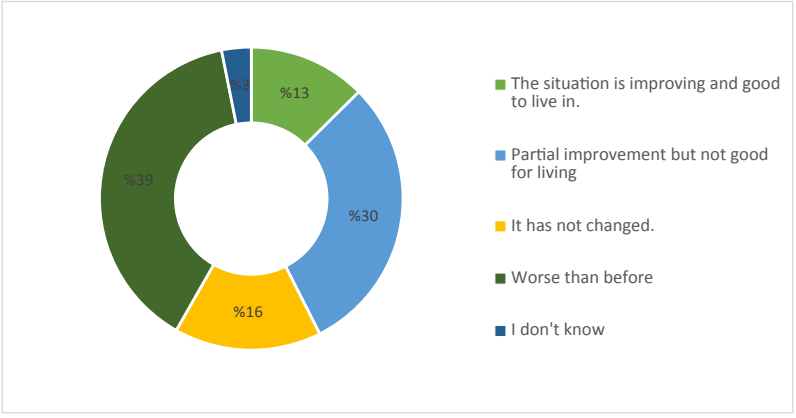
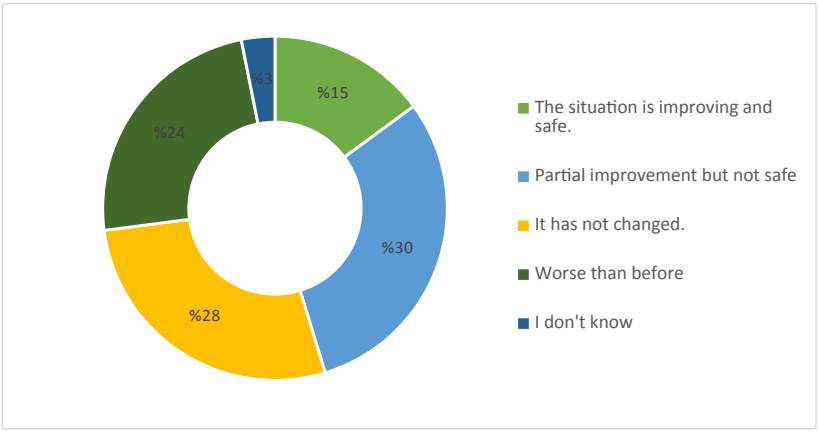


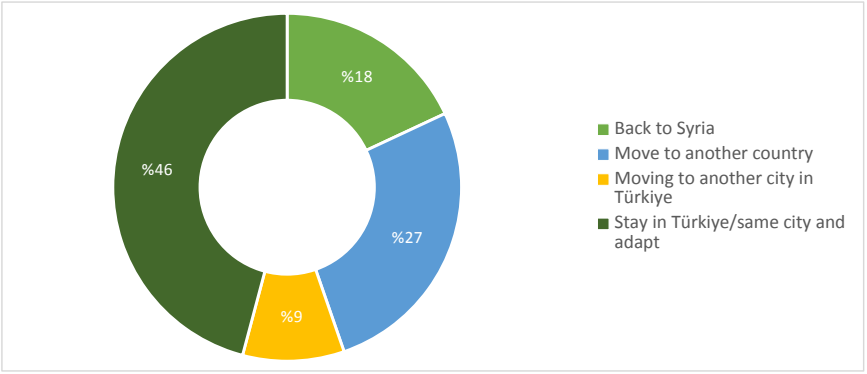
Figure 3. Perceptions on Current Security Situation in Syria



6.2. Future Plans of Syrians in Türkiye

This chart illustrates the future plans of Syrian respondents in Türkiye, highlighting their preferred courses of action. The largest portion, 55%, expressed a desire to stay in Türkiye, either in their current city or elsewhere, and adapt to their circumstances. Meanwhile, 27% indicated a preference to move to another country, reflecting aspirations for a fresh start abroad. A smaller group, 18%, stated their intention to return to Syria. These findings shed light on the diverse perspectives and priorities shaping the decisions of Syrian refugees regarding their future.

Figure 4. Future Plans of Syrians in Türkiye



6.3. Subgroup Analysis among University–and Postgraduate–Educated Respondents

To address the article's specific focus on highly educated Syrians, an additional chi-square analysis was conducted for respondents with university and postgraduate education only (n=350). The results show

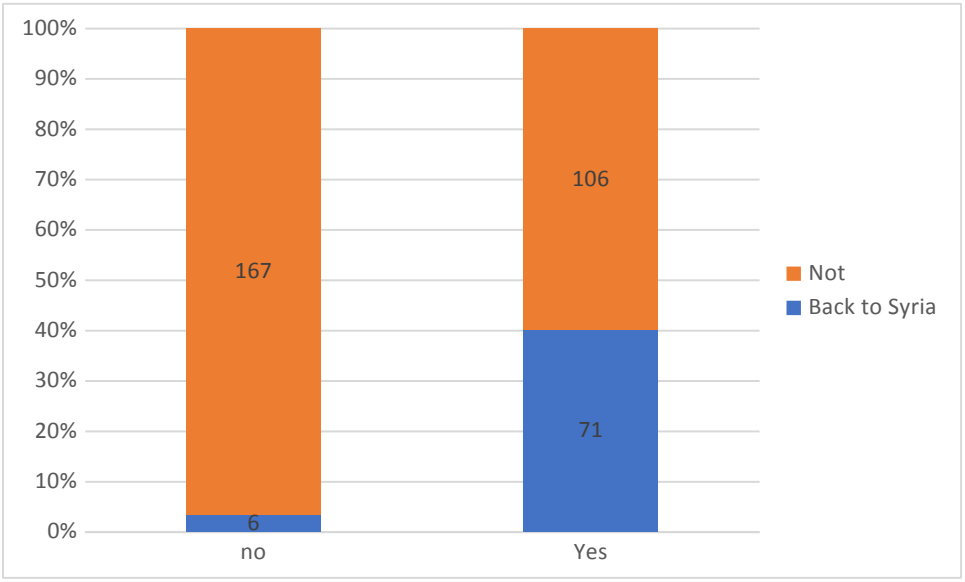
that the principal relationships observed in the full survey sample remain statistically significant within this more educated subgroup. Return aspirations among university – and postgraduate-educated respondents were significantly associated with educational level within the subgroup (university versus postgraduate degree, $\chi^2 = 27.84$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$), property ownership in Syria ($\chi^2 = 68.46$, df = 1, $p < 0.001$), citizenship status ($\chi^2 = 10.55$, df = 1, $p = 0.001$), duration of stay in Türkiye ($\chi^2 = 37.17$, df = 2, $p < 0.001$), perceptions of security in Syria ($\chi^2 = 218.38$, df = 4, $p < 0.001$), and perceptions of living conditions in Syria ($\chi^2 = 203.05$, df = 4, $p < 0.001$). These results strengthen the article's focus on highly educated Syrians by showing that the main quantitative patterns are not driven solely by less educated respondents in the broader survey sample.

6.4. Analysis of Return Aspiration Based on Property Ownership among Highly Educated Syrians

Figure 5 shows that property ownership in Syria is strongly associated with return aspiration among highly educated respondents. Among those who own a house or land in Syria, 71 out of 177 respondents expressed an intention to return, representing about 40%. By contrast, only 6 out of 173 respondents without property in Syria expressed a return aspiration, representing about 3.5%.

This indicates that property ownership remains an important pull factor for return, even among highly educated Syrians. Owning property may create both a material and emotional connection to Syria, making return more thinkable as part of rebuilding one's life or reclaiming assets. However, this does not mean that property ownership alone is sufficient to drive return. As the interview findings show, return remains conditional on wider concerns about security, legal recognition of property, services, and overall stability in Syria.

Figure 5. Return Aspiration Based on Property Ownership in Syria

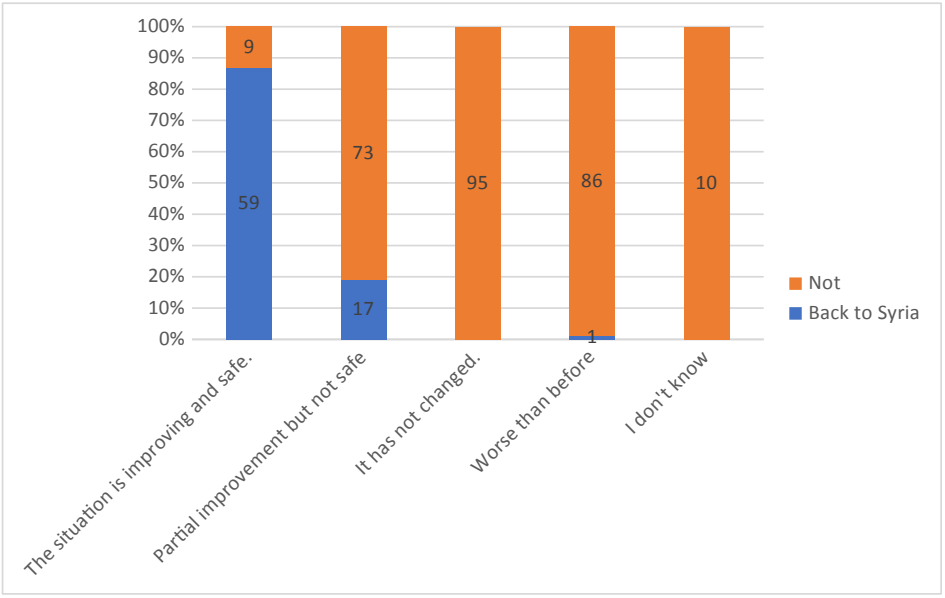


6.5. Analysis of Return Aspiration Based on Security Perspective in Syria among Highly Educated Syrians

Figure 6 shows a clear association between perceived security in Syria and return aspiration among highly educated respondents. Among those who viewed the situation as "improving and safe," 59 out of 68 respondents expressed an intention to return, representing about 87%. By contrast, return aspiration was much lower among those who believed that security had only partially improved but was still not safe, with 17 out of 90 respondents expressing an intention to return.

Almost no respondents who perceived the situation as unchanged, worse than before, or uncertain, expressed a willingness to return. This indicates that security is a threshold condition for return among highly educated Syrians. The interview findings further show that security was understood not only as the absence of violence, but also as institutional predictability, protection from arbitrary treatment, and the possibility of sustaining professional and family life in Syria.

Figure 6. Return Aspiration Based on Security Perspective in Syria



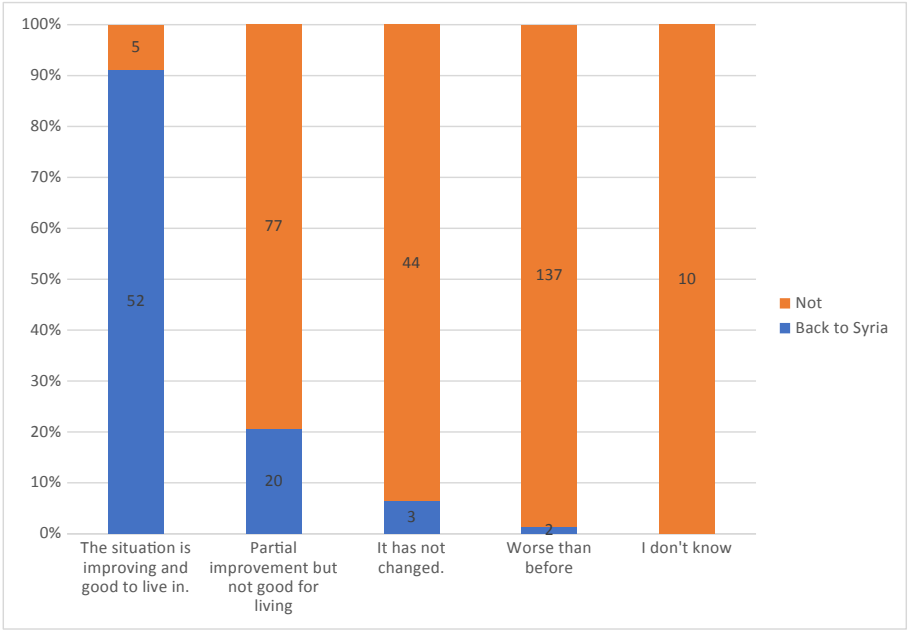
6.6. Analysis of Return Aspiration Based on Living Conditions Perspective in Syria among Highly Educated Syrians

Figure 7 shows that perceived living conditions in Syria are associated with return aspiration among highly educated respondents. Among those who believed that the situation in Syria was

"improving and good to live in," 52 out of 57 respondents expressed an intention to return, representing about 91%. By contrast, return aspiration was much lower among those who perceived only partial improvement, with 20 out of 97 respondents expressing an intention to return.

Return aspiration was very limited among respondents who believed that living conditions had not changed or had become worse. This indicates that, for highly educated Syrians, return depends not only on security but also on the availability of acceptable living conditions, including employment opportunities, infrastructure, education, healthcare, and basic services. In this sense, living conditions form part of the broader stability threshold that shapes whether return is seen as realistic or sustainable.

Figure 7. Return Aspiration Based on Living Conditions Perspective in Syria

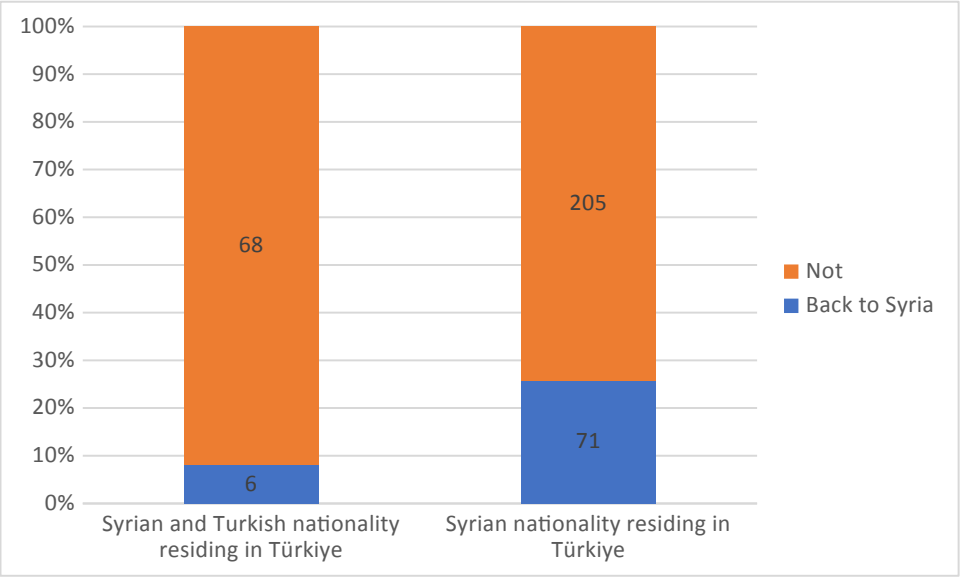


6.7. Analysis of Return Aspiration Based on Citizenship Status among Highly Educated Syrians

Figure 8 shows that citizenship status is associated with return aspiration among highly educated respondents. Among respondents with dual Syrian–Turkish citizenship, only 6 out of 74 expressed an intention to return, representing about 8%. By contrast, among respondents holding only Syrian citizenship, 71 out of 276 expressed an intention to return, representing about 26%.

This suggests that Turkish citizenship reduces the tendency to return by providing greater legal security, mobility, and long-term settlement opportunities in Türkiye. For highly educated Syrians, legal status is therefore not only a formal category, but also an important dimension of stability affecting employment, family planning, mobility, and future expectations.

Figure 8. Return Aspiration Based on Citizenship Status

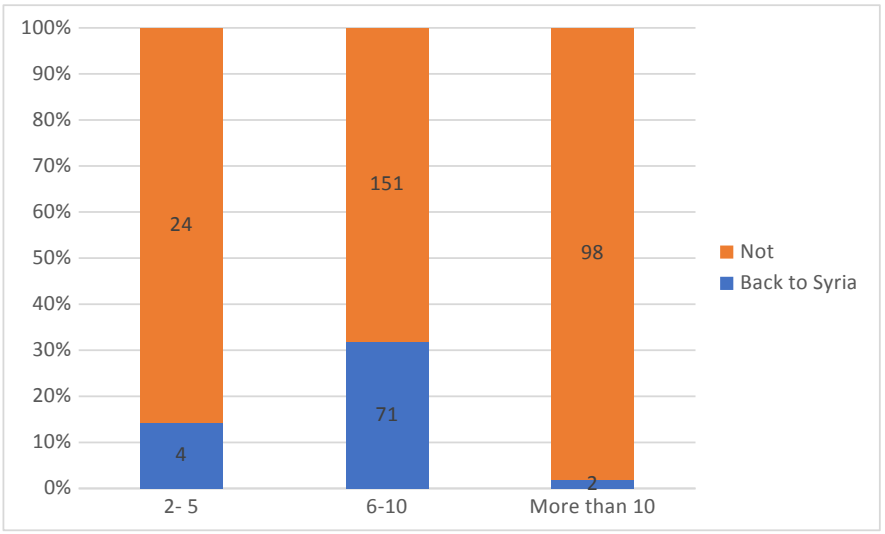


6.8. Analysis of Return Aspiration Based on Duration of Stay among Highly Educated Syrians

Figure 9 shows that duration of stay in Türkiye is associated with return aspiration among highly educated respondents. Among those who had lived in Türkiye for 2-5 years, 4 out of 28 respondents expressed an intention to return, representing about 14%. The highest return aspiration appeared among those who had stayed for 6-10 years, with 71 out of 222 respondents expressing an intention to return, representing about 32%. By contrast, among those who had lived in Türkiye for more than 10 years, only 2 out of 100 respondents expressed an intention to return.

This suggests that long-term residence in Türkiye may reduce the likelihood of return, as highly educated Syrians become more socially, professionally, and institutionally embedded in the host country. Over time, employment ties, children's education, social networks, and adaptation to local institutions may make return less attractive unless clear improvements occur in Syria.

Figure 9. Return Aspiration Based on Duration of Stay



The survey findings among highly educated Syrians show that return aspiration is shaped by several interconnected factors. Perceptions of security and living conditions in Syria appear as the most decisive conditions for return. Respondents who viewed Syria as safe and suitable for living were much more likely to express an intention to return, while those who perceived continued insecurity, poor services, or worsening conditions largely rejected return. Property ownership in Syria also increased return aspiration, suggesting that material and emotional ties to place remain important. However, property alone does not appear sufficient unless broader conditions of safety and stability are also perceived as acceptable. Citizenship status and duration of stay in Türkiye further shaped return aspirations. Respondents with dual Syrian–Turkish citizenship and those who had lived in Türkiye for more than ten years were less likely to express an intention to return, reflecting the role of legal security, social embeddedness, and long-term settlement in reducing return propensity.

The following interview section builds on these survey findings, by exploring how highly educated Syrians interpret these factors in lived terms after the political rupture of December 2024. Rather than retesting the survey results under the same conditions, the interviews clarify how security, living conditions, property, legal status, and duration of stay are understood through a broader search for stability, professional continuity, family security, and future prospects.

6.9. Stability as the Axis of Divergent Migration Trajectories

Building on the methodological flexibility discussed earlier, the qualitative phase was expanded following the fall of Bashar al-Assad in order to better interpret and deepen the survey findings

collected before this political rupture. The addition of semi-structured interviews made it possible to capture how return aspirations, uncertainties, and future projections were being reformulated in real time within a rapidly changing political context.

This section presents the qualitative findings based on twenty semi-structured interviews conducted with highly educated Syrians who have lived in Türkiye for approximately a decade. Interviews were carried out in two waves: six in December 2024, immediately following the fall of Bashar alAssad, and fourteen in May-June 2025. The sample is gender-balanced, consists entirely of married individuals aged 37-45, and includes participants with at least a university degree.

The analysis groups interviewees into three broad orientations: those intending to remain in Türkiye, those planning to return to Syria, and those seeking to relocate to a third country. Across these differing orientations, a single concept consistently emerges as the primary reference point shaping decisions: *istikrar* (stability). Stability functions simultaneously as an aspiration and a constraint, structuring how highly educated Syrians evaluate their options across contexts. In Türkiye, it is primarily associated with legal status, protection from racism, and economic continuity; in Syria, it is tied to broader political, economic, and security conditions.

Rather than reflecting a simple stay–return dichotomy, the interviews reveal a spectrum of positions—firm non-returners, reluctant and conditional stayers, onward migration aspirants, return aspirants, and strategic returners. What differentiates these positions is not attachment to a specific place, but varying assessments of where stability is more attainable. Across all cases, stability operates both as a guiding aspiration and a structuring constraint, shaping whether highly educated Syrians opt to stay in Türkiye, return to Syria, or seek opportunities elsewhere. In Türkiye, stability is mainly associated with legal status and protection from racist attacks, whereas in Syria it depends on broader economic and political conditions.

In contrast to the survey findings—where university graduates appeared more willing to return than other educational groups—the qualitative interviews conducted after the fall of the Assad regime reveal a more cautious and often reluctant stance toward return among highly educated Syrians. This divergence can partly be explained by the changing political context in which the interviews took place. While the collapse of the regime removed what many participants had previously described as the main obstacle to return, it also shifted attention toward broader concerns about long-term stability, institutional uncertainty, economic collapse, and everyday security in post-war Syria.

Those who rule out return—who constitute the plurality of our interviewees—see no viable path to stability in Syria given its persistent volatility. For them, despite the challenges they face in Türkiye, remaining is still preferable to return. Conversely, for those considering return, the inability to achieve stability in Türkiye—due to legal precariousness, social exclusion, or economic hardship—acts as a decisive push factor. Ultimately, the pursuit of stability—through legal recognition, economic security, and social integration—emerges as the main axis shaping migration trajectories. The interviews reveal the delicate balancing act highly educated Syrians

perform as they navigate between different contexts, weighing risks and possibilities in search of a sustainable future.

Firm non-returners: Those who adopt a firm non-return stance are typically individuals who have established a stable life in Türkiye, largely through acquiring Turkish citizenship and securing stable employment, while seeing no viable prospects for stability in Syria.

Hasan, a 42-year-old Turkish citizen, is an engineer and business owner living in Kilis. Married with three children, he underscores stability as the decisive factor in his decision to remain in Türkiye: "Things are relatively stable for me, making it difficult to relocate. (…) It might be feasible for me to visit Syria occasionally while continuing to live here. Since my children and my business are in Türkiye, staying here is the better option for now." However, his outlook is not without reservations. He raises concerns about insecurity, problems within the judicial system, and instances of racism, yet he believes that his children "have a promising future here. (…) it is likely to be better than in Syria."

Similarly, Amal, originally from Aleppo and living in Türkiye since 2013, expresses a resolute decision not to return. Despite her temporary protection status, she has adapted to life in Türkiye, learning Turkish and building a social network. While she retains strong emotional ties to her hometown, she considers return impossible due to destruction, lack of services, and limited economic prospects, and has not visited Syria since leaving for safety reasons. As she puts it: "There is nothing to return to. The city I knew no longer exists. (…) Even if the war stops, the services, jobs, and safety won't be there for years."

For Alawite refugees, the situation is particularly complex. Rana feels unsafe in both Syria and Türkiye. Regarding Syria, she fears persecution after the fall of Assad, explaining: "The country is destroyed, and everything is going backwards. There have been many attacks on us as a sect, just because Bashar al-Assad is Alawite. They blamed us all, even though we had nothing to do with it. I personally never agreed with him." In Türkiye, she also feels insecure due to her temporary protection status and hopes to obtain citizenship: "There's no security, no stability. I have my house, my shop, my cats, and my life—but I can't settle down. When I think of citizenship, I think of stability." As for return, she is unequivocal: "Right now… I don't have a clear plan. But there's one thing I'm sure of: I don't want to go back to Syria."

Rana's account illustrates how perceptions of return are shaped by intersecting axes of vulnerability, particularly sectarian identity and political positioning. While our analysis initially emphasizes the role of education in structuring expectations, her narrative reveals that, in contexts of heightened insecurity, concerns over physical safety often override institutional and professional considerations. Significantly, these concerns emerged spontaneously during the interviews rather than through direct solicitation—a finding that underscores how return aspirations are fundamentally mediated by broader configurations of risk. This aligns with the scholarly consensus on the primacy of political and security factors; as Zakirova and Buzurukov (2021) argue, political conditions in the country of origin remain the most potent predictors of return.

Similarly, Alrababah et al. (2023) demonstrate that even when faced with adverse conditions in host countries, refugees are unlikely to repatriate unless there is a substantial improvement in the safety of their home environment.

For many, despite severe legal and economic difficulties, remaining in Türkiye is still perceived as the better option. This is the case for Sami, who has lived in Antakya under temporary protection since 2014. After his home was destroyed in the 2023 earthquake, he briefly moved to Mersin before returning to Antakya, where he now runs a small business with his wife and children. He expresses a firm intention to stay in Türkiye, citing the destruction, insecurity, and lack of economic prospects in Syria, and clearly rules out return: "Aleppo is destroyed; there is nothing to go back to. Life there is impossible now—no work, no safety. (…) Even after the earthquake here, it is still better than going back to Syria. (…) My children's future is here, not there."

Reluctant stayers: Wafa is one of the reluctant stayers. Originally from Damascus, she has lived in Türkiye since 2015, with a brief return to Syria before settling in Istanbul in 2018. Trained in theater arts, she now works irregularly in freelance media. Holding temporary protection status and with a stalled citizenship application since 2019, she faces mobility restrictions, economic hardship, and persistent bureaucratic barriers. The absence of a supportive network, combined with growing anti-Syrian sentiment, has made life in Türkiye feel "almost impossible." Although she has serious concerns about safety and living conditions in Syria, worsening circumstances in Türkiye have pushed her to reluctantly contemplate return: "Life here has become almost impossible … everything is harder now." (…) "I don't want to go back, but sometimes I feel I have no choice. In Syria, there is no safety, no good services, and I don't know how we would live … but here, things are getting worse."

Conditional stayers: Among those who remain in Türkiye, a common profile is that of conditional stayers, whose decision to stay is shaped less by a firm preference for Türkiye than by the absence of stability in Syria. Lina is one of them. She fled from Aleppo to Türkiye with her family during the war, first settling in Gaziantep and later moving to Istanbul in search of better opportunities. While she has built a life and social network in Türkiye, her emotional ties to Syria remain strong. Her desire to return is present but clearly conditional on the restoration of safety, stability, and viable living conditions, particularly for the sake of her children's future. As she puts it, "If Syria becomes safe and life is possible again, I would like to go back." At the same time, she acknowledges current realities: "Right now, there is no way to live there. I cannot risk my children's future."

Basma, who holds a PhD in chemistry, has decided to remain in Türkiye for practical reasons related to her job. She envisions, within the next two years, a professional arrangement linking Türkiye with universities in Syria. This plan, which she describes as a "dream," depends largely on whether conditions in Syria stabilize. "I genuinely want to settle in Syria and work there. But the decision to return depends on the country's stability. Also, my research requires specific infrastructure—24-hour electricity and materials like argon. All my work is in batteries and

energy science, and the experiments I conduct require fully equipped labs. If this infrastructure becomes available in Syria, there's nothing preventing me from returning, working, and conducting research."

For many highly educated Syrians who intend to remain in Türkiye, staying does not mean the absence of concern. Among more devout Syrians, a key issue is the perceived mismatch between their conservative religious values and those reflected in the Turkish education system, which they see as insufficiently aligned with their beliefs. This concern is also voiced by Abd, a 42-year-old industrial engineer pursuing a PhD and currently working as a factory manager. Holding Turkish citizenship and stable employment, he has no intention of leaving Türkiye and does not face the legal or economic difficulties experienced by many others. Yet his primary concern centers on his children's education and their upbringing in line with the family's religious and conservative values.

For many others, the main source of anxiety is the persistence of racism, which shapes a desire to remain socially unobtrusive. For them, fluency in Turkish is not simply a practical skill but a way to avoid standing out and potential discrimination. When asked, "If you could change one thing about your life in Türkiye, what would it be?" Abd responds, "To speak Turkish fluently so that I wouldn't stand out as Syrian." This remark highlights how concerns about cultural fit, education, and social acceptance remain deeply intertwined, even for those who have achieved legal security and economic stability and are committed to building their future in Türkiye.

Prospective onward migrants: A small but significant group consists of those who aspire to relocate to a third country, such as Germany or Canada, in search of greater stability, largely motivated by the precariousness of their legal status under Temporary Protection Status (TPS). Ahmed exemplifies this profile. A 47-year-old translator at a Turkish school, he lives in Gaziantep with his wife and three children and remains under TPS without Turkish citizenship. He is considering relocating to Canada, citing economic and financial difficulties as the primary motivations for leaving Türkiye: *"In another country, our financial situation could improve, and I might find a suitable job, which is crucial. [I can] ensure a better and safer future for my children and family."*

For those with onward migration aspirations, experiences of racism constitute a major source of psychological distress and anxiety. The events in Kayseri—where an alleged child abuse incident triggered violent attacks against the city's refugee community in late June 2024—left many Syrians fearful and deeply disillusioned. Ahmed also points to sporadic cases of forced deportation, which further reinforce his sense of uncertainty and instability. He expresses his aspirations clearly: "I seek a country that offers stability, full humanitarian asylum, permanent residency, and the possibility of obtaining citizenship." For him, these conditions are essential to securing a stable future for his family.

Another illustration of onward migration aspirations emerges in the case of Muhammed, a 39yearold professional working in the humanitarian sector. Married with three children, he holds

a residence permit in Türkiye but not citizenship, which he sees as the main obstacle to long-term stability. The absence of a clear legal pathway to citizenship and limited protective legal frameworks, in his view, create a persistent sense of uncertainty.

Seeking security, he plans to relocate to Germany in hopes of obtaining legal recognition and a strong passport. Recent events, particularly the attacks in Kayseri, intensified these concerns, leading him to send his family to Aleppo in September so his children could continue their education in a more familiar environment. Yet for Muhammed, acquiring German citizenship is ultimately a strategic step toward a future in a country that better aligns with his cultural and moral values, combining legal stability with a sense of belonging.

Return aspirants: Finally, among the highly educated interviewees, those who seek to return to Syria are individuals who envision not only rebuilding their own lives but also contributing to the broader effort of establishing a stable and sustainable future for their country. Abu Al-Kheir, a 39year-old educator living in Gaziantep, embodies this profile. Married with one daughter, he works in alternative and informal education while managing Quran institutes in liberated Syrian territories, maintaining strong professional and emotional ties with Syria.

He frames his return as both a moral and professional obligation: "A sense of duty and responsibility compels me to serve my country." As a "child of the Syrian revolution," he sees this commitment as extending beyond the personal: "It is the duty of every free individual with expertise and qualifications to return, contribute, and assume key positions in their respective fields. This ensures that, in the future, those in power will be individuals of competence and integrity."

Among those inclined toward return, perceptions of an increasingly unwelcoming social and political environment in Türkiye play a decisive role in shaping their stance. Abu Ilyas, a 38yearold journalist, holds a master's degree in social sciences from Gaziantep University. Married with two children, he recently relocated to Azaz, Syria, where he has been living for the past four months. Although he is currently in the process of naturalization in Türkiye, his primary concern throughout this transition has been his children's education, particularly ensuring instruction in Arabic and the preservation of Islamic values.

His return was shaped by both personal convictions and the broader socio-political climate in Türkiye. While working on Syrian-related issues there, he describes a growing sense of exclusion that ultimately led him to leave: "I was working on issues related to Syria while in Türkiye, but the environment became less conducive and less supportive. It started feeling like an environment that pushes you out. To be clear, I didn't face any personal issues—everything was fine: my job, salary, legal status, everything. But the environment itself started feeling unwelcoming and unreceptive. So, I took the initiative myself; I didn't wait for anyone to take action against me."

Reflecting on his early years in Türkiye, he recalls an initial sense of warmth grounded in a shared Islamic identity, which he believes gradually eroded: "Initially, there was a sense of warmth

and mutual respect, especially in the early days when it felt like we shared a common faith and values as Muslims. But a feeling of true belonging to Türkiye? Never. As time passed and racial tensions increased, things changed significantly. It became clear that there were stark differences, along with growing animosity and hatred fueled by the media. While the early shared sense of belonging was based on common Islamic identity, it has since faded. Now, it's more like, 'When are you leaving?"

Strategic returners: They are individuals who view return not as an emotional decision but as a calculated step shaped by professional, familial, or mobility-related considerations. Ali, a Syrian visual artist from northern Syria living in Türkiye under temporary protection, is one of the Syrians who adopts what can be described as a strategic return orientation. His plan to return to Qamishli is deliberate and tied to specific objectives: reuniting with his family and gaining greater freedom of international mobility for his exhibitions. Although he considers his hometown relatively safe, he is aware of the economic limitations and the absence of a viable art market there, therefore intends to rely primarily on international opportunities.

Due to bureaucratic restrictions in Türkiye—particularly the inability to travel abroad, which significantly constrains his artistic career—Ali views return as a calculated step, prioritizing family ties and the potential professional advantages of greater mobility despite existing uncertainties. As he explains, "My hometown is generally safe… the problem is the economy and the lack of an art market. (…) If things don't work out after I return, I would rather go to Europe than stay in Türkiye."

In sum, these narratives demonstrate that the migration orientations of highly educated Syrians cannot be reduced to a simple binary between staying and returning. Rather, they reflect an ongoing negotiation shaped by the pursuit of *istikrar* (stability) across multiple dimensions of life. Legal status, economic security, professional continuity, social acceptance, children's education, and moral or identitarian attachments interact in complex and sometimes contradictory ways, giving rise to differentiated positions such as firm non-returners, conditional stayers, onward migration aspirants, return-oriented actors, and strategic returners. What connects these trajectories is not a shared migratory destination, but a common effort to secure a dignified, predictable, and sustainable future for themselves and their families. In this sense, mobility decisions emerge less as geographically fixed choices than as attempts to locate the social, legal, and emotional conditions under which stability becomes imaginable.

Taken together, the two phases of the study also highlight the importance of combining quantitative and qualitative approaches in contexts of rapid political transformation. While the survey phase identifies the principal correlates of return aspirations across a broader sample, the interviews reveal how these same factors are subjectively interpreted, re-evaluated, and negotiated following a major political rupture. Read together, the findings show that return, stay, and onward migration are shaped not only by changing perceptions of Syria, but also by

the capacity to maintain longterm life projects amid legal uncertainty, fragile belonging, and an unstable regional environment.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the factors shaping Syrian refugees' aspirations to return to Syria, remain in Türkiye, or pursue onward migration, with particular attention to how these orientations evolved during a period of major political transformation. By combining a pre-transition survey with posttransition qualitative interviews, the research captures not only broad patterns of migration aspirations, but also the ways in which these aspirations are reinterpreted under rapidly changing political conditions. Although the two phases were conducted in different moments and are therefore not directly comparable, this temporal layering constitutes one of the study's analytical strengths. It makes it visible how migration intentions are neither fixed nor linear but continuously renegotiated in response to shifting perceptions of stability, security and future possibilities.

The findings confirm the central role of perceived stability in shaping migration trajectories, yet they also reveal that "stability" extends far beyond physical security alone. The survey findings demonstrated strong associations between return aspirations and perceptions of improved security, living conditions, and property ownership in Syria. At the same time, the qualitative interviews revealed that the collapse of the Assad regime, while removing a major symbolic and political barrier to return, did not automatically produce a widespread willingness to go back. Instead, many highly educated Syrians continued to perceive Syria as economically fragile, institutionally uncertain, and socially unstable.

One of the study's most significant contributions lies precisely in the tensions and partial divergences observed between the two phases. The survey data suggested comparatively stronger return aspirations among university graduates, whereas the post-transition interviews with highly educated Syrians revealed a more cautious and ambivalent stance. This contrast demonstrates that educational attainment alone does not determine migration orientation in a linear way. Rather, highly educated refugees appear to navigate a more complex set of calculations involving professional continuity, children's futures, legal security, transnational opportunities, and moral or identitarian attachments to Syria. For some participants, return was framed as an ethical responsibility linked to reconstruction and belonging; for others, remaining in Türkiye or pursuing onward migration represented the only viable strategy for preserving long-term stability and dignity. These differentiated trajectories illustrate that return aspirations are deeply shaped by temporal context and evolving political expectations.

The study also contributes to broader debates in migration scholarship by moving beyond binary understandings of mobility. Rather than positioning refugees simply as either "returning" or "remaining," the findings point to a spectrum of orientations including conditional stayers, strategic returners, onward migration aspirants, and individuals maintaining simultaneous attachments to multiple places. This confirms recent scholarship emphasizing the fluid,

negotiated, and reversible nature of migration decision-making in protracted displacement contexts. Particularly for highly educated refugees, mobility decisions are embedded in long-term life projects that combine family strategies, career trajectories, citizenship opportunities, and aspirations for social recognition.

From a methodological perspective, the study also demonstrates the value of flexible and adaptive research designs in contexts of rapid political change. The incorporation of a qualitative phase after the fall of the Assad regime made it possible to capture emerging interpretations and emotional responses that would not have been visible through survey data alone. In this respect, the research highlights the importance of temporality in migration studies: aspirations are shaped not only by structural conditions, but also by the timing of political events and the ways individuals interpret uncertainty and transition in real time.

Looking ahead, the findings suggest that the future of Syrian mobility will likely remain characterized by fragmentation and uncertainty rather than by a singular mass return dynamic. Even if political conditions in Syria continue to evolve, sustainable return will depend not only on regime change, but also on long-term institutional reconstruction, economic recovery, legal guarantees, and the rebuilding of trust in everyday life. At the same time, restrictive migration regimes and growing anti-refugee sentiment in host countries may further complicate refugees' capacity to make voluntary and durable decisions about their futures. Under these conditions, many Syrians may continue to adopt hybrid and flexible strategies that combine temporary return, transnational mobility, or the maintenance of social and economic ties across borders.

Ultimately, this study argues that refugee return should not be understood merely as a physical movement back to a country of origin, but as a broader search for a stable, predictable, and dignified future. Understanding how refugees evaluate and negotiate stability across different political and social contexts is therefore essential not only for migration scholarship, but also for the design of realistic and humane return policies.

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