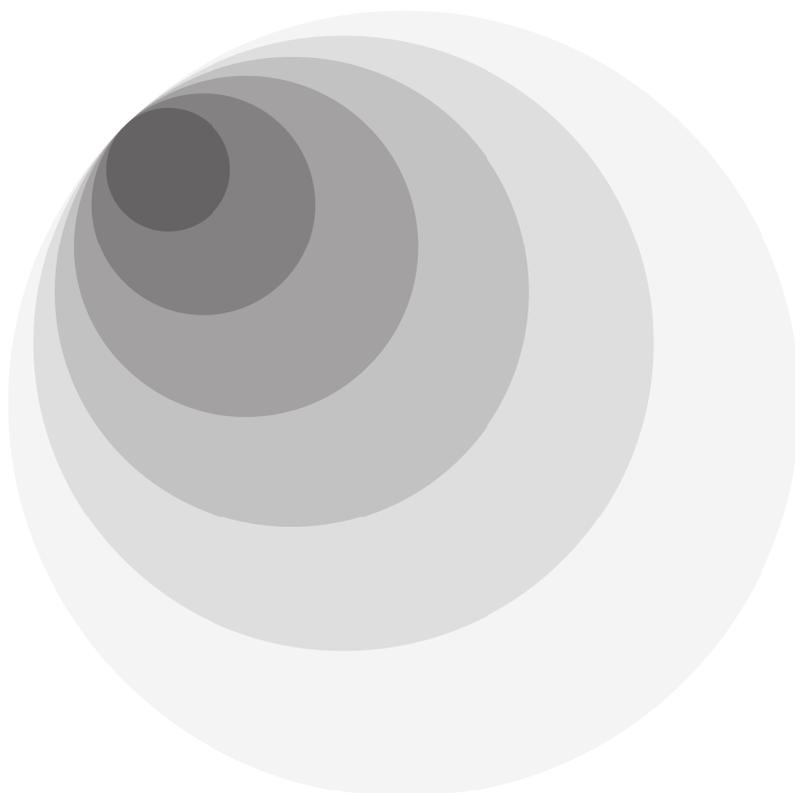


# SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY

Current Situation, Return Dynamics, And Social  
Cohesion

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# SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY: CURRENT SITUATION, RETURN DYNAMICS, AND SOCIAL COHESION POLICIES

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## 1. Conditions in Syria: Structural Obstacles to Sustainable Return

**Security and Human Rights:** The presence of armed groups, arbitrary detentions, torture, and systematic human rights violations continue. This situation effectively makes a "safe" return, as defined by international law, impossible.

**Socioeconomic Collapse:** The country's economy has experienced a deep structural collapse, with housing, health, education, and basic infrastructure largely dysfunctional. High unemployment and widespread poverty eliminate the possibility of establishing a "sustainable" life for the returning population.

**Risk of a Lost Generation:** The fact that at least 2 million children remain outside the education system stands out as a severe humanitarian crisis threatening Syria's future.

## 2. The Situation in Turkey: The Chronic Nature of Vulnerability and Structural Problems

**Evolution from Humanitarian Crisis to Structural Crisis:** Over 90% of the refugee population struggles to meet their basic needs, and the 2023 earthquakes have further deepened this vulnerability.

**The Gap in Education:** Approximately 750,000 Syrian children remaining outside the education system in Turkey brings with it the risk of a "lost generation."

**Intersectional Disadvantages:** LGBTI+ refugees face layered discrimination and violence at the intersection of the precarity stemming from their refugee status and homophobia/transphobia.

**Dual Structure in Employment:** Despite the increase in official work permits, an estimated 500,000 Syrians are believed to be working in the informal economy under precarious conditions.

### 3. Return Dynamics and the "Right to Remain"

Field findings show that the decision to return is shaped by four main factors: 1) Security Concerns, 2) Economic Conditions, 3) Socio-cultural Factors (particularly the freedoms acquired in Turkey for women and youth), 4) Access to Education and Health Services.

Practices such as the "go and see" policy have allowed refugees to assess the conditions in Syria firsthand and have had an effect of reinforcing the intention to stay in Turkey.

The research reveals that the "right to remain" should be placed at the center of debates and that refugees' long-term future plans are only possible with this legal and social guarantee.

### Policy Recommendations

The ultimate inference of the research is that the reality of Syrian refugees in Turkey necessitates a shift in policy focus from a rhetoric of return to an inclusive strategy centered on the "right to remain" and "social cohesion." This strategy must have two fundamental pillars:

1. **Strengthening the Legal and Institutional Infrastructure:** The status uncertainty created by the geographical reservation must be overcome. A framework that moves beyond the Temporary Protection regime, provides long-term legal guarantees, and makes social cohesion a state obligation must be urgently established. Social cohesion units should be established within all relevant public institutions.
2. **Establishing Local-Based and Multi-Stakeholder Social Cohesion Mechanisms:** Social cohesion should be conceptualized not as a centralized policy, but as a dynamic process built locally under the leadership of municipalities and with the active participation of civil society. Inclusive education, accessible health services, gender-sensitive protection mechanisms, and intercultural dialogue programs should form the core components of this process.

### Research Methodology

This report is based on qualitative research designed to analyze the current situation, return dynamics, and social cohesion policies regarding Syrian refugees in Turkey in a multidimensional manner. The research is based on a qualitative research methodology aimed at developing an in-depth understanding. A critical approach, which aims to interpret facts within the context of social, political, and economic structures, has been adopted in the analyses. Data was collected through the channels specified below and used in a complementary manner:

#### 1) Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews:

**Purpose:** To obtain primary, detailed, and contextual data from key stakeholders.

**Participant Selection and Sample:** Using the purposive sampling method, individuals and institutions with direct experience, expertise, and field knowledge on the subject were identified. Interviews were conducted with a total of 17 key stakeholders.

- **Civil Society Organizations (CSOs):** Field coordinators, project managers, and lawyers from 8 different NGOs working in the fields of refugee rights, humanitarian aid, media, law, and women's rights.
- **Local Governments:** Staff working in the migration and social services units of metropolitan and district municipalities heavily affected by migration.
- **Academia:** Academics working in the fields of migration, international relations, and social policy.

**Data Collection Tool:** The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview form, which provides a flexible framework and allows participants to freely express their experiences. The interviews lasted 45-60 minutes on average and were recorded.

## 2) Document Analysis:

**Purpose:** To support and verify the primary data obtained from the interviews and to establish a historical/thematic context.

### Analyzed Documents:

- **Reports from NGOs and International Organizations:** Monitoring, evaluation, and situation analysis reports.
- **Official Documents:** Data from the Directorate General of Migration Management (GİB), regulations, the Harmonization Strategy Document, and the National Action Plan.
- **Academic Publications:** Articles published in peer-reviewed journals, theses, and books related to the topic.

**Ethical Principles:** All participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their consent was obtained.

**Limitations:** As this study was designed as a qualitative case study, its findings cannot be used for statistical generalization. Furthermore, security and access restrictions in some regions limited the scope of the field research to a certain extent.

## INTRODUCTION

The ongoing armed conflict and humanitarian crisis in Syria have resulted in one of the most severe instances of mass displacement globally. This forced migration wave, triggered by the civil war, has displaced over 13.5 million people from their homes; these individuals, in search of security, were either forced to relocate permanently within the country or had to cross international borders. Approximately 7.4 million of this population sought refuge in different regions within Syria's borders, acquiring the status of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). This situation has led to a significant demographic transformation within Syria and placed intense pressure on its infrastructure.

Approximately 6 million Syrians, primarily in neighboring countries due to geographical and cultural proximity, have sought international protection. Countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan stand out as hosts to the largest refugee populations. In addition, an estimated one million Syrians have migrated to more distant regions; a significant portion of this group has settled in European countries, notably Germany, as well as in third countries like the United States, Canada, and Australia. This distribution clearly demonstrates that the Syrian crisis is not only regional but also global in nature, having profound effects on international migration regimes.

## 1) THE SITUATION IN SYRIA:

As of August 31, 2025, the political transition process in Syria raises a complex set of questions regarding the prospects for safe and sustainable return for approximately 4.7 million Syrian refugees residing in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. While developments toward political stability theoretically create a potential foundation for mass returns, a deep uncertainty prevails regarding how this process will unfold in practice.

Not only has stability consistently failed to be achieved in the country, but power struggles and sectarian tensions among various armed groups continue to cause conflicts at the local level. Human rights violations also remain a major source of concern. Serious crimes such as arbitrary detentions, torture, and extrajudicial killings remain widespread.

The Syrian economy has experienced a deep structural collapse following a decade of war. The country's reconstruction capacity is not just an issue of rebuilding physical infrastructure (housing, schools, hospitals), but also of making the national economy functional again and creating sustainable livelihoods. Current data indicates that a significant portion of the national housing stock is unusable, and there are severe disruptions in access to basic public services (electricity, clean water, healthcare). Under these conditions, the question of how the vital needs of the returning population—such as shelter, employment, and access to basic services—will be met is one of the fundamental parameters directly influencing the decision to return.

According to data shared by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the ongoing mass displacement movements within Syria during the January-July 2025 period are notable. The data shows that one-third (33%) of recently displaced persons were forced to leave their homes due to worsening economic conditions<sup>1</sup>. This figure reveals that the primary driver of displacement is not limited to security concerns and that structural poverty and the collapse of livelihood opportunities are also extremely decisive. A quarter (25%) of the displaced were also forced to migrate because their housing conditions had become unlivable.

In addition to the physical destruction caused by over a decade of armed conflict, the complete collapse of the socio-economic infrastructure stands out as a fundamental factor deepening the humanitarian crisis. In this context, the extraordinary levels of poverty nationwide and the structural blockage in the education system constitute the most critical problem areas threatening Syria's future. UNICEF data reveals that at least 2 million children in Syria remain outside the school system. A significant portion of these children have never been enrolled in school since the start of the civil war, representing a demographic reality that could be termed a "lost generation." Current

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<sup>1</sup> [https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/Syria%20Baseline%20R5\\_June\\_2025.pdf?iframe=true](https://dtm.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/Syria%20Baseline%20R5_June_2025.pdf?iframe=true)

economic challenges pose one of the most fundamental barriers to education; students are unable to attend school due to reasons such as being unable to afford the cost of uniforms, books, and other educational materials, or the necessity to contribute to their family's livelihood.

Return is not merely an act of physical relocation, but also a complex social and legal process. Prolonged absence has caused refugees to become disconnected from the social fabric of their country of origin and to adapt to new social realities. Upon return, issues such as the restitution of property rights, confirmation of citizenship status, trust in the judicial system, and social acceptance are among the critical factors shaping individuals' decisions to settle permanently. The question of how individuals with different political views or those belonging to specific ethnic/religious groups will find a place for themselves in the new political order profoundly affects the dynamics of return.

## 2) THE SOCIOECONOMIC SITUATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TURKEY

Data from the Directorate General of Migration Management (GİB) reveals that, as of the end of August 2025, there are over 2.5 million Syrians registered under Temporary Protection (TP) status in Turkey<sup>2</sup>. UNHCR data shows that over 90% of Syrians in Turkey and Jordan struggle to meet their basic needs<sup>3</sup>. This statistic is an indicator that the refugee crisis has evolved from being merely a "shelter problem" to one with dimensions of "structural poverty" and a "chronic humanitarian crisis."

The situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey appears highly fragile due to both structural problems and the devastating impact of the 2023 earthquakes. According to official data, a significant proportion, approximately half of the registered Syrian refugee population, resides in the regions most severely affected by the 2023 earthquakes. A portion of this group continues to reside in temporary shelter centers managed by the state and local municipalities, with no clear timeframe regarding the duration of their stay or long-term settlement options.

The humanitarian needs of refugees struggling to survive under these uncertain and precarious conditions are particularly urgent in the earthquake-affected regions. Addressing these needs requires a multifaceted intervention strategy encompassing several key priorities. Foremost among these is the provision of comprehensive protection services, consisting of structured case management, legal assistance—especially for those with irregular migrant status—and robust psychosocial support.

The European Union's financial support continues to be vital in this process. Within the scope of total assistance amounting to 3.486 billion Euros for the 2012-2024 period, an emergency response fund of 78.2 million Euros was also established following the 2023 earthquake. Additional resources of 26 million Euros for 2024 and a projected 20 million Euros for 2025 are indicators of the EU's ongoing commitment<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.goc.gov.tr/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>

<sup>4</sup> [https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/europe/turkiye\\_en](https://civil-protection-humanitarian-aid.ec.europa.eu/where/europe/turkiye_en)

The expansion and diversification of multi-purpose cash assistance stands out as a vital mechanism for refugees and migrants in regions grappling with the effects of the earthquake, to meet basic livelihood needs. Simultaneously, efforts to improve infrastructure should focus on enhancing sanitation and shelter conditions in these areas to mitigate public health risks. Ensuring inclusive access to basic services necessitates making specialized healthcare services, adapted to meet the needs of persons with disabilities in particular, accessible.

Findings from Human Rights Watch indicate that nearly half of the 1.5 million Syrian children in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey remain out of school. There is a need for targeted interventions, including enrollment initiatives to increase educational access for out-of-school children and cash-based support mechanisms to alleviate the economic barriers to their school attendance. The current situation carries the risk of a "lost generation," threatening not only individual futures but also the long-term socioeconomic stability of the region. Barriers to education stem from multi-layered problems, including financial constraints as well as language barriers, cultural adaptation issues, and psychological trauma.

LGBTI+ refugees in Turkey, particularly trans women, face layered and intersectional challenges. These individuals confront additional vulnerabilities, including systematic discrimination, exposure to physical and psychological violence based on gender identity and sexual orientation, and barriers posed by the legal framework. On the other hand, despite residing in Turkey for over a decade, a significant portion of Syrian refugees continue to face restrictions in accessing stable livelihoods and long-term security guarantees. The intersection of these two factors—identity-based marginalization and structural precarity stemming from

refugee status—condemns these individuals to a cycle of ongoing and compounded vulnerability and humanitarian risk.

LGBTI+ refugees in Turkey face a spiral of multi-layered oppression and vulnerability created by the intersecting disadvantages based on refugee status and sexual orientation/gender identity. The structural challenges faced by displaced individuals—limited access to resources, restricted freedom of movement, and precarious legal status—combine with the homophobia and transphobia prevalent in Turkey, placing these individuals in a unique position of vulnerability.

This intersectionality manifests in phenomena such as social isolation, institutional discrimination, and a lack of effective legal protection mechanisms; furthermore, the intense social stigma they face constitutes a significant barrier to their socio-economic integration. Policies restricting freedom of movement, such as travel permit requirements, further narrow their opportunities for accessing economic stability and deepen their vulnerability. Trans women refugees, in particular, are forced to live under precarious and exploitative conditions due to limited access to the labor market and widespread discrimination encountered in both public and private spheres. Ultimately, this structural exclusion, inadequacy of institutional support systems, and persistent discrimination compel many LGBTI+ refugees to resort to irregular migration routes in search of safety and social acceptance, despite the high risks involved.

The employment profile of Syrian refugees in Turkey exhibits a distinct "dual structure." According to official data, 117,334 Syrians were granted work permits in 2024, an increase of 8.1% compared to the previous year. In parallel, 120,284 applications were approved under the Work Permit

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/tag/education-syrian-refugee-children>

Exemption in the seasonal agriculture and livestock sectors. However, beyond these formal employment figures, it is estimated that approximately 500,000 Syrians are engaged in the informal economy.

Informal employment, prevalent in sectors such as construction, subcontracting, agriculture, and livestock, brings with it working conditions devoid of legal safeguards to protect their rights. Sectoral concentration analysis shows that Syrians are represented at rates of approximately 20% in the textile sector and up to 80% in the agricultural sector. As expressed by Muzaffer Cevizli, Chairman of the Giyimkent Board of Directors, the high rate of labor turnover in the sector is concerning both for industrial stability and the working conditions of refugee workers.

Proposed solutions to the current crisis require a multidimensional and interconnected approach:

**Protection Mechanisms:** The continuity of a holistic protection system comprising structured case management, legal assistance, and psychosocial support is essential.

**Education Policies:** There is a need to establish targeted interventions to increase school enrollment rates and to continue cash transfer programs and language support mechanisms.

**Economic Integration:** Reducing informal employment, improving and facilitating formal working conditions, and expanding vocational training programs should be prioritized.

**Health and Infrastructure Services:** Improving accessible healthcare services, particularly for persons with disabilities, and enhancing basic infrastructure is critical.

The situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey is highly complex and multifaceted. While current financial support and humanitarian efforts are vital for meeting immediate needs, institutional coordination, inclusive policy implementation, and the development of long-term social cohesion strategies are required for durable and sustainable solutions. Addressing the structural problems in the areas of education, employment, health, and shelter is of vital importance both for meeting the humanitarian needs of the refugee population and for ensuring their integration with the host community.

### 3) RETURNS

#### 3.1 Introduction: The Global Refugee Crisis and the Evolution of the Legal Framework

The rights granted to asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants within the international legal system differ significantly based on the individual's legal status. This distinction points to a complex legal structure, ranging from the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol to national legislation.

Throughout history, states have developed three primary strategies to find humanitarian and durable solutions to the refugee problem: local integration, resettlement to a third country, and voluntary return. This "triple solution" model constitutes the fundamental pillars of the international protection regime. These solutions are defined as the establishment of a situation where refugees no longer need special protection due to their displacement, can benefit from basic rights and services without discrimination, and can participate fully in societal life.

#### 3.2. The Political Economy of Durable Solution Options

As detailed in the academic work of İçduygu and Nimer, the political approaches of international actors and states towards these three fundamental solution paths run parallel to the course of global politics and exhibit profound differences<sup>6</sup>. These paradigm shifts in the international refugee regime play a decisive role in the feasibility of solution options. Particularly during periods in global politics where sovereignty concerns come to the fore and populist discourses rise, trends such as the narrowing of resettlement programs, increased political resistance to local integration, and the presentation of return as the only solution, clearly demonstrate how national-level refugee regimes are influenced by global dynamics. In this context, the feasibility and preference for each solution path are not static but are in constant transformation with the changing balances of global and regional politics.

### 3.3. The Ideal Return Paradigm: Conceptual Framework and Core Principles

Within the framework of international refugee law and humanitarian policy, an ideal return process is built on three core components: voluntariness, safety, and sustainability. The UNHCR consistently emphasizes the principle of voluntariness as an indispensable condition for return, along with a dignified and honorable return process. The conceptual framework of İçduygu and Ayaşlı (2019) elaborates on these elements as follows<sup>7</sup>:

- The **principle of voluntariness** requires that return is not imposed on refugees and asylum seekers, and that the decision to return is made by individuals of their own free will, free from any pressure or coercion. This principle forms the basis for the legitimacy of return.
- The **safety component** necessitates that human security—physical, psychological, and legal—is established, or is actively being established, both during the return journey and in the areas of arrival.
- **Sustainability** refers to the ability to rebuild daily life in the places of return within the framework of basic needs such as shelter, livelihood, education, health, and social security, and to ensure the permanence of the return.

### 3.4. The Practical Challenges of Return: A Multi-Layered Analysis

The dynamics shaping the decision to return are highly complex and multi-layered. Although factors such as family reunification, concerns about the protection of assets and properties left behind, observed improvements in the political and economic conditions of the country of origin, or adverse conditions experienced in host countries are influential, academic literature shows that the assumption that all returns are voluntary is unrealistic. Limited employment opportunities, discriminatory practices, social exclusion, legal uncertainties, and precarious living conditions in host countries can force many refugees into an involuntary return, a situation defined as "constructive refoulement."

Mass return movements, in particular, entail their own unique, multidimensional challenges. These primarily include limited economic opportunities, inadequate health services, capacity deficiencies

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<sup>6</sup> İçduygu, A., & Nimer, M. (2019). The politics of return: exploring the future of Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. *Third World Quarterly*. DOI: 10.1080/01436597.2019.1675503.

<sup>7</sup> İçduygu, A., & Ayaşlı, E. (2019). Geri Dönüş Siyaseti: Suriyeli Mültecilerin Geri Dönüş İhtimali ve Gelecek Senaryoları. Koç Üniversitesi Göç Araştırmaları Merkezi (MIREKOC)

in the education system, land and property disputes, weak governance mechanisms, and insufficient infrastructure. Especially in regions that have experienced prolonged conflict, rebuilding infrastructure, providing basic services, and ensuring economic recovery are extremely difficult. Therefore, the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2016) emphasizes that safe return is not merely a matter of physical transportation, but also requires the effective functioning of a complex set of administrative arrangements, documentation, counseling services, and logistical support systems<sup>8</sup>.

### **3.5. The Prerequisite for Sustainability: Inclusive Policy and Effective Monitoring Mechanisms**

The prerequisite for sustainable return is the creation of the necessary social, economic, and political conditions for individuals to establish a safe, dignified, and productive life. Azad and Jasmin (2013) state that the permanence of return and the provision of effective reintegration largely depend on structural factors in the countries of return, such as political stability, economic vitality, social cohesion, and the rule of law.<sup>9</sup> In this context, ensuring the effectiveness of assisted return programs requires the systematic collection of participant feedback, strengthening accountability, enabling independent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and the flexible restructuring of programs, all of which are of great importance.

### **3.6. Alternative Perspectives: The Right to Remain and Positioning Refugees as Agents**

Contrary to the common assumption that refugees will desire to return to their countries of origin once conditions improve, field research in situations of prolonged refuge reveals a different picture. As also observed in the work of Yıldırım Yücel (2009), direct interviews with refugees have shown that return is not the preferred option under all circumstances; rather, changing life contexts, social ties, and future expectations over time profoundly influence this decision<sup>10</sup>. These findings indicate that the debate on refugee rights cannot be limited solely to the right to return, but must also incorporate individuals' "right to remain" safely and legally in the countries where they have sought refuge.

Gerver (2019) emphasizes that refugees' ability to build permanent and meaningful relationships with the host society depends on their liberation from uncertainty about their future<sup>11</sup>. Only when individuals are free from the fear of being forced to return at any moment can they fully participate in the social, cultural, and economic life of their host country and make long-term plans. This perspective moves beyond an understanding that views refugees merely as passive aid recipients or individuals whose ultimate goal is either resettlement in a third country or return. As Dorai (2018) also underlines, refugees are dynamic actors who, with their social and cultural capital,

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<sup>8</sup> IOM. (2016). Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration 2016 Key Highlights.

<sup>9</sup> Azad, A. & F, Jasmin. (2013). Durable Solutions to The Protracted Refugee Situation: The Case Of Rohingyas In Bangladesh. *Journal of Indian Research*, 1(4), 25-35.

<sup>10</sup> Yıldırım Yücel, Z. (2019). *Ulus Devlet, Mültecilik ve Menşe Ülkeye Geri Dönüş: Türkiye'de Yaşayan Suriyeli Mülteciler*. (Doktora tezi, İstanbul Üniversitesi, İstanbul). Erişim adresi: <http://nek.istanbul.edu.tr:4444/ekos/TEZ/ET001514.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Gerver, M. (2019) Must refugees return? *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 1-22. DOI: 10.1080/13698230.2019.1573347.

entrepreneurial skills, professional experience, and developed coping strategies, actively contribute to the socio-economic fabric of host countries<sup>12</sup>.

An ideal and comprehensive refugee policy should avoid a one-dimensional and rigid approach, and instead address the options of return, local integration, and third-country resettlement in a balanced, equally important, and complementary manner. Approaches that center return and idealize it as the ultimate solution not only overlook the long-term needs of refugees and the complex socio-political realities of countries of origin, but can also lay the groundwork for new humanitarian crises, social conflicts, and instabilities through precarious and unsustainable return processes.

Therefore, a resilient, human-centric, and forward-looking policy framework must be built on an understanding that is sensitive to individual circumstances, flexible, participatory, and accepts the three durable solutions as complementary options. This framework should view refugees not as powerless victims, but as agents capable of contributing to societal development with their skills, experiences, and potential, aiming to produce sustainable solutions that center their human rights and dignity.

### **Return Dynamics of Syrian Refugees in Turkey**

Return dynamics are too complex and multi-layered to be explained by a one-dimensional approach. The impact of political changes on returns can only become meaningful with improvements in security, economic stability, social services, and infrastructure conditions. Therefore, return policies must be addressed with an inclusive and long-term perspective that is sensitive to the individual needs and concerns of refugees. Producing sustainable solutions for both refugees who will remain in Turkey and those who will return necessitates a balanced approach that bridges humanitarian aid and development cooperation.

In the period following the regime change in Syria, a limited increase in voluntary returns from Turkey to Syria has been observed. In a recent statement to the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, Minister of Interior Ali Yerlikaya reported that a total of 1.2 million Syrians have returned to Syria from Turkey since 2016<sup>13</sup>. The total Syrian population under temporary protection in Turkey is over 2.3 million. This situation clearly demonstrates that return dynamics depend not only on changes in the political context but also on the permanent establishment of security, the existence of economic livelihood opportunities, housing conditions, and uninterrupted access to basic services.

The "go and see" policy implemented by the Turkish government on January 1st established a temporary framework for Syrian refugees to assess conditions in their country of origin firsthand. This policy, which ended on July 1st, allowed one adult from each Syrian household to make three temporary visits during a six-month period. The implementation of the policy was carried out by provincial directorates of the Directorate General of Migration Management, and only the Çobanbey/Al Rai, Zeytindalı/Jinderes, and Yayladağı/Kesab border crossings were permitted for exit. This practice was a significant step, allowing refugees to base their permanent return decisions on direct observations.

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<sup>12</sup> Dorai, K. (2018). Conflict and Migration in the Middle East: Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon. <https://www.e-ir.info/2018/09/04/conflict-and-migration-in-themiddle-east-syrian-refugees-in-jordan-and-lebanon/>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/more-than-12-million-syrians-returned-home-from-turkiye/news>

Findings from field interviews conducted by civil society organizations with Syrian refugees reveal that the decision to return is shaped by highly personal and multidimensional factors. The NGOs participating in the research state that refugees' perspectives on return are determined by four main factors:

1. **Security Concerns:** According to the rights-based civil society organizations interviewed, security concerns remain the biggest obstacle to return, despite news of improvements in certain areas. The presence of armed groups, claims of arbitrary detention and kidnapping, and systematic human rights violations cause refugees to have serious reservations about returning to their country. Risks of gender-based violence, especially for women and children, are among the factors directly influencing the return decision.
2. **Economic Conditions:** NGOs emphasize that high unemployment, housing costs, and serious deficiencies in basic infrastructure services (health, education, water, electricity) in Syria constrain tangible life opportunities for those considering return. Regular income sources acquired in Turkey and the social support provided make return economically risky for many refugees.
3. **Socio-cultural Factors:** Social and cultural dynamics are also among the elements complicating the return decision. Representatives from NGOs report that certain groups, particularly women and youth, have shared concerns about losing the social freedoms and rights they have gained in Turkey if they return to Syria. Furthermore, it is noted that many families have established a stable life in Turkey, integrated into society, and their children have adapted to the Turkish education system; this is stated to make return psychologically and practically difficult. Family ties are another factor complicating the decision-making process: while some refugees wish to reunite with relatives in Syria, others prefer to join family members who have settled in third countries.
4. **Education and Health Services:** Turkey's inclusive education system and accessible healthcare play a decisive role in families' decisions to stay. The inadequacy of the educational infrastructure and serious disruptions in health services in Syria make return difficult, especially for families with children. Children's education is a determining factor shaping intentions. Access to stable and quality education plays a central role in families' decisions to stay in Turkey. Many parents have stated that school closures or uncertainties regarding their children's educational future are among their greatest concerns. Therefore, ensuring children's continuous access to inclusive and accredited education is a fundamental element of both integration and protection strategies. As the lack of functioning schools in some parts of Syria continues to prevent families from returning, educational support should also be considered in return planning.

These findings obtained by NGOs indicate that all initiatives aimed at facilitating voluntary return must center these complex realities. NGOs hold the view that ensuring permanent security, economic stability, and basic infrastructure in Syria is a prerequisite for large-scale and sustainable returns. Furthermore, they underline that developing social and legal protection mechanisms, especially for women and disadvantaged groups, is essential.

The gender analysis regarding the return processes of Syrian refugees is shaped at the complex intersection of security, economic vulnerability, property rights, and social status. It is reported that

the absence of male protection in patriarchal security environments, the risk of deepening economic marginalization in gender-segregated labor markets, and the risks of social resistance and stigma towards women's presence in public spaces, their mobility, and decision-making autonomy significantly influence the return decision of Syrian refugee women.

According to NGO assessments, without meaningful improvements in these areas, a safe and dignified mass return does not seem possible. Furthermore, data obtained from field studies conducted by rights-based civil society organizations confirms that the intention to return is shaped by long-term factors rather than short-term opportunities and reveals the necessity of conducting continuous information campaigns to address information gaps and misperceptions. Another point to mention is that the intention to stay in Turkey has increased significantly compared to the initial periods after December 8th. This situation highlights the urgency of sustainable and dignified co-existence solutions. Job and income opportunities and children's education stand out in the background of the decision to stay in Turkey. Although the proportion of those planning to return has decreased, field studies conducted by various organizations reveal that the determination level of those considering staying has increased.

In light of the findings obtained, the following policy recommendations have been developed:

- **Comprehensive Information Mechanisms:** Targeted social assistance activities and continuous information campaigns should be conducted to address knowledge gaps regarding voluntary return procedures. Advocacy efforts should consistently emphasize that all returns must be voluntary, safe, and dignified and must not be influenced by coercive or restrictive measures.
- **Strengthening Livelihoods:** Economic integration programs and vocational training opportunities should be developed for both refugees who choose to remain in Turkey and those planning to return.
- **Education and Health Infrastructure:** International collaborations should be encouraged to maintain Turkey's inclusive education system and to improve the educational infrastructure in Syria.
- **Protection Mechanisms:** Gender-sensitive protection programs and information-sharing mechanisms, especially for women and children, should be strengthened.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Cooperation:** Coordination mechanisms among local governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations should be developed.

## **CIVIL SOCIETY AND MUNICIPALITIES: TWO KEY COMPONENTS OF SOCIAL COHESION**

Social cohesion is, first and foremost, a process. It is possible to track its trajectory through various parameters such as the formation of shared values and a culture of citizenship, the weakening or elimination of discrimination and social exclusion mechanisms, everyday encounters occurring within an equal and fair framework, the emergence of patterns of social solidarity, and ensuring equality in access to public services. While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of social cohesion, in the most general sense, it is a concept referring to the participation of refugees in the

society they are in without losing the characteristics of their past that constitute their identity <sup>14</sup>. It is crucial to remember that the communities we roughly divide into two groups—refugees and citizens, as the subjects of the social cohesion process—also contain significant internal differences, and that specialized policies encompassing all these different groups and genuine participation are determining factors for the functionality and effectiveness of this process.

The social cohesion process begins with the encounter of groups with different characteristics and, if not managed with correct policies, can lead to a deepening and free public service network, and institutionalized, rights-based policies with established local branches, based on participation, are among the most important elements of the social cohesion process.

In Turkey, the introduction of the concept of social cohesion into migration policy legislation and academic texts began with Syrian refugees, and there is a primary need to clarify the concept through policy texts.

In the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, the concept of "harmonization" (uyum) is preferred over "integration," and it is defined in Article 96 as activities between beneficiaries under the law and the local community. The concept of harmonization is used differently and more limitedly in the law compared to the international framework and does not refer to access to rights. However, a legal status is of key importance for social cohesion. The persistence of the geographical reservation appears as the most significant problem for a comprehensive social cohesion program aligned with international standards.

The most important social cohesion work conducted in the context of refugees in Turkey is the conditional cash assistance provided through the Social Cohesion Assistance (SUY). Since its inception in 2016, millions of refugees have benefited from SUY, the majority being Syrian refugees under temporary protection <sup>15</sup>. This assistance is support provided to the most vulnerable refugees to meet basic needs such as access to nutrition, shelter, and infrastructure services, and is financed under the 3RP (Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan). Complementary cash and in-kind assistance are provided to households in need who do not meet the SUY criteria. Additionally, conditional education assistance and economic support for the most vulnerable groups are available.

The Harmonization Strategy Document and National Action Plan adopted in 2018 are among the most important policy documents for strengthening social cohesion within the framework of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection, promoting self-sufficiency, and enhancing the possibilities for persons under temporary and international protection and citizens to live in harmony. On the other hand, despite various programs run with international support, the Law on Foreigners and International Protection does not contain a provision stating the general obligation of the state to facilitate the social cohesion of refugees. In addition, apart from the Directorate General of Migration Management, structures such as ministries and provincial directorates that

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<sup>14</sup> Akıncı, B., Nergiz, A., & Gedik, E. (2015). Uyum süreci üzerine bir değerlendirme: Göç ve toplumsal kabul. *Göç Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (2), 58–83.

<sup>15</sup> Bölgesel Mülteci ve Dayanıklılık Planı 2020-2021 Türkiye Ülke Bölümü

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/kuruluslar-arasi-koordinasyon>

provide basic public services (education, health, social services, youth and sports, employment, etc.) do not have social cohesion units<sup>17</sup>.

### **Policy Recommendations Regarding Social Cohesion:**

For civil society organizations and municipalities operating with a rights-based approach in the field of refugees in Turkey, the most important agenda in the near future will be social cohesion. To ensure social cohesion, it is necessary to strengthen and expand the capacities and areas of activity of municipalities and civil society, support them to achieve necessary structural changes, and make them more economically resilient across many topics. These include effectively facilitating access to basic public services, especially empowering vulnerable groups, eliminating inadequate/negative coping strategies, and expanding access to livelihoods, employment, legal support, and psycho-social support.

#### **- Access to Public Services**

Access to public services constitutes an important leg of social cohesion efforts. Since 2015, substantial resources have been transferred to meet the increasing demand for public services (health, education, social services, employment, etc.) in regions with high concentrations of Syrian refugees under temporary protection and to facilitate access to these services. Municipalities, NGOs, and local units of public institutions are critically important in ensuring access to basic public services for foreigners with different statuses (such as temporary protection, international protection) and in carrying out supportive/complementary work for these services.

There is still a need for the active support of local governments in many areas. These include informing refugee communities who have decided to stay in Turkey about services offered in education, health, social services, and employment; investigating current needs; identifying and supporting vulnerable groups; providing translation and transportation support where necessary; removing local barriers to access; establishing support points in more remote locations; and creating demand for unrecognized needs.

#### **- Health:**

Among refugee communities, applications to health institutions often occur only after a problem arises, and the preventive/protective health understanding can be pushed into the background. Organizing informative meetings, especially for women and girls, on topics like sexual and reproductive health—which directly affect their lives—to ensure they undergo necessary check-ups and take preventive measures before problems occur, is of great importance for public health.

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<sup>17</sup> **ARTICLE 96** – (1) Within the scope of the country's economic and financial means, the Directorate General may plan harmonization activities, also utilizing the suggestions and contributions of public institutions and organizations, local administrations, non-governmental organizations, universities and international organizations, with the objectives of:

a) Facilitating the mutual harmonization of foreigners, applicants, or international protection status holders with the society in our country,

b) Providing them with the knowledge and skills to facilitate their ability to act independently in all areas of social life without the intermediation of third parties, whether in our country, in the country where they are resettled, or upon their return to their own country.

Important work municipalities can carry out in the context of sexual and reproductive health includes conveying methods (such as self-examination, regular check-ups, preventive vaccines and medication) for diseases like breast and cervical cancer to both refugee and citizen women, and raising awareness on topics like contraception and healthy pregnancy.

Conducting studies where local governments actively take on roles in areas like healthy nutrition and sleep patterns, mother-child communication, infant and elderly care, rational drug use, and basic hygiene rules will yield very positive results.

LGBTI+ refugees' access to public health institutions is limited for many reasons. It is crucial for specialized municipal units, in addition to NGOs, to carry out supportive work in some urgently needed areas.

Regarding environmental and public health, it is very important for municipalities to take a more active role in developing special measures for refugees and citizens working in seasonal agriculture. Providing accessible clean drinking and utility water, explaining methods to deal with issues like lice and scabies, conveying critical information on pesticide use, and emphasizing the importance of garbage and toilet cleanliness are crucial both for alleviating women's daily workload and protecting public health.

In the context of mental health, various vulnerable refugee and non-refugee groups must be supported, and municipalities must actively take on roles and facilitate access to these services. Municipalities need to systematically develop their existing capacities to establish counseling centers and organize group sessions and meetings to eliminate the negative effects of problems like coping with trauma, addiction, common adolescent issues, family communication breakdown, problems exacerbated by violence and poverty, and inability to express oneself effectively.

Support should be provided for obtaining disability reports, necessary equipment should be provided through solidarity and exchange, and limited efforts to establish various support mechanisms, including psycho-social support for youth, children, and women with different types of disabilities, and to provide space and resources for these activities, need to be increased<sup>18</sup>.

#### **- Livelihoods and Employment:**

Rising living costs in recent years continue to severely negatively impact refugees' ability to meet their basic needs. In households where women are the head, livelihoods are often limited to SUY and support from various actors, revealing how inadequate efforts towards achieving self-sufficiency have been.

In Turkey, the Regulation on the Work of International Protection Applicants and Status Holders regulates the working conditions, work permit applications, and procedures for refugees. The regulation covers applicants, refugees, conditional refugees, and foreigners with secondary protection status. In this context, there is an obligation to obtain a work permit before starting work and for the workplace to meet certain conditions. Significant problems are experienced in creating and sustaining formal employment opportunities due to factors like the need to renew the permit upon job change, meeting quotas, additional payments for employers, long processing times for

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<sup>18</sup> <https://sgdd.org.tr/unfpa-turkiye-ve-sgdd-asam-avrupa-birligi-ile-birlikte-engelli-siginmacilara-destek-oluyor/>

permits, and the reduction/cessation of some social assistance due to formal employment. There is a great need for legal support mechanisms and correct guidance throughout these processes.

Although various projects are run to develop formal employment opportunities for refugees, the continuity of employment, especially for women, is largely at risk after projects end. Municipalities need to actively collaborate with relevant public institutions and NGOs to develop women's language skills, expand existing efforts, and conduct these activities in a way compatible with women's daily workloads and living conditions. Given the limited formal employment opportunities, local governments must actively take on roles in introducing alternative formal employment/livelihood opportunities like cooperatives to refugee women's communities, supporting these communities, and ensuring the sustainability of these efforts<sup>19</sup>. Supporting processes of creating employment/livelihood opportunities with efforts related to women's empowerment and raising awareness on various issues can yield very positive results.

Informative meetings for youth on employment and education will both support and increase access to services offered by relevant public institutions and strengthen the social cohesion of youth (citizen and non-citizen) with similar working and living conditions. Interaction between municipalities and youth on topics like local working conditions, local production practices, local products, sectors with the highest labor demand locally, and newly developing business fields is very important.

Thousands of refugees in Turkey work as seasonal agricultural workers or reside in provinces where this work is done. Cooperation and coordination between different municipalities and institutions are of great importance for refugees who earn their livelihood through seasonal agricultural work. Ensuring the continuity of services for refugees who are in different provinces in different seasons is only possible through the cooperation and coordination of different local institutions.

In this framework, social cohesion units and community centers established by various municipalities make significant contributions to ensuring refugees' access to services and strengthening social cohesion. Gaziantep Metropolitan Municipality was the first to establish a special unit for working with refugees. Its Department of Immigrant Affairs has been actively working since December 2015 in cooperation with organizations like GIZ, IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF, Vatan Association, International Rescue Committee, Bonyan Organization, Welthungerhilfe, Blue Crescent, CARE International, UN Women, ILO, and SGDD-ASAM, as well as chambers of commerce and industry.

**- Education:**

Special programs for young refugees should be developed to break the cycle of poverty and develop self-sufficiency and resilience at both individual and community levels. At this point, well-structured support programs that also address different vulnerabilities must be created to prevent girls from discontinuing education, prevent child marriages, and enable boys to continue their education despite increasing livelihood difficulties.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.halkakoop.com/>

Pre-school or early childhood education is critical for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development and can have many positive effects for refugee children<sup>20</sup>. Local governments must create opportunities for pre-school education for vulnerable refugee and non-refugee children, support studies in this area, and be in communication with various NGOs that can develop different methodologies.

It is very important for local governments to take on supportive roles for public institutions in areas like creating support for covering education costs, developing this support to include solidarity networks of the local population, increasing access to education, creating spaces with internet access for studying, forming volunteer support groups, developing the capacities of parents from different groups, and strengthening social cohesion in schools. Activities like sharing educational materials, toys, books, musical and sports instruments among children, peer-to-peer learning, and learning with volunteer support are known to contribute significantly to social cohesion. Municipalities can greatly contribute both to organizing these activities and providing personnel, budget, and space support for them.

Local governments need to progress in a more structured manner in expanding access to work provided by relevant public institutions and providing similar/complementary services for strengthening groups with different vulnerabilities, such as the elderly, disabled persons, and children at risk. Establishing special units within municipalities, in cooperation and solidarity with relevant public institutions and NGOs, to provide appropriate shelter for women and children facing violence, abuse, forced and early marriage, or at risk; supporting their access to education and livelihoods; and providing necessary legal and psycho-social support creates an important foundation for general protection and empowerment efforts. Conducting informative work for mukhtars, community leaders, and parents to prevent child marriages and gender-based violence will strengthen all of the municipalities' efforts to ensure social cohesion.

**- Access to Legal Support:**

Legal support that refugee communities can access when needed is a crucial factor in ensuring social cohesion and preventing violations. Support mechanisms provided by municipalities and civil society are of great importance in reviewing rental contracts for homes/workplaces, clearly communicating content to parties, finding these places, and explaining procedures for initiating and terminating subscriptions.

There is great benefit in municipalities working in coordination with institutions like NGOs and bar associations that offer support in cases of gender-based violence and violence/abuse against children. Informative work and brochures in their own languages for refugee women on topics like divorce, marriage, inheritance, and property acquisition, directing them to correct mechanisms, are very important.

Communication, coordination, and capacity-building training for refugees on topics like working conditions, advantages of formal work, actions to take in case of workplace accidents, ensuring workplace peace, preventing discrimination and child labor, among local trade unions, bar associations, relevant NGOs, and municipalities will be beneficial for refugees working under more humane conditions.

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<sup>20</sup> See: ACEV - Summer Kindergartens Project for Syrian Children

## CONCLUSION

The situation regarding the Syrian population in Turkey has undergone a qualitative transformation after more than a decade, evolving from a humanitarian crisis management issue into a phenomenon requiring structural and systematic solutions. Current data and field research unequivocally demonstrate that conditions in Syria are not conducive to a mass return—aligned with international law standards (voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable)—in the foreseeable future. This radical reality compels policymakers, civil society actors, and the international community to reconfigure their strategic approaches through a fundamental epistemological shift.

This new paradigm necessitates moving beyond the current framework dominated by a "return"-focused rhetoric, making an inclusive strategy centered on a "right to remain" and social cohesion imperative. While this transition requires the continuity of humanitarian mechanisms (conditional cash transfers, emergency healthcare, basic shelter), it also demands institutional and structural changes beyond the policy level.

These structural changes should be constructed around two main axes:

1. **Strengthening the Legal and Institutional Framework on a Human Rights Basis:** The status uncertainty caused by the geographical reservation constitutes the most critical obstacle to long-term, rights-based planning. It is an urgent necessity to construct a legal infrastructure that moves beyond the Temporary Protection regime, provides individuals with legal certainty and predictability, establishes social cohesion as a state obligation, and is aligned with international human rights standards. The establishment of social cohesion and access to rights units within all ministries and institutions providing public services (education, health, labor, etc.) will form the institutional foundation of this process.
2. **Participatory, Local-Based, and Multi-Actor Social Cohesion Mechanisms:** Social cohesion should be conceptualized not as a centralized, top-down policy, but as a dynamic process built through multi-stakeholder participation at the local level. Local governments, as key actors in this process, are positioned as the architects of a shared societal life through inclusive education models, accessible health services, gender-sensitive protection mechanisms, psycho-social support systems, and programs promoting intercultural dialogue. The roles of civil society in rights-based monitoring, advocacy, legal support, and capacity development will ensure that this process progresses in a transparent, accountable, and rights-based manner.