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Syrians returning to their homeland from Türkiye

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Nearly half a million Syrian refugees have returned from Türkiye since the fall of the Assad regime on December 8th. But not all Syrians have gone back. This article explores why a significant number of Syrians have returned, and why others are delaying their homecoming or are not returning at all. This is an in-depth analysis of the journey of Syrian nationals back to their home country from Türkiye following the collapse of the regime of Bashar al-Assad on December 8th 2024.

It includes dozens of eyewitness accounts and the author's firsthand observations from both Syria and Türkiye, and from a variety of locations, men and women, and different age groups, to provide a comprehensive insight into the situation in both countries.

Introduction

Following the fall of the regime of Bashar al-Assad on December 8th 2024, a notable shift in returnee policy has taken shape. This report tracks the return of Syrian nationals from Türkiye to Syria, focusing on the period from December 8th 2024 until the present day. It covers key developments, monthly trends, and data disaggregated by border crossing points, such as Cilvegözü / Bab Al-Hawa in Hatay province and Öncü Pınar / Bab Al-Salama in Kilis.

1. Context & Policy Background

In the wake of the Assad regime's collapse on December 8th 2024, the Turkish government unveiled a new policy: Türkiye would support the safe and voluntary return of Syrians residing in Türkiye under "temporary protection" to their home country. Speaking to the state-run Anadolu Agency in late December, Turkish Minister of the Interior, Ali Yerlikaya stated that 763,433 Syrians had already returned home in a "voluntary, safe, dignified, and orderly manner" since 2017.[1]

According to Yerlikaya, at the time 4,164,472 foreigners resided legally in Türkiye, including 2,920,119 Syrians under temporary protection. Yerlikaya shared detailed demographic insights, noting for example, that 61% of the Syrian population in Türkiye hails from Aleppo. The minister also highlighted the fact that approximately 875,000 Syrian children had been born in Türkiye, representing roughly 30% of the overall Syrian refugee population in the country.[2]

"The number of Syrians returning to their homeland from Türkiye has increased nearly seven-fold daily since the Assad regime's ouster, with expectations of even more people returning in the coming days", Minister Yerlikaya said on December 24th. "Between December 9th and last night, over a span of mere 15 days, the number of Syrians we facilitated to voluntarily return to Syria exceeded 25,000" Yerlikaya told Anadolu Agency, referring to the figure a day after opposition groups toppled Bashar al-Assad's regime. The majority of returnees hailed from Türkiye's southeastern province of Gaziantep, followed by Hatay and Istanbul, reported the newspaper Hürriyet.[3]

Key measures Türkiye adopted in late 2024 included increasing the processing capacity at its six border crossings from approximately 3,000 to 15,000-20,000 returnees per day. Yerlikaya stated by the end of last year that they managed to increase it from 3,020 to around 19,000 per day.[4]

Another key measure involved simplifying asset declarations and facilitating the cross-border transfer of household goods, vehicles, and valuables benefiting returnees. Minister Yerlikaya announced that Syrians returning home would be permitted to take all their household belongings, workplace equipment, and personal vehicles with them. To streamline this process, the Trade

[1] https://yetkinreport.com/en/2024/12/24/turkish-interior-minister-25000-syrian-refugees-returned-home-this-month
[2] Ibid.
[3] https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrians-returns-from-turkiye-surge-sevenfold-minister-203971
[4] https://yetkinreport.com/en/2024/12/24/turkish-interior-minister-25000-syrian-refugees-returned-home-this-month

Ministry also introduced measures to ease procedural requirements for declaring assets. According to Hürriyet, migration offices would also be established in Turkish embassies and consulates in Damascus and Aleppo, allowing Türkiye to share refugee data directly with Syria's new administration.

Destruction in Eastern Ghouta, Damascus suburbs, July 2025

2. Crossing into Syria on the third day after the fall of the Regime

When the author of this report entered Syria via the Coranbey /Al-Ra'y crossing on December 10th, 2024, she witnessed a large number of vehicles parked in a parking lot outside the border checkpoint. At the time, and specifically at that border crossing, Syrians were not permitted to drive their cars into the country and instead had to cross on foot. On the Syrian side, a family member, friend, or hired contact, would be waiting with a car to pick them up.

On the other side of the border crossing, at the parking lot near Al-Ra'y and later, on the road from Al-Bab to Aleppo (which until December served as the dividing line between the Syrian National Army (SNA) and regime-controlled areas), the author witnessed several cars filled with household goods. When she enquired about their destination, at a parking lot between Al-Bab and Aleppo, one Syrian family told her they were moving from Al-Bab back home to Homs.

When the author exited Syria through the Öncü Pınar / Bab Al-Salama border crossing on December 25th, she was able to observe the situation at the largest border crossing in the Gaziantep region. This time, many Syrians were crossing the border carrying all their belongings with them, some pushing carts, others hauling bags, suggesting that they planned to return permanently.

Another key measure Türkiye introduced in December 2024 to facilitate Syrians returns is known as the "Pioneer Migrants" scheme. This allows Syrian nationals contemplating returning to their

home country to access Syria multiple times and for up to 6 months, in order to assess the living conditions there before relocating permanently. The minister announced that, thanks to the "Pioneer Migrants" scheme "from Jan. 1 to July 1, 2025, each family will be granted three entries and exits to facilitate the readiness of their homes", adding that two of the six designated border gates will be authorized for such movements.[5]

In Syria, the author encountered several Syrian men, whose families were still in Türkiye (mostly in Gaziantep), and who had taken advantage of the "Pioneer Migrants" initiative. They had come to Syria to explore housing and work possibilities. Several single young Syrian males in Istanbul, however, told the author that this scheme was not intended for their demographic, and expressed their frustration about the matter. It appears that only youths with a Turkish passport can go and return. The author has met such men too, in Damascus, Homs, Daraya in Syria and in Istanbul and Mersin in Türkiye.

3. The Volume of Returnees Over Time

December 2024

The number of Syrians who returned to their home country over a 21-day period (from December 9th to December 28th) reached 35,114, most of them arriving in Aleppo, according to CNN Türk. "The past two weeks have witnessed an unprecedented spike", minister Yerlikaya said, "with over 25,000 Syrians crossing the border, compared to the monthly average of 11,000 in the previous 11 months of the year."

Minister Yerlikaya explained that 30% of the Syrians residing in Türkiye, totaling 2,805,000, are children born in Türkiye and have not been granted citizenship (without at least one Turkish parent, children born in the country are not granted Turkish citizenship, and instead reside under temporary protection. Once they leave for Syria, they lose their temporary protection status). A migration office is set to open in Damascus to provide educational assistance to institutions in the city, and "return operations will increase as summer approaches, when schools are on holiday," according to Yerlikaya.[6]

Meanwhile, Syrian human rights activist Taha Ghazi noted that Syrians with dual nationality are currently allowed to visit Syria through third countries such as Jordan or Lebanon. He also mentioned that there is a proposal under consideration to permit returnees' entry directly through Türkiye's border crossings with Syria.[7]

In August, *The New Arab* reported that Syria will allow expatriates with foreign nationality or residency, excluding those living in Türkiye, to enter via land crossings without prior approval.[8]

A total of 52,622 Syrians voluntarily returned to their home country in December 2024 alone, according to the Turkish Interior Ministry. Speaking at the Cilvegözü Border Gate in Hatay's

[5] https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrians-returns-from-turkiye-surge-sevenfold-minister-203971
[6] https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/12/around-1700-syrians-return-daily-from-turkey
[7] https://english.enabbaladi.net/archives/2024/12/around-1700-syrians-return-daily-from-turkey
[8] https://www.newarab.com/news/syria-eases-border-rules-expats-turkey-crossings

Reyhanlı district, known in Arabic as the Bab Al-Hawa crossing leading to Idlib. "At the Türkiye-Syria border, the main return processing points at Bab Al-Hawa and Bab Al-Salama remain calm, with relatively low numbers of returns before 8th December. However, in the last five days, daily returns have increased to between 1,300 and 1,850, with over 7,600 individuals returning between 9th and 13th December."[9]

"After the takeover of 8th December 2024, Syrians returned from abroad for various reasons, such as to inspect their properties, to assess the security and economic situation, and/or to reunite with their family members. It is not known how many Syrians remained in Syria permanently after their return and how many Syrians decided to leave their homeland again after their return. It is not possible for foreign governments and organizations to keep track."

In December 2024, the World Food Program reported that over 90 percent of Syrians lived below the poverty line, on less than $2.15 a day. Many Syrians survive on one meal a day. When the author arrived in downtown Damascus shortly after Assad's fall, unwashed children and adults in tattered clothes swarmed her and her companions, begging for money. The author witnessed similar scenes in Homs.[10] By mid-September the situation in central Damascus had not changed.

4. The situation in Damascus in December, on the fourth day after the fall of Assad

On 12th December 2024, in Bab Touma, a mixed Christian-Muslim area in the Old City of Damascus, the author encountered a Greek Orthodox Syrian man named Rami. "We don't know whether we will be happy or not, the situation is not yet clear," he said, but noted that basic services, such as the provision of electricity, had already improved. "We used to get 1,5 - 2 hours of electricity a day, now we have 3 - 4 hours. And they have promised us that in a month, we will have electricity 24 hours a day. Queuing for bread at a bakery used to take five hours. Now, we only have to wait for an hour".

Rami explained that although "the Assad regime was good for Christians", overall, the situation in the country was bad. "The economic situation was zero—there was nothing." According to Rami, many Syrian Christians had moved abroad due to poverty. "I am a state employee and my income is $10 a month," he said. "It is not enough to survive on, which is why I also work in a restaurant". A trip to the supermarket would cost the Christian man his entire month's salary. "Many have become beggars," he said.

Reports from Jan-Feb 2025 indicate that 35,000 Syrians rushed home initially, but growing disillusionment emerged over inadequate infrastructure, power and water supply, and as communications shortages persisted.[11] Rami told the author that he had heard that everything was cheaper in the opposition-held areas, whereas in the capital, they had no heating oil. "We are dying

[9] https://www.reddit.com/r/Syria/comments/1hnaeyg/unicef_syria_humanitarian_situation_report_18
[10] https://dawnmena.org/lifting-sanctions-can-supercharge-syrias-liberal-economic-opening/
[11] https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hope-turns-regret-among-syrians-returning-home-turkey-2025-02-05/?utm_source=chatgpt.com

of cold," he said. "We are dead here, honestly, we are dead here in Syria." The following months, he said with resignation, would show whether things would start changing for the better.

At Al-Yasoun Restaurant in Bab Touma, the author talked to its owner, Emad, a Greek Orthodox Christian and trained mechanical engineer. He is the owner of both the restaurant and a hotel, located in a beautifully preserved Ottoman-era courtyard house in the Old City, complete with a central fountain and intricate wood paneling typical of the district's historic architecture. The restaurant's staff was a diverse mix of Sunnis, Christians, Druze, and Alawites. "I expect a positive change," Emad said, expressing hope that the crippling shortages of oil, gas, food and electricity would soon come to an end, and that essential services would return.

"We don't know the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) well, but they promised things would get better," Emad continued. "Bashar al-Assad's clique was very bad. This government must become a mix. There's no point in having a government made up of only one sect."

In Damascus, Emad said, many people had been barred by the regime for years from returning to their homes on the city's outskirts. These were areas that - like eastern Aleppo - had been once held by the opposition and then starved and besieged by Assad's forces into surrender. "The regime did not allow them to return to rebuild their homes," Emad explained. "I know a family who has a five-story building in Jobar and the regime did not allow them to go back. If those who live here could not return to their homes, how would Syrians in Europe do that?"[12]

Infrastructure challenges further complicate economic recovery. Any infrastructure left untouched by bombs during the last 14 years remains dilapidated, lacking serious maintenance or updates since the 1950s. "Put yourself in the position of a businessman," financial expert Osama al-Qadi said in February in an interview with Syria TV. "If you want to invest billions in production, you need electricity, water, communications and a functioning banking system. None of this is easy in cash-driven Syria." Meanwhile, the US and the EU have announced the lifting of the sanctions.

"The situation in former regime areas is disastrous," said Huseyin Eissa, director of the Chamber of Industry and Commerce in Syria's Al-Ra'y in the former opposition-held area on the border with Türkiye. "You can tell who has lived in the liberated areas for years by their clothes—by the shape of the body." Rebel-held areas achieved fragile economic stability in part by adopting the Turkish Lira and attaining freedom from Assad's corrupt oversight. Many Syrians now hope the success of these zones can be emulated nationwide, but concerns linger over entrenched patronage networks and the massive challenge of liberalization.

5. The situation in April – May in Damascus, Jaramana, Daraya, Sahnaya and Homs

By May 2025, conditions in Damascus had improved slightly, though they varied by neighborhood. A young Kurdish-Arab woman told the author that in Dumar, a residential area

[12] https://dawnmena.org/freed-from-assad-syrians-rejoice-while-wary-of-what-comes-next/

outside the city center, locals now had access to up to eleven hours of electricity per day. Still, many residents remained frustrated.

"Damascus is still only semi-inhabitable. The electricity grid and heating are such a mess," one Syrian remarked back in February.

The new government has essentially inherited a country in ruins. According to the United Nations, over 200,000 refugees had returned to Syria by mid-January 2025, only to find an economy in collapse and scarce opportunities.[13] Since the fall of Assad, an estimated 400,000 Syrians have returned from neighboring countries, based on UNHCR figures. In parallel, more than one million internally displaced people (IDPs) have returned to their communities, bringing the total number of Syrians who have returned home to over 1.4 million.[14]

In former regime-held areas, however, the supply of electricity remains limited, often available for just two to three hours per day.

The town of Jaramana – three kilometers southeast of Damascus - escaped bombing during the conflict in Syria. The town was originally populated solely by Muwahhideen-Druze, but then Iraqi refugees came, along with Lebanese and Syrians, who fled the war to this relatively safe haven. The same is true for Christian Sahnaya and Muwahhideen-Druze Ashrafiyat Sahnaya, both of which administratively belong to the larger town of Daraya, and are part of Reef Damascus province, Damascus countryside. Daraya was a rebel-held town and was therefore mostly destroyed by bombing. It is also located close to the Mezzeh military airport, another reason for the Assad regime to level the neighborhoods there. Mazhar Shorbaji, the former mayor of Daraya, gave the author a tour. Two of Shorbaji's brothers were killed by the regime, one of them in Sednaya. Mazhar is the uncle of the well-known activist Yahya Shorbaji.[15]

6. Accounts of returnees from Türkiye to Syria

6.1 Return to Daraya, outskirts of Damascus (Reef Dimashq province)

Mazhar Shorbaji, architect and former mayor of Daraya, returned from Gaziantep, Türkiye, where he served as office manager in the Local Government Councils Department of LACU. He was arriving for his third visit to Syria on June 15th to assess conditions in his city and to inspect his home. "I came to see if I can repair my house and resume normal life," he said, explaining that most Syrians returning from Türkiye head directly to their homes and properties, provided they are still standing. "Everyone who returns checks the condition of their home first," he said. "However, many families are postponing their return due to destroyed schools, distant educational facilities, and limited health care access, with private clinics being prohibitively expensive". These sectors remain severely damaged.

[13] https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/nearly-30-syrians-want-go-home-up-almost-zero-un-refugee-chief-says-2025-01-25/

[14] https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-needs-intensify-400-000-syrians-return

[15] https://creativememory.org/chronology/yahya-shurbaji/

Despite the challenges, Shorbaji estimates that many hundreds of thousands of Syrians have returned from Türkiye, mainly to Aleppo, Latakia and rural Damascus, mostly areas of relative stability, he says.

“But if someone has no home, how can they return? Unless they have the means to rent or support from abroad”. The main obstacles, according to Shorbaji, include the lack of access to education, basic services and health care, as all of these sectors remain severely damaged. Still, he acknowledged signs of improvement. “Electricity used to be available for only two hours a day; now it’s eight”, Shorbaji said, but warned that continued international sanctions posed a serious threat to reconstruction, particularly in sectors such as health and education.

“The medical city in Daraya is completely destroyed,” he said. “If sanctions aren’t lifted, no one will fund rebuilding schools or hospitals. We’re worried about SWIFT restrictions and aid transfers from Europe. That’s what could hold everything back.” Shorbaji also noted that some families, especially those with children in Turkish schools or universities, are waiting until exams are completed before returning. “Usually the father visits first, checks the house and starts repairs, as it’s often not ready yet for the whole family.”

While recent geopolitical tensions, such as clashes between Iran and Israel, have caused some anxiety, they haven’t stopped people from returning. According to *The Syria Report* on June 17th, over 1.3 million internally displaced people and 577,000 refugees have returned since late 2024, though a broader return remains constrained by funding gaps and ongoing security concerns.[16]

A car carrying all belongings enters Syria from Turkey through the Once pinar border crossing – Bab Al-Salama, June 27, 2025

[16] https://syria-report.com/six-months-after-fall-of-assad-return-of-idps-and-refugees-advances/

6.2 Return to Homs, Central Syria from Gaziantep: The extended family

Immediately after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, on December 10th, the author entered Syria via its northern border and traveled to the city of Homs with a Syrian colleague. His extended family, originally from Palmyra in eastern Homs province, owns three homes in Homs that had been confiscated by regime loyalists, known as *Shabeeha*, who had even continued to threaten them through WhatsApp.

Their first stop was to visit one of the houses for the first time since fleeing, just before Assad's forces took control. Most of the family had initially escaped to the Rukban camp in eastern Syria, which was later besieged and starved by regime forces. The women eventually fled to Idlib under UN protection in 2019, before relocating to areas controlled by the Syrian National Army (SNA). Later most of the family fled to Türkiye, after two men were killed in an explosion in Mabrouka, near Ra's Al-Ayn, by the PKK/SDF (Kurdistan Working Party/Syrian Democratic Forces). While the men, at risk of arrest, were smuggled north.

Upon their return to Homs, a small ceremony was held. One of the men, now a middle rank commander in the SNA, was accompanied by fellow soldiers to help reclaim the properties. However, the houses were in poor condition, and during the author's visit, she overheard a phone conversation between one of the brothers and a *Shabeeha* member who had yet to return to one of the homes. Despite these challenges, the entire family returned from Gaziantep in March 2025. "We're renting homes until ours can be renovated," one sister told the author.

While one family member had been promoted to a middle rank position in the Ministry of Defense, others had resumed their businesses or were trying to set up one. The children, however, had not yet started school. "They can't read or write Arabic," one mother explained. "We have a private tutor who comes to the house every day to teach them, so they can eventually go to school here." Unlike many destroyed towns and villages, Homs still has functioning schools.

Ten-year-old Ahmad told the author: "We wish there were parks and clean streets like in Türkiye, but we're very happy to be back in our country. I'm taking private lessons, I'm learning Arabic and English." When asked what she missed most from Gaziantep, an eight-year-old girl replied, "In Türkiye, there was Sankopark, amusement parks, clean streets, bicycles, my school friends, the beach, everything," her eleven-year-old brother added, "I don't have school here or friends like I had in Türkiye. There were playgrounds, trips, and fun things. Here, there's nothing. But I play on my bike in the street, and I love amusement parks."

Despite the difficulties, the children said they were glad to be in Syria, where everyone speaks Arabic. "I feel relaxed here. I'm happy and free, I can do what I want," the brother said. The worsening situation for Syrians in Gaziantep had pushed many families to return. Residence permits were being denied, and people were afraid to leave their homes for fear of arrest or deportation. On December 8th, police even prevented Syrians from publicly celebrating Assad's fall.

"In Türkiye, Arabic was forbidden. Here we're taking Arabic and English lessons so we can understand when we go to school," the brother explained. This language gap is a widespread concern. A Syrian mother from a town in Idlib province, now living in the Netherlands with five children, said: "My children, including my sixteen-year-old, can't read or write Arabic. If we returned to Syria, he'd have to sit in a class with six-year-olds."

6.3 Still Weighing the Return – Work

In Damascus, the author came across Ahmad, whom she knew from Gaziantep, where he once ran a film company and worked with the UN. He had already shut down his business after years of decline. “I’m still looking,” he said. “Renting an apartment here, including services, isn’t cheap, at least $750 a month, and most landlords want a full year’s rent paid upfront. Moving from Türkiye to Syria costs at least $2,000. It’s not an easy decision.”

Single men, in particular, face unique barriers. While heads of families are allowed to travel from Türkiye to Syria up to three times before making a final decision to return, single men are excluded from this option, at least according to several sources the author talked to in Istanbul.

Take Mohamed, for example, originally from Aleppo. He has lived in Istanbul for more than a decade, working to support his parents and sisters back home. “I want to visit Aleppo,” he said, “but I can’t. If I leave Istanbul, I won’t be able to take care of them anymore.” When he first arrived in Türkiye, Mohamed had so little money on him that he was forced to sleep rough in public parks. Two years ago, after 10 years apart, he was finally able to bring his parents and eldest sister to Istanbul on a visa via Beirut. “It was the best 10 days of my life,” Mohamed recalled. A year later, his father passed away.

When asked if he considered returning to Syria, Mohamed replied: “I can’t earn enough money there. I’d like to visit, but for me, it’s a one-way trip.” Mohamed now books hotels and tours for Arab tourists in Istanbul, but since October 7th, business has plummeted. “Rising prices in Türkiye and growing racism toward Arabs have deterred many visitors, and the Iran–Israel war has further reduced tourism”, Mohamed explains. Flights have been canceled, and Mohamed’s income is shrinking. “I would really like to visit my family in Aleppo,” he said, “but I can’t.”

The popular Falafel House in Istanbul is one of many Levantine food restaurants in Istanbul that employs a significant number of Syrians. The owner is a Palestinian, originally from Hebron. Syrians can easily connect with Arab tourists, much more easily than Turkish staff. One of the employees had previously told the author that he had tried to reach Europe but had already been arrested by the Turks on the coast near Izmir about two years ago. “I lost all my money, and now back to square one.” In April, he showed the author a video of his neighborhood in Deir Ezzor and pointed out the location of his house. “It's all destroyed; I have nothing to return to.”

Other single Syrian men in Istanbul echo his concerns. Ahmad, who works in a travel agency downtown, told the author, “We’d love to visit, but it’s too early to return. There’s still not enough electricity, and reconstruction hasn’t progressed enough.”

In a Türk Telekom store on Istiklal Street, in June, the author spoke with a young Syrian from Homs who had just returned from a visit. “I have a Turkish passport, so I can go back and forth,” he explained. “I want to return to Syria, but I haven’t got my life together yet.”

A Kurdish Syrian from a village near Bulbul, in the northern district of Afrin, who works at a Turkcell store in central Istanbul, told the author in September that they might return to their village next week. “My parents live in Homs, but we own land and a house in Afrin. So far, we haven't been able to get the house, but it seems we will soon. We also had a house in Homs, where my parents live. I fled to Türkiye.”

“Many Syrians left”, a taxi driver in Mersin told the author at the end of August. “Reasons why Syrians leave are also the costs of living here, the rents are very expensive, sometimes more expensive than in Istanbul”, a Levantine Arabic speaking Turkish woman, a shop owner in Mersin,

said. “And the costs of living have become very expensive, Mersin used to be cheap for Syrians, but that is no longer the case. So, they decided to go to Syria”, she added.

“We're not going back because of our studies,” two brothers sitting near the beach in the evening in Mersin told the author. They came from Aleppo. A friend of theirs from Homs said, “The situation isn’t favorable for me to go back yet; I have work here.”. “We're hearing from people that the situation is really difficult,” one of the brothers from Aleppo said, “and we hear that some regretted going back, a few have even returned to Mersin.”

On a bus in Mersin, a woman wearing a niqab took a seat next to the author. “You don't plan to return to Syria?”, the author asked. “No, we're from Deir Hafer, in eastern Aleppo, and the SDF is shelling the city. It's not safe enough for us to return. And I myself am from Raqqa, where the SDF is. We can’t return to my city for similar reasons.”

The woman raised an important point: the Syrians, primarily Arabs from the eastern provinces of Deir Ezzor, Raqqa and Hasaka, but also Kurds who fled the YPG (People’s Defense Unit)/SDF’s practices, cannot safely return. Also, Kurds who fled ISIS in Kobani, still won’t return, due to forced conscription and child abductions in PYD (Democratic Union Party) areas.[17] We’re talking about hundreds of thousands in Türkiye primarily in the southern provinces, such as Şanlıurfa and others.

7. The situation in June – July

7.1 The situation at the Öncü Pınar / Bab Al-Salama border crossing in June and July

When the author arrived at Gaziantep Airport early on June 27th, three buses reserved for Syrians heading to the Öncü Pınar / Bab Al-Salama border crossing were parked outside, each carrying around 30 passengers, mostly from Damascus and Aleppo. All of them were returning to Syria for good; one family had even traveled from London *en route* to Damascus. Although she considered taking one of the buses, the author was told they would arrive late in Kilis, where passengers had to arrange their own transport to the crossing. At the border, the scene was significantly busier than before the fall of Assad: long lines of people and vehicles, trucks loaded with Turkish cement, and lorries piled high with the belongings of Syrian families returning home.

Hoping to speak with an official, the author waited 15 minutes before being introduced by her driver, who also happened to be a military leader from Tel Rifaat. The official, while noting that accurate figures were only available from the migration office in Damascus, estimated that approximately 1,000 Syrians were crossing daily through Öncü Pınar / Bab al-Salama to return permanently, making it now the busiest return point in the country.

In a lunchroom in Gümüşsuyu, Istanbul, at the end of July, Ahmad, originally from Aleppo, told the author that he wanted to wait a bit longer, because the situation in Aleppo wasn't favorable enough for a return: there’s no work, and services, such as supply of electricity, aren't adequate. But the lack of work was the main reason he hadn’t returned yet. Other Syrian men working in the lunchroom have similar stories, they were also mostly from Aleppo or Damascus.

[17] https://www.harmoon.org/en/researches/pyd/

“Syria’s new interim government struggles financially. For months, it was unable to pay its employee salaries, and members of the state security forces were funded by private donations, Mazhar Shorbaji says. The architect shared that, in his hometown of Daraya, displaced people returning to Syria wanted to join the new security force. “We created a WhatsApp group with long-time residents who had fled to Germany and other countries. Everyone donated, and we raised $66,000.”

At the time of writing, the new Syrian state is again able to pay its employee salaries, as a result of new customs duties and increased tax revenue. “For example, a one-time $1,000 payment is required for every used car crossing into Syria”, Shorbaji says. He noted in April that old public sector employees, such as clerks and professors, are receiving around $40, the same as they did under Assad, while new officials are paid at least $100.

8. Syrians who regret returning

South of Aleppo, July. The author overheard two young Syrian men in a parking place speaking Turkish among each other. “*Ben gidiyorum*”, “I am leaving” one of them said. Striking up a conversation, the author learned that one of the men was from Manbij. Ali had fled ISIS and couldn’t return home later on because of the YPG militia’s control. He had spent the last ten years with his family in Bursa. The other young man, Hasan, hailed from Idlib.

“I returned six months ago, right after Bashar al-Assad fell,” Ali said. “And I came back two months ago,” Hasan added. “Do you have any regrets?” the author asked. “Yes,” Ali said, pointing to a factory in the distance. “I work there, my salary is so low, just 200 dollars a month, you can’t do anything with that. I’m going back to Türkiye.” *But can you return?* “Yes, I have relatives in Bursa.” *When are you leaving?* “Next month.”

“I’m leaving too, for the same reason, wages are too low. You can’t survive on this,” Hasan said, “I’ll go in two months.”

9. Latest statistics of returnees from Türkiye

Over May-June alone, approximately 23,000 Syrians returned to their home country, increasing the total number of returnees from approximately 250,000 to approximately 273,000. By mid-June 2025 more than 273,000 Syrians had voluntarily returned from Türkiye since December 8th, 2024. UNHCR estimates that approximately 700,000 people in total will return from Türkiye by the end of 2025.

This positive trend is equally observed in the return of internally displaced people within Syria. An estimated 1.2 million internally displaced people have come back to their areas of origin since the end of November 2024. Unfortunately, some new displacements have also taken place, for example following the latest violent events in Suwayda.

By 7th September, Turkish newspaper *Daily Sabah* quoted Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya who said that 474,018 Syrian Nationals returned to their country from Türkiye after December 8th, 2024.[18]

9.1 Breakdown per border crossing

A break down per border crossing from Türkiye

Turkish authorities have not published their monthly border gate specific statistics beyond March. These are projections based on trends observed during December-March. The return may be influenced by seasonal patterns (e.g. summer school holidays, high school or university exams, changes in Türkiye's internal policies, or emerging security conditions in Syria).

Bordergate (Türkiye)	Province	Returns Dec 2024 – Mar 2025	Extrapoled to Mid June
Cilvegözü/Bab Al-Hawa	Hatay	~ 87,867	~ 164,000
Öncüpınar/Bab Al-Salama	Kilis	~ 63,532	~ 119,000
Yayladağı/Kasab	Hatay	~ 10,151	~ 19,000
Zeytindalı/Hamam	Hatay	~ 5,410	~ 10,000
Karkamış/Jarabulus	Gaziantep	~ 7,127	~ 13,000
Akçakale/Tel Abyad*	Şanlıurfa	~ 1,425	~ 2,500

Cilvegözü/Bab Al-Hawa clearly led throughout: it dominated December and remained the busiest up until March. Öncü Pınar / Bab Al-Salama saw rapid growth in January – March, matching Cilvegözü / Bab Al-Hawa in cumulative totals by mid-March. In June a border crossing official told the author that Öncüpınar /Bab Al-Salama was by now the busiest border crossing with 1,000 per day returning.

Smaller gates such as Yayladağı/Kasab, Zeytindalı/Hamam, Karkamış/Jarabulus and Akçakale/Tel Abyad contributed with modest but non-negligible shares. These patterns align with Turkish Interior Ministry and Migration reports covering core return.

*For the Tel Abyad/Raqqa border crossing, which means the SNA area that remains isolated from the rest of the country, as it is completely surrounded by the SDF within Syria. From there, the only way to Aleppo, Hama, Homs or Damascus etcetera is by smuggling. According to Syrians who have taken this route, the smugglers charged USD 500 in April.

[18] https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/nearly-half-a-million-return-to-post-assad-syria-from-turkiye/news

10. The situation 15 September at the Öncü Pınar / Bab Al-Salama border crossing

When the author entered Syria for the fourth time on September 15th, after the fall of Bashar al-Assad, the number of Syrians at the border crossing was lower than in June and July. After asking several Syrians, I learned that the number of returnees had indeed decreased slightly.

11. Conclusion

Türkiye has long been the epicenter of the Syrian refugee crisis. At the end of 2024, the country hosted nearly 2,9 million registered displaced people and asylum-seekers from Syria. Since 2017, Syrians have returned to areas such as the countryside of Aleppo, in which Türkiye has helped develop trade zones and built hospitals and schools, as well as to Idlib. However, although numbers were steadily increasing, they remained relatively low for years, as the area was simply too small to absorb millions of returnees.

In recent years, the public mood in Türkiye has changed, becoming less and less welcoming toward Syrian refugees. This played a role in making more Syrians willing to return to their homeland, even if other factors, like job opportunities, remained very limited. The year 2025 has witnessed a sharp increase in the number of returns. The dynamics of the repatriation of Syrian refugees, especially from Türkiye, have undergone a dramatic shift since al-Assad's overthrow. While in the past Syrians could settle in a small strip of land in the countryside of Aleppo in the north, they are now able to go back to their original cities, towns or villages: all of Syria is open to them, with the exception of SDF areas (for many at least) because they have been expelled from their towns (Arabs) or fled forced conscription (Kurds and Arabs) including that of minors. Like the woman from Deir Hafer in the bus in Mersin specified: Syrians from northeastern Syria cannot return safely yet.

As a result of shifting policies and ground realities, this report has documented a consistent and more structured flow of returnees. The post-December 8th landscape shows a complicated but active phase of repatriation, from the increasing numbers of Syrians going through major border crossing like Cilvegözü / Bab al-Hawa and Öncü Pınar / Bab al-Salama to the logistical and social difficulties faced by those returning.

The sustainability of this return movement will ultimately depend on potential improvements in the fields of infrastructure, security, basic services and, most importantly, the availability of employment opportunities for Syrians returnees from abroad. The governorate of Aleppo has thus far received the largest number returnees from Türkiye. Aleppo has emerged as the leading nexus for cross-border movement, given its proximity to key crossings like Cilvegözü in Hatay/Bab Al-Hawa and Öncü Pınar in Kilis/Bab Al-Salama. Syrians entering via Hatay and Kilis overwhelmingly relocate to northern and central governorates, notably Aleppo, Idlib, Homs and Raqqa.

Syrians, who have had their homes destroyed, are mostly not able to move back to Syria from Türkiye. This is because rents are high, especially in Damascus, and there are still limited services available for returnees, even though access to electricity in July had improved significantly compared to May (from 2.3 hours to 9 hours, for example, in central Damascus). However, people are returning and enrolling their children in schools.

From both the dozens of short conversations and in-depth interviews inside Syria and in Istanbul, a clear pattern emerged: returnees with capital or support systems in place are more likely to return to Syria permanently. Those with limited education or low-paying jobs either don’t go back or struggle greatly when they do.

The rapidly increasing rents in Türkiye, in cities like Mersin, also play a role in Syrians’ decision to return, especially for those who own a home in Syria. When it comes to rent, the costs aren't much different in Damascus, for example, but incomes for workers are much higher in Türkiye. Then there are Syrians who fought against Nusra and/or HTS in the past. They won't feel safe in Syria today, where HTS controls the security.

By September 2025, nearly half a million Syrians from Türkiye had returned.

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