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Return of Syrians: Myth or Reality

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Abstract

The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, has resulted in one of the largest refugee crises since World War II, displacing millions of Syrians both internally and internationally. Türkiye, which hosts over 3 million Syrian refugees, has become a focal point for discussions on refugee return and integration. With the collapse of the Ba'athist regime in December 2024 and the rise of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the question of whether Syrian refugees will return to their homeland or remain in Türkiye has gained urgency. This paper employs the Conflict Model of Migration to analyze the physical, political, legal, economic, and social conditions influencing Syrian refugees' decisions to return or stay. The study argues that refugees' perceptions of human security in both Türkiye and Syria play a critical role in shaping their migration choices. While Türkiye offers relative stability and access to basic services, ongoing political instability, economic devastation, and social fragmentation in Syria create significant barriers to return. The paper concludes that, in the short to medium term, most Syrian refugees are likely to remain in Türkiye due to the perceived insecurities in their home country. However, the Turkish government's efforts to facilitate repatriation, coupled with international support, may influence future return dynamics. This study contributes to broader discussions on refugee crises, integration policies, and the long-term implications of mass displacement.

Keywords: *Syrians; Turkey; return migration; refugees; insecurity*

Introduction

On December 8, 2024, the 61-year-old Ba'ath regime was toppled in less than 10 days, following the victory of the counterinsurgent movement Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). The overthrow of Assad, and the abrupt victory of HTS altered the regional dynamics in the Middle East on many fronts. In an interview with a documentary film-maker, the leader of the movement Ahmed al-Sharaa touched upon on of the most pressing questions in the global agenda, the plight of displaced Syrian refugees:

> Families were torn apart. But now, families are coming back together and that is why people are happy. It's as if they were in prison and visitation was forbidden. The streets are like a festival. I saw people joyful and celebrating. … Do you know how hard it is to be forcibly displayed from your home? By nature humans have an instinct for possession. … But they seized people's houses, forced them out without nothing but their clothes, send them to Idlib, or to refugee camps in Lebanon or Jordan, countries already struggling economically and burdened further by these crises. Three and a half were sent to Turkey and others crossed the sea, drowned,

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> including women and children. Then they arrived in countries that may or may not welcome them, or confine them to closed camps, issuing them ID cards, and collecting their fingerprints. And it does not stop there, in some countries their camps were burned…. Now, you can tell these people "Your lands are restored. Yes, it is true that it is destroyed, but there are people who pitched tents on their land. And they feel as if they have the world in their hands. I am certain that within two years the Syrians in exile the 15 million displaced Syrians. I believe that only 1 million to 1.5 million of them will remain abroad (Hattab, 2024)

Dubbed as the largest refugee crisis since World War II, the civil war in Syria has resulted in the international displacement of 4.6 million Syrians, according to recent estimates by the UNHCR (2025). Many of these individuals have sought refuge in neighboring countries, including Türkiye, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, as well as throughout Europe. Among these host countries, Türkiye has accommodated the largest number of internationally displaced Syrians. As such, it is important to examine the prospects of return for Syrians with a particular focus on Türkiye. Additionally, Türkiye provides an important case study in terms of understanding the public reaction to the presence of a large population of displaced Syrians and their impact on domestic politics.

Al-Sharaa anticipates that, after many difficult years in exile, Syrians will be eager to return home to reunite with their families and homeland. Judging by the initial reactions of several host state leaders, it is clear that he is not the only one who is eager for Syrians to begin their homeward journey. Following the collapse of the regime in Syria, statements from the United Nations (UN), certain European host-countries, Türkiye and also the Syrian government itself have made it clear that the right of refugees to return to their origin-country is the desired solution (Yahya, Kassir, and el-Hariri 2018). Although HTS remains classified as a terrorist organization in the EU, this did not prevent the bloc from supporting return discussions, likely influenced by the ongoing Ukrainian crisis, which has created a significant number of additional refugees whom Europe must accommodate. Austria's Karl Nehammer announced the suspension of pending asylum applications from Syrian citizens, with the rationale that the fall of the Assad regime had fundamentally changed the country's situation, rendering this a "safe country" in refugee legislation (Reuters, 2024). Germany soon followed suit, suspending its intake of Syrian asylum seekers (Deutsche Welle, 2024). However, it rejected a controversial suggestion by the opposition CDU members to pay €1,000 to voluntary returnees, citing ongoing instability in Syria (The Middle East Eye, 2024). Türkiye also rushed to announce that approximately 25,000 additional Syrians returned in December, which constituted a 70% increase over the previous month (Anadolu Ajansı, 2024). The Minister of Foreign Policy, Hakan Fidan, invited Syrians to return home. However, the critical question that warrants an answer is "Will refugees return and if yes when and why?" (Anadolu Ajansı, December 9).

In this discussion paper, we examine the potential physical, political, legal, economic, and social conditions that may influence the decisions of Syrian refugees in Türkiye concerning whether to return to their home country or stay in Türkiye. Employing the Conflict Model of Migration as a theoretical framework and based on an assessment of the overall environment these conditions have fostered for refugees, we argue that the decision on the part of Syrian refugees as to whether to return to their home country or stay in Türkiye will be significantly impacted by their perception of human insecurities obtaining in both states.

The article is structured as follows: Section I presents the main features of the Conflict Model of Migration employed in this study. Section II analyzes the physical, political, legal, economic, and social conditions in the Turkish and Syrian context that may affect the potential return of Syrian refugees in-depth. Finally, the discussion section draws implications on the prospect of Syrian refugees to return to their home country or to stay in Türkiye in line with the dynamics suggested by the Conflict Model of Migration.

The Conflict Model of Migration and Aspirations of Return

Human security is 'a condition of existence in which basic material needs are met, and in which human dignity, including meaningful participation in the life of the community can be realized.' (Thomas, 2000, p. 161). The Conflict Model of Migration, one of the more novel approaches to understanding human mobility, explains the primary motivations behind migration in terms of conflicts at the macro (state or intra-state level), mezzo (household level), and micro (individual-level) and the attendant perception of human insecurities. According to the model, migration can occur not only under conditions such as warfare that pose a direct threat to the physical wellbeing of individuals, but also for various reasons related to human security such as lack of job opportunities, discrimination, forced conscription, poor education and healthcare services, human rights violations, ethnic cleansing policies, political oppression, and food insecurity (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2016). Consequently, although humans are inherently security-seeking creatures, physical as well as political, legal economic, and social reasons directly influence the perception of human insecurities.

Although the model emphasizes that conflict at all three levels (macro, mezzo and micro) influences individuals' perceptions of human insecurities, it also posits that not every conflict fosters the same perception of insecurity in individuals and thus triggers migration. In other words, the Conflict Model of Migration argues that not all individuals perceive conflict as a matter of human insecurity on equal terms. For this reason, the model underscores that conflict should be assessed according to a scale. Whereas the perceptions of human insecurity remain low in conditions where reconciliation and cooperation are possible, the perception of human insecurity can be heightened in cases where there is direct violence and a threat to individuals' physical well-being. Migration emerges as a strategic option for individuals when environmental conditions are perceived as considerably insecure.

Thus, the Conflict Model of Migration emphasizes that international migration is fundamentally a matter of choice rather than necessity, explaining why some individuals opt to migrate while others remain immobile (Cohen and Sirkeci, 2016). However, the model states that the migration process is shaped not only by an individual's perceptions of heightened human insecurity and the accompanying aspiration to migrate, but also by an individual's capacity to migrate. In other words, the model states that individuals should also have sufficient resources in order to migrate successfully and argues that they can draw upon four types of capital: physical, economic, human, and social (Aksu Kargın and Sirkeci, 2023; Sirkeci, Utku and Yüceşahin, 2019).

Finally, the model posits that migration is a dynamic process and should be assessed along a continuum (Sirkeci and Cohen, 2015). Accordingly, the fact that individuals have migrated once does not mean that they will not re-migrate. If individuals are not satisfied with the living conditions in their host country and their perceptions of human insecurity persist or are

exacerbated, they may prefer to return to their country of origin or migrate to a third country (Sirkeci, 2009).

Between Returning and Remaining: A Multifaceted Analysis of Syrian Refugees' Return Decisions in Türkiye

The Impact of the Physical Environment on the Return Decisions of Syrian Refugees

The existing literature suggests that the perception of *physical security* in the country of origin is the fundamental driver underlying 'refugee migration' (King 2000; Simmons 2000; Alrababah et al. 2023). For refugees fleeing war, migration is not primarily driven by skills or effort, as is the case with labor migration, but by the perceived risks to physical security in the home country. The voluntary, safe, and sustained return of refugees is more likely to occur when their perceptions of the conditions in the country of origin meet their minimum expectations regarding physical security (Zetter 2021). The majority of Syrian refugees fled due to threats from the regime, imprisonment, the loss of family members during the war, and significant risks to personal safety (Ghosn et. al. 2021; Kurtoğlu et.al. 2023). A survey conducted by Balcilar and Nugent (2019) with the Syrian household heads found that over 75% of the refugees departed from Syria due to lack of physical security. A study conducted by Alrababah et al. (2023) in Lebanon indicated that despite dire living conditions and poverty experienced by the Syrian refugees, they are unlikely to return home unless there is a significant improvement in security conditions. In a similar vein, according to the findings of another study, Syrian refugees in Türkiye do not contemplate returning to their home country until the living conditions are normalized (Aksu Kargın and Trix, 2021). Other studies on Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon have also shown that insecurity in Syria is a major deterrent to return, making such returns infrequent and highly selective so far (Beaman et. al. 2022). Thus, the situation in the country of origin is a primary determinant underlying aspirations and attempts for return migration (Beaman et al. 2022).

In this context, 'physical security' will be a key factor in the decisions taken by Syrian refugees concerning whether to return to their home country or remain in Türkiye. Global refugee crises highlight the challenges of repatriation in post-conflict zones, where renewed cycles of conflict and insecurity often emerge. Voluntary repatriation efforts have frequently failed, as in Rwanda, where a protracted intra-state conflict between Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups displaced people from 1960 to 1995. Several cycles of peace agreements and democratic elections were followed by renewed violence in the country with the involvement of neighboring countries. The armed conflict between the Serbian military and Kosovo Liberation Army, which also involved the largest NATO operation in history, ended in 1999, but violent riots in 2004 directed against minorities, particularly the Serbian population, precipitated another wave of displacement. It's a common tale among the 240,000 refugees and internally displaced persons from Kosovo, mostly Serb and Roma (Gypsy) minorities, who found refuge in Serbia, Montenegro or Macedonia. Another 60,000 minority refugees from Kosovo are scattered across the rest of Europe. Between 1999 and 2003, only 7,000 or so non-Albanian refugees have returned to Kosovo (Relief Web, 2003). Similarly, millions of Afghan refugees who returned under the joint UNHCR/IOM Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) in 2002 later fled again, with millions remaining in exile (Turton and Marsden, 2002).

Schwartz (2019) has studied the emergence of conflict in several different cases following the repatriation of refugees. Her findings suggest that often the nature of violence and source of conflict is redefined in post-conflict geographies since non-state actors/groups can dominate in areas where state sovereignty is limited. Similarly, the power vacuum in Syria has caused the mushrooming of a parallel economy stemming from illegal activities, including looting, kidnapping and smuggling (Yazigi, 2014) and warlordism (Wind and Dahi, 2014) and this has become the main source of income for some segments of the society. Furthermore, although HTS has deposed the Assad regime and gained control of substantial parts of the country, there are still several opposition groups fighting on the ground who motivated by a variety of interests. Thus, as long as Syria remains unsettled politically and territorially, it will be unlikely to be regarded as a safe home for Syrians refugees.

With respect to the 'physical security' of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, the ruling AKP government has pursued a generous asylum policy, providing international protection to millions of Syrians fleeing the Assad regime. Although there have been social tensions engendered between the local population and refugees, the majority of the Syrians has felt their physical security threated to the degree that this would motivate them to return. For instance, several public protests have been orchestrated by local citizens against the Syrians in Gaziantep in which the police forces intervened (Karaoğlu, 2015). Last year, the Turkish province of Kayseri witnessed violent riots following the allegations that a Syrian man sexually abused a minor. The protests spread to other provinces and protestors chanted slogans, criticized the government's migration policy and targeted the properties of Syrian refugees (BBC, 2024). Despite intermittent outbursts like these between the local population and Syrian refugees, the prevalence has remained low, and these outbreaks have been mostly contained by security forces without escalating.

In conclusion, although most of Syria is under the control of Al-Sharaa government following the collapse of the Assad regime, the ongoing armed conflicts and the presence of illegal organizations within the country indicate that the optimum environment of security that would help to secure the voluntary return of Syrian refugees has not been achieved. Although Syrians have been experiencing tensions with the local population in Türkiye from time to time, it is reasonable to suppose that they are in a physically safer environment in comparison to Syria. Therefore, in terms of the perception of physical security, Syrians are more likely to remain in Türkiye and less likely to return to Syria.

The Impact of Political Environment on Syrian Refugees' Return Decisions

Syria is a state consisting of a multitude of religions and sects – Christianity, Sunni Islam, Shia Islam, Druze, Ismaili and Jewish populations coexist – as well as several ethnic groups – primarily, Arabs, Circassians, Kurds, Yazidis, Turkmens, Armenians, Palestinians, Jews, and Greeks. When the public protests broke out out in Syria, the Alawites (12% of the Syrian population), who were closely integrated within the state's political and military apparatus, backed the Assad regime, while the Sunni Arabs, comprising the 64% of Syria's population sided by the opposition groups (Phillips, 2015, p. 357).

This sectarian dimension to the conflict was itself a reflection of the way in which the Assad regime nurtured social fears and deepened the sectarian polarization within the society by depicting the protests as sectarian in character throughout the war (Hadaya, 2020). Consequently, minority groups in Syria, including Christians (9%), Druze (3%) and Shiites

(2%), allied with the Assad regime out of the fear that they would be persecuted at the hands of the Sunni Arabs (Phillips, 2015, p. 357). Phillips (2015) posits that sectarian ties were not as powerful as is now suggested by post-war readings of the conflict. They were rather more ambiguous and fluid, based on multiple fault lines including ideology, class and political identity. However, during the civil war, it is true that Assad's strategy of positioning the conflict as secretarian in nature enabled the regime to survive by drawing on support from Alawites and other minority groups and portraying the Sunni majority as a pawn of foreign powers. Furthermore, such portrayals enabled both the Assad government and anti-Assad resistance to engage in systematic human rights abuses against other groups. Meanwhile, the Kurds – the largest non-Arab minority in Syria, comprising of approximately 8.5% to 10% of the population – have exploited the power vacuum in Syria and have mobilized along ethnic lines (Allsoop, 2014).

In terms of the current environment of 'political security' in Syria, the victory of the HTS has been met with pleasure by the majority of Syrian refugees who are predominantly Sunni Muslim. However, the sectarian policy employed by the former regime and the human rights violations it committed engendered deep social polarization among the Syrian population. As a Syrian scholar, Aldoughli (2021) states, "the challenges of the post-Assad era lie not only in establishing transitional justice, but in building a robust state that forms its basis of legitimacy through transcending sectarian affiliation". Otherwise, religious or ethnic groups, supported or manipulated by the leadership to maintain its power, are likely to seek privilege and exact revenge, inevitably leading to renewed cycles of violence and outmigration. In the Bosnian case, the Dayton peace agreement signed between the parties required a government structure in which every ethnic group was equally represented, even at the leadership level. This was instrumental to building legitimacy and confidence among refugees (Vedsted-Hansen, 1997). However, despite the fact that Syria's interim president, Ahmed Al-Sharaa, has promised to protect the rights and freedoms of all segments of the society and to forsake any sectarian policy or engage in retributory attacks against the Alawites, the death toll of Alawites has exceeded 1,000, which constitutes the largest number of killings at one time since the fall of the Assad regime (Fouda, 2025).The killings of Alawites, who are considered the loyalists of the toppled Assad regime, was committed by Syrian security forces targeting the Tartous and Latakia regions and has led thousands of Syrian Alawites to seek asylum in Lebanon (BBC, 2025).

Despite the fact that the Syrian interim president al-Sharaa, promised to establish an inclusive government, the revenge killings perpetrated against the Alawites have led to concerns regarding whether a long-lasting political settlement and sustainable peace will be achieved in Syria. Al-Sharaa also stated that the general elections will not be held earlier than five years from now, and no political parties will be allowed to operate until the enactment of new legislation governing these parties. Finally, the HTS is considered a terrorist organisation by Western states due to its affiliation with Nusra Front, and is still not internationally recognized as the legitimate government in Syria. All these political concerns hinder the restoration of stability and make the political safety of those contemplating return uncertain. Additionally, those Syrian refugees who are perceived to have affiliations with the deposed Assad regime or other opposition groups may face political pressure such as arbitrary detention or arrests, if they return.

Finally, the political uncertainties regarding Syria are likely to be further exacerbated by the involvement of cross-border groups and external powers with conflicting agendas. Hezbollah, supported by Iran, continues to play a significant, although somewhat weakened, role in propping up the remnants of the Ba'athist regime, while Russia has been a key ally to the Assad government, providing military and political backing. On the other hand, extremist groups like ISIS, though largely defeated, remain a destabilizing factor in certain regions, and are capable of exploiting power vacuums to regroup and launch attacks. Moreover, since the fall of the Assad regime, Israel has attacked Syria to deepen and entrench the occupation of the Golan Heights (Al Jazeera, 2025).

With respect to the 'political security' environment of Syrian refugees in Türkiye, refugees are granted international protection through their temporary protection status, and the Turkish government has neither engaged in any mass deportations of Syrian refugees or arbitrary policies such as detentions and surveillance. However, on the other hand, the massive scale of migration, the prolongation of the Syrians' duration of stay, and the increase in the visibility of refugees in urban areas, has led to the politicization of the matter of Syrian refugees in Türkiye in recent years (Akman, 2022). The opposition parties have begun to blame the AKP government for its foreign policy in Syria and the Syrian refugee crisis, and have pledged to return refugees in the event that they rise to the power (Ceylan and Uslu, 2019; Secen, 2021; Tuğsuz and Yılmaz, 2015; Tuncel and Ekici, 2019). Moreover, there has been a rise in political movements such as the Victory Party, embracing anti-immigrant discourses similar to the far-right parties in Europe, which have placed further political pressure on the AKP government (Deniz and Aksu Kargın, 2023). Turkish society has also begun to blame the Syrian refugees from the growing unemployment, economic crisis, and high inflation experienced in recent years in Türkiye. The AKP's loss of votes in the metropolitan cities in both general and local elections in recent years have convinced the AKP government to take swift steps to repatriate the Syrian refugees.

Finally, the PYD/YPG – the Syrian branch of the PKK – has gained strength in the northern regions of Syria with the intention of forming an autonomous zone by taking advantage of the power vacuum in Syria. This has deepened Türkiye's security concerns vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue, and, in order to ensure both its border security and to accelerate the return of Syrian refugees to a designated "safe zone", Türkiye has conducted three cross-border operations to Syria named Euphrates Shield (2016-2017), Olive Branch (2018) and Peace Spring (2019). According to the Interior Minister, Ali Yerlikaya, over 100,000 Syrians have returned to this safe zone since 2017, where Türkiye has constructed 116.000 prefabricated houses to accommodate returnees (Anadolu Ajansı, 24th of December 2024). Additionally, border security measures have been significantly tightened to prevent irregular crossings since 2017. Following the overthrow of Assad, Türkiye announced that approximately 25,000 additional Syrians returned in December, which was 70% higher than the previous month (See Table 1).

Türkiye has recently proposed a number of new regulations to facilitate the orderly return of Syrians, such as multiple-entry visas and mechanisms for transferring physical property to Syria (Anadolu Ajansı, December 24 2024). Furthermore, following the fall of the Assad regime, the AKP government held a diplomatic meeting with Syria's interim president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, to normalize bilateral relations with Syria, thereby endeavoring to accelerate the safe return of Syrian refugees to their home country. In sum, despite the negative

instrumentalization of Syrian refugees within Turkish politics and recent initiatives on the part of the AKP government to speed up their safe return, the recent outbreaks of sectarian conflict in Syria and the prevailing uncertainties regarding the political future of the country must weigh heavily on the perceptions of political security on the part of Syrian refugees, making the likelihood of their returning to Syria a more distant possibility.

Table 1. Number of Returning Syrians after the HTS victory, December 2024.

Host country	Number of Syrian Returnees
Türkiye	35,113
Jordan	22,000
Lebanon	100-200
Iraq	948
Egypt	2,695

Source: UNHCR, https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/01/1158706

The Impact of Legal Environment on Syrian Refugees' Return Decisions

The concept of 'legal security' mainly encompasses three dimensions: access to basic rights, the rule of law and the absence of arbitrary policies. Although the Syrian refugees contemplating returning home assume that they will be afforded greater rights in Syria in comparison to the limited rights offered in Türkiye due to TP, since there is currently no legitimate central authority in Syria, whether they will be able to access basic rights and freedoms is uncertain. Furthermore, the erosion of state sovereignty and the unenforceability of laws in Syria could lead to disputes over the restitution of property rights for Syrian refugees. For instance, Syrians who remained in the country throughout the war or insurgent groups might have occupied the abandoned properties. Moreover, in order to impede the return of refugees, the Assad government issued Law No. 10, which stripped Syrian refugees of their assets and transferred them to state ownership (DiNapoli, 2019). The Assad regime has also deliberately engaged in social engineering policies, depopulating Sunni-majority areas through land seizures and violent military operations (Hokayem, 2016). Additionally, the destruction or loss of legal documents during the war might further hinder the ability of refugees to lay claim to their privately owned assets and complicate the resolution of property disputes.

Furthermore, along with the war the constitutional system has completely collapsed in Syria. On March 14th 2025, Syria's interim president al-Sharaa signed a temporary constitution, and promised that the constitution will safeguard the rights of all Syrians until the drafting of a new constitution within the following three years. However, some provisions of the constitution have already been subject to criticism due to allegations about its lack of inclusivity. While some provisions of the former Syrian constitution remained untouched, Article II of the temporary constitution stipulates that the head of state must be Muslim and that Islamic jurisprudence will be the principal source of legislation (Naughtie, 2025). Additionally, although Article VI of the temporary constitution affirms that the rights of citizens will be safeguarded regardless of their ethnic, religious and sectarian identity, the nature of the regime that will emerge in Syria is still nebulous and this must necessarily foster uncertainty for those Syrians contemplating return.

There is also a risk that the HTS could impose Sharia law upon the country, and this would almost certainly discourage the return of women and secular segments of the society; this would have obvious implications for the rights of ethnic minorities as well. For instance, the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish organisation that controls the north-eastern part of Syria signed an agreement with the HTS administration a few of days before the announcement of Syria's interim constitution and agreed to integrate some of its military forces within the Syrian army. However, the enactment of the interim constitution caused deep disappointment among the Syrian Democratic Forces and the organization stated that the new constitution doesn't respect the diversity of Syria (Evrensel, 2025). Furthermore, the interim constitution has granted a great deal of executive power to al-Sharaa stating that Syria will be a presidential system; two-thirds of the members of the People's Committee, designated as a transitory parliament until the general elections are held, would be appointed by a committee to be elected by al-Sharaa, and the remaining one-third would be appointed directly by al-Sharaa. Moreover, the ongoing power struggles and political instability in Syria may limit the returnees' right of freedom to travel due to security concerns. Finally, although Türkiye is legally bound by international agreements such as the Geneva Convention and the New York Protocol which are designed to protect the basic rights of refugees, HTS is not an internationally recognized political entity and has no legal responsibility to safeguard the basic rights of Syrian refugees. Accordingly, the organization could implement arbitrary policies, such as stripping those refugees of some of their basic rights if they are deemed to have affiliations with the deposed Assad regime or with other opposition groups.

The environment of legal security in Türkiye vis-à-vis the Syrian refugees must be understood in relation to the evolution of the conflict, with Syrians beginning to arrive in Türkiye in April 2011 and increasing exponentially following the intensification of armed conflict in the country. The Syrians, whose stay was considered temporary by the Turkish government and who were referred to as guests at the onset of the war, were granted temporary protection status when the war evolved into a large-scale humanitarian disaster. According to the Article 91 (1) of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (No. 6458), the temporary protection status is an exclusive policy implemented to address mass asylum movements in cases where the individual asylum claims cannot be processed. However, TP status imposes several restrictions in regards to accessing work permits, education, and healthcare services, and the refugees are eligible to benefit from these rights only within their city of registration. Furthermore, Syrians in Türkiye may travel to other cities only with a permit obtained from the Directorate of Migration in their city of registration. Additionally, a 2022 regulation prohibits Syrians from residing in certain districts and neighborhoods where their population has exceeded specified ratios. Since 2022, Türkiye has adopted a more stringent approach to enforcing these restrictions, resulting in the apprehension of numerous Syrians found to be in violation of TP rules. These measures have contributed to a significant decline in Türkiye's Syrian population, with official figures indicating a reduction of nearly 700,000 over the past three years. (Presidency of Migration Management, https://www.goc.gov.tr/gecici-koruma5638). This reduction includes hundreds of thousands of Syrians who were reportedly encouraged to voluntarily sign repatriation documents and leave Türkiye, despite the ongoing civil war in Syria (McKernan, 2019). As Janmyr (2016) and Schwartz (2019) have argued, such policies risk compelling Syrian refugees to return prematurely, often without sufficient guarantees for their safety and security in Syria.

Following the implementation of its open-door policy and the large-scale arrival of Syrian refugees to Türkiye, the AKP government has frequently appealed to the 'ensar-muhajir' discourse to legitimize its migration policy. According to this discourse, Syrians fleeing the Assad regime are likened to muhajir, similar to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad who fled Mecca, while Turkish citizens, in turn, are regarded as ensar, who are responsible for providing protection to Syrians seeking security. However, this metaphorical discourse has frequently been invoked to reaffirm the temporary nature of Syrians' presence in Türkiye, thereby diverting attention from the implementation of long-term integration policies (Balkılıç and Teke Lloyd, 2021). Furthermore, in accordance with the political steps taken by the AKP government to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees since 2021, the Presidency of Migration Management in Türkiye initiated a voluntary return program. Consequently, the number of Syrians in Türkiye seeking to settle in a third country, primarily Canada, the US and Europe increased.

Although the pathways to durable solutions might indicate a legal interpretation based on the existing refugee laws and regulations, in practice, the standards of international law are often inconsistently applied, with premature efforts at repatriation sidestepping the protections they are meant to provide (see for ex. Omata 2013). Host governments, most of them from developing countries with limited resources, as well as the UNHCR are often overstretched and interested in accelerating the repatriation process, rather than prioritizing alternative solutions such as local integration or resettlement (Barnett 2001). Syria is currently regarded as unsafe by many host states as well as the UNHCR (UNHCR 2024, December), but if relative stability continues for a sustained period, the emphasis on voluntary return will likely emerge.

If such a consensus is reached, the international community may adopt either a "carrot" or a "stick" approach to facilitate returns (Turton and Marsden 2002). On the one hand, punitive policies in host states—such as limiting access to rights or pathways to integration— and pressure exerted by the UNHCR may undermine refugees' sense of security in their host country, effectively compelling returns even if conditions for safe and dignified repatriation have not been fully met. For instance, in cases such as Liberia (2012), Angola (2012) and Rwanda (2013), the UNHCR unilaterally determined that prolonged periods of post-conflict peace and stability justified repatriation (UNHCR). UNHCR revoked the Cessation Clause in these three cases, leading refugees to lose their *prima facie* status, resulting in increased returns despite ongoing safety and stability concerns (Omata 2013). Another example is Tanzania, where settlement camps for Burundian refugees were closed in collaboration with the UNHCR, which provided additional incentives for voluntary repatriation (UNHCR; Schwartz 2019). Meanwhile, in Lebanon, restrictive policies on property ownership and basic rights for Syrians have heightened refugees' perceptions of insecurity, further complicating their position in the host state (Beaman et al., 2022). In some instances, ultimatums by host states may motivate return migration. For example, Sudanese refugees in Israel had to choose between repatriation with a stipend or the threat of detention (Gerver, 2014).

In addition to punitive measures, the international community might support incentives such as investments in reconstruction, cash payments to returnees, and peacekeeping efforts aimed at fulfilling the condition of relative safety and enhancing refugees' security perceptions in their country of origin. This second strategy, which emphasizes incentives for return, has been notably employed in contexts such as Bosnia and Mozambique. In these cases, international

support—including financial assistance for returnees, amnesties issued by home governments, and investments in rebuilding infrastructure—played a crucial role in encouraging voluntary repatriation. These measures yielded relatively higher repatriation rates, such as 84% in Bosnia and 40% in Mozambique, but required extensive timeframes and substantial resources. Returns often spanned decades, highlighting the gradual and resource-intensive nature of such programs. While cessation clauses and voluntary repatriation programs both facilitate refugee returns through forceful means, the latter tends to be more consistent with international norms but demands greater commitment and investment.

Türkiye might seek to increase pressure on Syrian refugees by restricting their access to citizenship rights. Kibreab (2003) contends that when refugees lack prospects for obtaining citizenship or relocating to a third country, their perception of insecurity in the host country may intensify. In July 2016, the AKP government stated that some Syrians might be granted citizenship, and to date, Türkiye has granted citizenship to 238,768 Syrians (Mülteciler.org.tr), prioritizing individuals with economic capital, university students, and property owners. Surveys conducted in 2020 revealed that 30% of Syrian refugees indicated a desire to obtain Turkish citizenship and 20% sought to resettle in a third country and these were the primary reasons given for not returning to Syria (Euronews 2022). However, studies demonstrate that a large majority of Turkish society is opposed to granting citizenship rights to Syrian refugees (Aksu Kargın, 2022; Kahraman and Kahya Nizam, 2016; Doğan, 2019; Tamer, 2016). Thus, although President Erdoğan has publicly stated that Syrians are welcome to remain in Türkiye (Independent), this position could change in response to rising public hostility, particularly from Turkish citizens who believe that Syria is now safe for return. Furthermore, in 2023, 3519 Syrian women and 1219 Syrian men were married to Turkish citizens, and acquired residency in Türkiye in this way (Anadolu Ajansı). The pressure to return might also create more incentives for marriages with Turkish citizens for Syrians who do not want to return to Syria.

Consequently, Syrian refugees contemplating return will have to weigh risks such as a precarious legal status, the lack of a constitutional framework guaranteeing their legal rights, property disputes, problems concerning the right to travel and freedom of expression, and exposure to arbitrary practices if they return to Syria. Although Syrians in Türkiye enjoy limited legal rights under TP, Türkiye does afford a number of crucial rights (e.g., free access to healthcare and education services) and legal guarantees (e.g., non-refoulement principle) to refugees, and refugee perceptions of legal security in Türkiye are expected to be comparatively higher than in the case of Syria.

The Impact of the Economic Environment on Syrian Refugees' Return Decisions

In the event that conditions for voluntary return arise, another critical factor influencing the decisions of Syrian refugees will be *economic security*. Although economic reasons did not initially motivate their migration to Türkiye, once settled, refugees are likely to behave similarly to labor migrants. The current literature on refugee returns confirms that physical security of oneself and one's family members is the threshold condition for refugee return to the post-conflict zones (Zetter, 2021). When this is established, at least perceptually, then refugees will weigh other elements such as access to education, healthcare and employment (Ghosn et. al. 2021; Constant et. al. 2021; Al Husein et. Al. 2023; Alrababah et. al. 2023). Recent nongovernmental organization reports from the Middle East adopt a similar framing, arguing

that refugees actively consider whether life will be better at home than in their host country (Oxfam, 2018). Consequently, Syrian refugees' decisions to remain in Türkiye or to return to Syria will be influenced strongly by the comparison between their existing economic conditions in Türkiye and their prospective economic circumstances in Syria.

The protracted civil war in Syria has severely damaged the country's economy, leading to the collapse of the industrial, trade and tourism sectors as well as transportation systems (Popa and Cocoş, 2015). The war has also caused both human and foreign capital flight from the country. In addition, the sanctions imposed by the European Union and the United States have further depressed the Syrian economy and impoverished the population while aiming to punish the Assad regime. The sanctions have significantly damaged the nation's trade capacity (World Bank Group, 2022) and resulted in the depletion of its foreign exchange reserves (Wind and Dahi, 2014). They have also impeded the Syrian government from generating revenues from oil exports and compelled it to rely on its reserves. The rapid depletion of these reserves has further destabilized the Syrian economy, leading to the depreciation of the Syrian lira. By 2023, Syria's imports had surged to six times the level of its exports, and its trade deficit reached 70% of GDP (Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2024, p. 6).

The armed conflicts in Syria have also had detrimental effects on the nation's cultural and historical heritage (Popa and Cocoş, 2015) by significantly undermining its tourism revenues. Given security concerns, both Western and regional governments have issued travel notifications discouraging visits to Syria, resulting in a sharp decline in the number of tourists (Tachir and Alalı, 2022). In the pre-war period, agriculture and oil revenues accounted for approximately half of Syria's GDP. Prior to the war, agriculture employed approximately one-fourth of Syria's working-age population. However, the civil war has severely damaged the agricultural sector, leading a substantial number of farmers to abandon their farmland due to personal safety concerns. The war has also led to shortages of basic agricultural inputs such as labor, seeds, fertilizers, and fuel which have halted agricultural production, worsening the economic hardship of the Syrian people (World Bank Group, 2024b). The national water sector has also been devastated in Syria due to intensive armed conflicts. The government's lack of capacity to manage water resources effectively has resulted in a 30% decrease in the national water capacity (Faour and Fayad, 2014, p. 535) and the conflict has severely damaged water systems, leading to a shortage of potable water and increasing water prices.

According to the World Food Program (2024), more than 90% of the Syrian population lives below the poverty line. The International Rescue Committee (2024) reported that 7.9 million Syrians were food insecure in 2020, and this had increased to 15.4 million in 2024. According to the World Bank (2017), the average number of unemployed persons in Syria was 538,000 between 2010 and 2015, with approximately 482,000 more people becoming unemployed each year. In 2022 alone, Syria's unemployment rate rose to 42.9% (Syria Policy Research Center, 2023b).

On the other hand, the current economic conditions experienced by Syrians residing in Türkiye reveal that the economic challenges they face are unlikely to be resolved in the near future. At present, the majority of Syrian refugees in Türkiye are employed in construction, agriculture, textiles, and the service industries—often for lower wages than local workers, without social security, and under exploitative conditions (Aksu Kargin, 2018a; Baban, Ilcan and Rygiel, 2016; Erdoğan, 2017; Ferris and Kirisci, 2016; Şimşek, 2017). Furthermore, due to the lack of recognition of their professional credentials, a considerable number of Syrian

refugees are unable to maintain their own professions and are employed in jobs below their skill level and qualifications (Aksu Kargin, 2018a). Although the Turkish government enacted the Regulation on Work Permits for Foreigners Under Temporary Protection in January 2016, which grants Syrian refugees the legal right to work in Türkiye, only an estimated 3% of the 900,000-strong Syrian workforce in Türkiye hold official work permits. The lack of legal access to the labor market and absence of social security hinders refugees from filing their complaints to the relevant authorities in cases of unpaid wages or work-related injuries (Aksu Kargin, 2016). Furthermore, working in the informal economy creates a cycle of poverty and prevents refugees from achieving a dignified standard of living. This situation poses a significant challenge for Syrians seeking long-term residence in Türkiye, as it limits their capacity to plan for the future and to secure better living conditions.

Secondly, the influx of Syrian refugees into Türkiye has resulted in a substantial increase in the rent and sale prices of houses, especially in border provinces where refugees predominate (Aksu Kargin, 2018b). While this increase has put considerable strain on the budgets of Turkish citizens in the middle and lower income groups, a significant number of Syrian refugees either reside in substandard houses or share a single house with several families in the face of high rent prices (Aksu Kargın, 2016). Furthermore, the majority of Syrian refugees in Türkiye are concentrated in poor neighborhoods in which the rental prices are typically lower. Although, cohabitation with fellow Syrians ensures the preservation of a sense of community, it also isolates them from the wider society and impedes their social integration (Aksu Kargın, 2022). Additionally, poverty is a pervasive issue for Syrians in Türkiye. While approximately 25% of refugees experience inadequate food consumption (Cuevas et al., 2019), around 64% live in poverty, and 18.4% in acute poverty (Al Munajed and Ekren 2020).

In conclusion, although Syrian refugees are exposed to precarious working conditions in Türkiye and are trying to cope with the high cost of living, the fact that the economic livelihoods of the people in Syria have been largely destroyed, the challenges in accessing even basic needs such as widespread food and drinking water insecurity, and the lack of job security upon their return makes Türkiye a relatively safer option compared with Syria in economic terms. Therefore, when the current economic conditions between the two countries are evaluated together, it is safe to say that Syrian refugees will have a higher perception of economic security in Türkiye and will be less likely to return to Syria.

The Impact of the Social Environment on Syrian Refugees' Return Decisions

In terms of the environment of 'social security' in both countries, the protracted civil war in Syria has had a devastating impact on the nation's education and health services. For Syrian refugees contemplating a return journey, access to education will play a key role in sustaining their livelihoods and restoring the nation's human capital losses. Between 2000 and 2010, the Syrian government implemented several reforms to enhance the national education system, leading to a remarkable increase in school enrollment rates. However, the ongoing civil war has led to a considerable decline in school attendance in Syria. The persistent armed conflicts nationwide have rendered one in three schools in Syria non-operational (Müller-Funk and Fransen, 2023). In addition to the devastation of the nation's physical infrastructure, a shortage of qualified teaching staff, prevailing security concerns among families, and high dropout rates among children who enter the workforce to contribute to household income have resulted in a decline in school enrollment rates. On the other hand, children who pursue

their education in Türkiye may have their education interrupted if they return to Syria. The transition from an education system where the language of instruction is Turkish to the Syrian education system, which differs in language, curriculum, and teaching methods, may present adaptation challenges for children. Furthermore, the usefulness of the education that Syrian refugees receive in Türkiye upon their return is uncertain. All of these factors could contribute negatively to the academic success of Syrian refugee children in the case of their return.

In a similar vein, the national healthcare system in Syria has been adversely affected by the armed conflict. The consistent aerial attacks and bombings have led to the destruction of health infrastructure, resulting in the loss of healthcare personnel either through death or migration. Furthermore, pharmacies have been destroyed, and international sanctions have led to a dramatic decline in the availability of medical equipment (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2023a). Currently, approximately half of the healthcare facilities in Syria are out of service, and the remaining half are functioning at a reduced capacity (Müller-Funk and Fransen, 2023).

Finally, the war has severely weakened the overall social cohesion within Syrian society (Syria Policy Research Centre, 2023a). The widespread systematic human rights violations, including killings, disappearances, detentions, and torture have exacerbated social fragmentation in Syria and fostered a pervasive sense of mistrust among different segments of the population. In particular, for Syrians who have lost loved ones in the war or who are uncertain about their fate, the process of return can create an additional source of stress. Moreover, in an environment where justice has not been served despite the crimes against humanity committed by the Assad regime, return can worsen feelings of revenge and increase the risk of individuals becoming re-involved in the conflict. As aforementioned, government security forces have already begun committing revenge killings against Alawites. All these incidents pose a significant barrier to the long-term societal reintegration and reconciliation in post-war Syria.

With regard to the environment of 'social security' in Türkiye, despite the fact that Syrian refugees are eligible to access free education and healthcare services, they experience a variety of hardships in utilizing these. For example, access to healthcare services is fraught due to issues such as communication barriers, high health expenses, an insufficient number of translators in the hospitals, and negative interactions with health personnel (Aksu Kargin, 2016). Similarly, although education services are provided free of charge, the enrollment rate of Syrian children In Turkish schools remains significantly lower than pre-war levels in Syria. At present, only 62% of school-age Syrian refugee children receive education in public schools in Türkiye (Şimşek, 2018, p. 377). A myriad of socio-economic and cultural barriers contribute to the persistent gaps in school attendance among Syrian refugee children. For instance, many male children face considerable pressure to enter the labor market at an early age to support their families, whereas for female children, early marriage is often perceived as a preferable alternative to formal education. Additionally, Syrian children enrolled in Turkish schools also encounter hardships including limited communication with their peers and teachers due to language barriers (Uzun and Bütün, 2016) and exposure to discriminatory attitudes and behaviors (Aksu Kargın, 2016; Demir and Ozgul, 2019; Karakus, 2019) which leads to higher dropout rates. Prior to 2021, Syrian refugees were exempt from tuition fees for higher education in Türkiye; however, recent policy changes now require them to pay international tuition fees set by individual universities. These costs are prohibitively high for the vast

majority of Syrian families, further limiting access to higher education and exacerbating existing socio-economic inequalities.

At the outset of the Syrian crisis, Turkish society embraced a humanitarian-oriented approach and welcomed the Syrian refugees. However, over time, their prolonged stay in Türkiye and the socioeconomic problems this engendered has shifted the attitude of Turkish citizens towards the refugees from one of hospitality to that of hostility (Ferris and Kirisci, 2016). Syrian refugees, who were initially considered victims of the war by the local population, began to be perceived as a threat to Turkish society (Erdoğan and Ünver, 2015; Taştan, Haklı and Osmanoğlu, 2017). The findings of a survey conducted in 26 provinces with 2,247 participants revealed that the majority considers Syrian refugees to be the most significant problem in Türkiye (Erdoğan, 2020).

Furthermore, although the 'ensar-muhajir' discourse employed by the AKP government aimed to reaffirm the cultural affinities between the two societies, and mitigate potential hostilities, studies have indicated that a considerable number of Turkish citizens believe that they share no cultural ties with Syrian refugees (Bandur, 2020; Budak et al., 2017; Erdoğan, 2017; Konda, 2016; Yilmaz, 2017). In addition to these findings, research on the portrayals of Syrian refugees in mainstream and social media in Türkiye reveals that refugees are often depicted either as an economic or social threat to the country (Erdogan, Kavukcuer and Cetinkaya, 2017; Göktuna Yaylacı, 2017; Kardeş, Banko and Akman, 2017; Onay-Coker, 2019; Sarıbek, 2021). Lastly, compounding the growing social distance between Syrian refugees and mainstream Turkish society is the fact that most Syrian refugees are unable to communicate effectively with the local population due to language barriers (Aksu Kargın, 2016), and this further undermines social cohesion.

In conclusion, in the context of social security, although Syrian refugees experience challenges in accessing education and health services in Türkiye and there is a growing discontent in Turkish society revolving around them, it should be emphasized that the protracted civil war in Syria has significantly undermined education and health services nationwide. Furthermore, the civil war has weakened social solidarity in Syria, intensifying polarization. Under these circumstances, the likelihood of living in an environment of peace remains unlikely for refugees contemplating return. Therefore, when the social conditions in both countries are taken into consideration, Syrian refugees' perception of social security is expected to be higher in Türkiye and the propensity to return to Syria accordingly lower.

Conclusion

The civil war in Syria, which began in March 2011, has led to the internal displacement of millions of Syrians and has led millions more to seek asylum in neighboring countries and throughout Europe. Türkiye, which is hosting over 3 million Syrians within its borders, has become the largest population centre worldwide. However, the collapse of the 61-year-old Ba'athist regime on December 8, 2024, has created a new window of opportunity for the future of Syria, and the question of whether Syrian refugees will return to their home country or not has become the focus of many host states.

By employing the Conflict Model of Migration as a theoretical framework, this study comparatively examined the physical, political, legal, economic and social conditions in Türkiye and Syria that will influence the decisions of Syrian refugees to return to Syria or

remain in Türkiye at the micro-level. In this article, we posited that the decision of Syrians regarding whether to return or stay will be influenced srongly by the extent to which the existing and potential physical, political, legal, economic and social conditions in both countries are perceived as secure by Syrian refugees. In other words, their decision will be shaped by the sum of their perceptions of physical, legal, political, economic, and social security in both countries. If the refugees expect that their physical, political, legal, economic and social security will improve considerably in Syria relative to Türkiye, a notable increase in return rates might be anticipated. Conversely, if Türkiye is perceived as offering greater overall security in these domains, return rates will remain limited among Syrian refugees.

In this context, the study analyzed five security dimensions that might influence Syrians' decisions to return or stay put: *Physical security* (i.e., consistent armed conflicts, exposure to violence, pervasive existence of illegal activities, forced conscription); *political security* (i.e., risk of subjection to political discrimination, political stability and the rule of law, free elections, the influence of regional and global powers, inclusive government, the sustainability of the temporary protection status); *legal security* (i.e., access to legal rights upon return including property rights and freedom of travel, acquiring citizenship, a properly functioning legal system, constitutional reforms); *economic security* (i.e., access to regular labor market, sufficient income for sustainable livelihood, adequate housing, food and potable water security, recognition of professional credentials, availability of economic opportunities) and *social security* (i.e., sufficient access to education and health services, discrimination, social cohesion).

The analysis conducted within the framework of the Conflict Model of Migration, has yielded three distinct scenarios for the return of Syrian refugees in Türkiye. The initial scenario, which has been discussed in the preceding sections in-depth, predicts that Syrian refugees will not return to Syria in the short or medium term and will remain in Türkiye. While the temporary protection status granted to Syrians in Türkiye has led to the deprivation of certain rights, and has led them to experience a number of challenges in the political, legal, economic and social domains, the ongoing political instability and the absence of long-lasting peace in Syria in the post-Assad period will lead to a high perception of insecurity among the Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Moreover, the protracted civil war, which has been ongoing more than 14 years, has completely devastated the political, legal, economic and social fabric of Syria, and the reconstruction of the country and the establishment of adequate living conditions for those intending to return necessitates the implementation of long-term policies and international support. In light of the current political, legal, economic and social conditions in Syria after the fall of Assad regime, it can be posited that Türkiye will be perceived as offering greater security for Syrian refugees in these domains as well as in terms of their core physical security. Thus, it is likely that Syrian refugees will decide to stay in Türkiye in the medium or short term.

In the second scenario, there is a minority group of Syrian refugees who acquired citizenship, made investments or had businesses in Türkiye. Recent studies have shown that the Syrian refugees who enjoy legal security in Türkiye (e.g., citizenship) do not contemplate returning to Syria (Kayaoğlu, Şahin-Mencütek and Erdoğan, 2022; Müller-Funk and Fransen, 2023). Furthermore, most of the foreign businesses recently established in Türkiye are owned by Syrian entrepreneurs (Altındağ, Bakış and Rozo, 2020). Additionally, the informal and formal marriages between Syrian refugees and Turkish citizens have become increasingly widespread. Thus, these legal and economic gains on the part of this group of refugees further strengthens

their economic and social status in Türkiye and increases their perception of human security. Therefore, it is assumed that refugees belonging to this group will be those with the least propensity of returning to Syria and the highest likelihood of remaining in Türkiye.

Finally, the Turkish government has undertaken a number of efforts to repatriate Syrian refugees and in this regard, it has conducted cross-border operations within Syria with the aim of resettling Syrians in the safe zone to be established in northern Syria. Moreover, the introduction of a multi-visa application after the fall of the Assad regime and the official negotiation with Syria's interim president al-Shaara are among the initiatives taken to speed up the repatriation of refugees. In the upcoming period, if the Turkish government can politically and financially mobilize the international community for the repatriation of refugees and adopts restrictive political, legal, economic and social policies, repatriation could become a strong option for refugees. However, even in this scenario, it is likely that the return of Syrians will not take place on a large scale, but more gradually as some household members return to Syria in a piecemeal fashion.

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