

RECONSIDERING 'HOME'

Aspirations and Intentions of Syrians in Belgium
in the Context of Syrian Political Transition

May 2026



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LIST OF ACRONYMS

CATI	Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing
CGRS	Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons
DTM	Displacement Tracking Matrix
EU	European Union
Fedasil	Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers
HLP	Housing, Land and Property
HoH	Head of Household
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IOM	International Organization for Migration
KIs	Key Informants
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer, inclusive of individuals with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, gender expressions and/or sex characteristics who use other terms or no terms to describe themselves
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance

Shelter damage in Aleppo City, Aleppo Governorate.
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Commissioned by IOM Belgium and co-funded by the European Union (EU) and the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (Fedasil), this study examined the mobility intentions of Syrians in Belgium following the change in government in the Syrian Arab Republic (henceforth referred to as Syria) at the end of 2024. This mixed methods study was conducted from October to December 2025 and involved a total of 351 survey respondents and 20 in-depth interviewees.

Most respondents are cautious about return: only 7 per cent intend to return to Syria within the coming year, while 38 per cent envision returning in the medium to long term, contingent on improved conditions in Syria. Among those considering returning in the medium to long term, 46 per cent plan to take a 'wait and see' approach, adjusting their plans in response to ongoing developments in Syria. A further 25 per cent envision their return in two to five years, and another 27 per cent beyond five years.

Safety and security concerns emerged as one of the most decisive factors shaping return intentions. Lack of safety (46%) and instability (33%) were the principal deterrents cited by respondents, alongside community-specific and personal fears. Reconstruction of housing, resolution of housing and land issues, and restoration of essential services, such as health care, were also identified as key preconditions for sustainable reintegration.

Individual characteristics influence overall return intentions. Year of arrival in Belgium emerged as a key factor, with 46 per cent of respondents who arrived before 2020 intending to return to Syria, compared to 27 per cent of those who arrived between 2020 and 2025. Longer-settled cohorts appear to have attained relative stability that enables them to consider return, while more recent arrivals are more likely to experience precarious living conditions, particularly in terms of housing and legal status, and may have exhausted the resources that enabled their migration while facing barriers to labour market entry, all of which act as deterrents to return. As such, integration in Belgium and voluntary return are not competing objectives. Rather, stability in the host country may provide individuals with the agency and confidence needed to make voluntary and informed decisions about their future, including return.

When asked about return-related policy measures, respondents expressed limited interest in organized return schemes offering financial incentives, viewed as both premature and insufficient to influence return decisions. Only 30 per cent of respondents who do not hold Belgian citizenship view them favourably. Financial incentives alone are unlikely to drive voluntary return decisions at this stage.

In contrast, more than half of the respondents expressed an interest in undertaking temporary 'go-and-see' visits (57%) that would enable them to assess conditions in Syria first-hand

without jeopardising their legal status in Belgium, or in returning in stages (52%). Flexible, cross-border arrangements that allow circular mobility and the maintenance of socioeconomic ties to Belgium could play an important role, enabling informed planning without placing family members at risk.

Finally, these findings point to the importance of recognising the Syrian population in Belgium as a diverse group with widely varying profiles, experiences, and conditions when designing return and reintegration support. Around half of the survey respondents reported that they do not see return as a viable option (48%). Among them were at-risk groups, including religious and ethnic minorities, highlighting the need for sustained protection in Belgium, regardless of evolving conditions in Syria.

Based on these findings, the [Conclusion and key messages](#) section of this report presents ten key messages on the factors shaping return intentions among Syrians in Belgium:

1

Return intentions are shaped by individual and family circumstances

2

Voluntary and informed engagement requires trust-based, community-rooted approaches

3

Large-scale voluntary return from Belgium is unlikely in the near future

4

Integration in Belgium and voluntary return to Syria are not competing objectives

5

Improvements in safety are a precondition of return

6

Restoration of essential services and resolution of housing, land and property issues influence the sustainability of return

7

Flexible return arrangements can mitigate the risks associated with return

8

Temporary and unconditional visits could support informed decision-making

9

Diversified support beyond financial incentives could support sustainable reintegration

10

At-risk groups who are unlikely to return voluntarily require continued protection

INTRODUCTION

Since the shift in power in Damascus on 8 December 2024, Syria has entered a critical transition period characterised by evolving political and humanitarian dynamics.¹ While authorities in Syria have shifted and active hostilities have decreased in some areas, the situation remains fluid and unpredictable. These developments are reshaping patterns of mobility with important implications for the intentions and needs of the affected populations in Syria and host countries.

In response to the evolving context, IOM has launched a multi-country initiative to generate robust and timely primary data on the mobility intentions of Syrians who arrived in the European Union (EU) following the onset of the 2011 civil war, aiming to inform evidence-based policies and reassess intentions over time. This report presents findings from Syrians interviewed in Belgium. It provides insight into the situation of Syrians in the country and an analysis of their current and future mobility intentions, focusing on the reasons, barriers and needs underpinning their decisions.

Although the findings are non-representative of the Syrian population in Belgium due to the purposive selection of respondents (see [Annex I. Methodology](#)), cross-cutting trends and meaningful differences across different profiles emerge, providing useful insights into return-related decisions of Syrians living in Belgium. All quotes in this report are extracts from the qualitative interviews conducted as part of this research.

DYNAMICS OF SYRIAN DISPLACEMENT AND RETURN MOVEMENTS

The 14 years of conflict in Syria, sparked in 2011 by civil unrest that emerged in the context of the Arab Spring, caused one of the most complex displacement crises worldwide. As of December 2025, over 11.6 million Syrians remained displaced, including 5.96 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Syria ([IOM, 2026a](#)) and 5.65 million refugees and asylum-seekers abroad ([UNHCR, 2026a](#)).

¹ On January 2025, Ahmad al-Sharaa, leader of the Islamist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, was appointed transitional president of Syria, and a transitional administration was created. In March 2025, a Constitutional Declaration was signed, launching a five-year transitional phase. It introduced a presidential system with extensive powers, designated Islam as the president's religion and Islamic jurisprudence as the main legislative source and affirmed judicial independence and certain freedoms. Two national commissions – the National Commission for Transitional Justice and the National Commission for the Missing – were also created. Simultaneously, in May 2025, the United Kingdom, the United States and the European Union administrations lifted or eased several sanctions on Syria ([EUAA, 2025a](#)).

An IDP currently residing with his family in Al Rayyan camp in Idlib, where ECHO supported water trucking, solid waste management and desludging activities. © IOM 2026/May Mahmoud

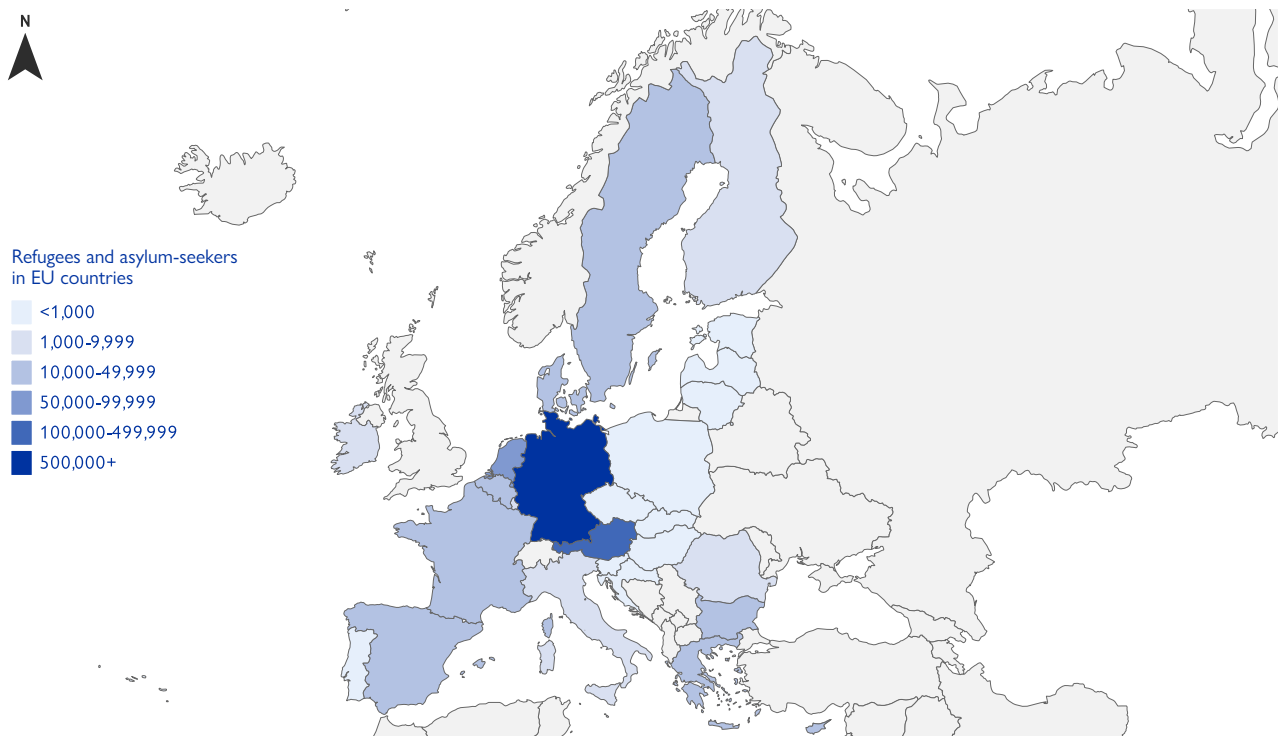


Most Syrians who fled since 2011 remained in the neighbouring countries of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the Republic of Türkiye (henceforth referred to as Türkiye),² while around one in five moved to countries in the EU.³ Secondary movements to the EU from third countries were triggered by various factors, including the prolongation of the Syrian conflict, legal uncertainties, worsening living conditions, and diminished access to essential services in host countries (IOM, 2025a). As of December 2025, around 1.19 million Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers were living in the EU, most of whom were residing in Germany (64%), Austria (10%) and Sweden (7%) (UNHCR, 2026a).

However, new irregular arrivals of Syrian nationals to Europe by sea or land declined significantly since the power shift in December 2024 (from 21% of the total arrivals in 2024 to 3% in 2025), with only 3,506 crossings recorded along the Eastern Mediterranean Route and 1,326 along the Central Mediterranean Route between January and December 2025 (IOM, 2025b; IOM, 2026b).⁴ This trend is also reflected in the number of asylum applications. For the last decade, Syrians have been the most common nationality of asylum-seekers in

the EU+,⁵ with over 71,000 applications between January and June 2024 (EUAA, 2024; EUAA, 2026). In 2025, the number of claims fell to 25,000 applications during the first half of the year, representing a 65 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2024 (EUAA, 2026). The shift appears to reflect both developments in Syria and changes in asylum policies in several EU+ countries. In December 2024, most EU+ countries (fully or partially) suspended processing Syrian asylum applications to gain more clarity on the situation in Syria. Processing of claims resumed in the second half of 2025, though some conditionality has been applied, and claimants must prove to be at risk of serious harm if they return to Syria (EUAA, 2025b). At the same time, Syria's worsening economic situation, shaped by the impacts of prolonged conflict and international sanctions, has made it increasingly difficult to move abroad. These challenges are further compounded by stricter border controls along migration routes, creating additional strains for those seeking refuge in Europe. Please refer to the [Annual Global Overview of Migration Routes 2025](#) for the latest comprehensive overview on routes to Europe.

Map 1. Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in EU countries (as of November 2025)

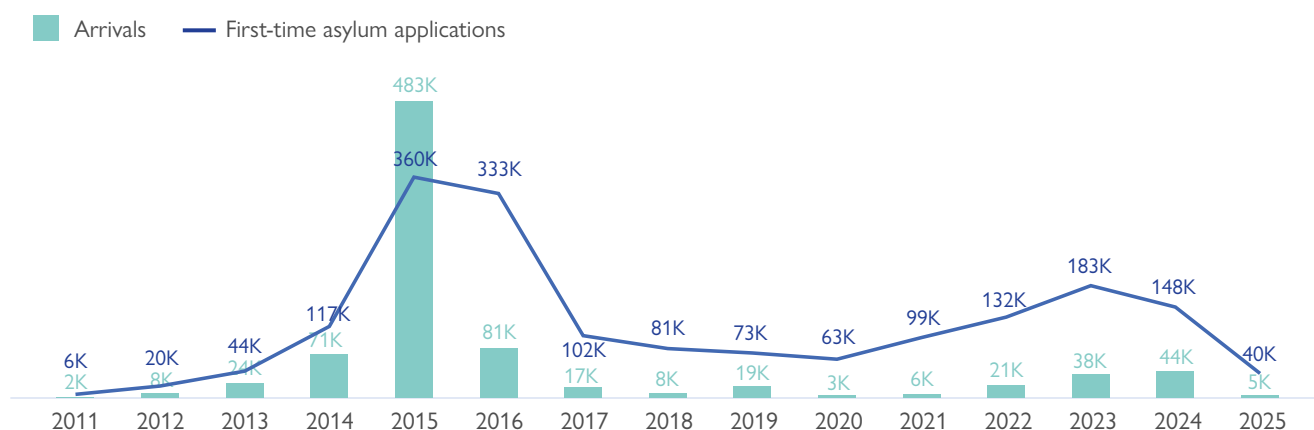


This map is for illustration purposes only. Names and boundaries on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.

Source: UNHCR, 2026a (accessed March 2026).

- As of December 2025, Türkiye hosted approximately 2.65 million Syrians, while Lebanon hosted 716,312, Jordan 511,177, and Iraq 301,670 (UNHCR, 2026a).
- Migration flows to Europe unfolded mainly along the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkans route and reached the peak of approximately 476,000 arrivals in 2015, coinciding with an intensification of violence in Syria and significant regional policy changes. Following the 2016 EU–Türkiye statement, migration along these routes declined substantially, with figures fluctuating between 63,000 and 183,000 (IOM, 2017).
- These figures capture irregular crossings along monitored routes only and do not reflect the full picture of Syrian arrivals to Europe, which also include regular pathways such as resettlement, humanitarian admission, and family reunification, which have similarly been affected by the shifting political and security situation in Syria.
- EU+ refers to the 27 European Union Member States, plus Norway, Iceland, Switzerland and Lichtenstein.

Figure 1. Arrivals of Syrian nationals by sea and land to Europe and first-time asylum applications by Syrian nationals (2011–2025)

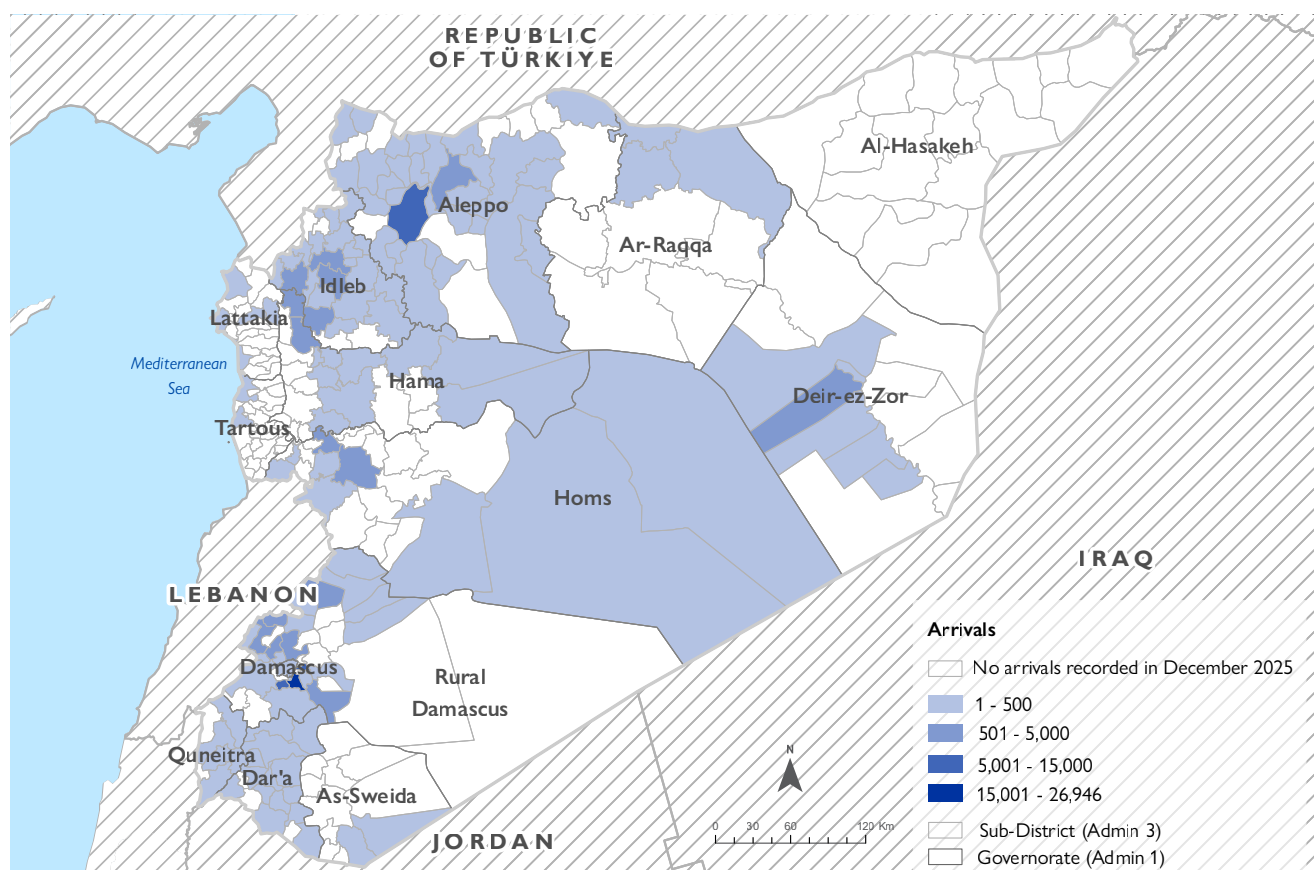


Note: Arrivals data from 2015 onwards are compiled by IOM's DTM Europe from national authorities, while data from 2011–2014 are from Frontex. Data are unavailable for the Western Mediterranean Route for 2015 and 2016. Data on first-time asylum applications in EU-27 countries are from Eurostat. Trends in arrival numbers and first-time asylum applications do not always correlate due to delayed onward movements and lags in application processing times.

Since the change in authorities in December 2024, Syria has witnessed intensified population movements, with a total of 2.98 million returns as of December 2025. This figure includes 1.91 million IDP returnees and over 1.07 million arrivals from abroad, together accounting for nearly 11 per cent of Syria's total population (IOM, 2026a). Between December 2024 and

December 2025, the majority of returns from abroad occurred from neighbouring countries – primarily from Türkiye (44%), Lebanon (28%) and Jordan (10%) (IOM, 2026c). Few returns were reported from EU countries, accounting for only 2 per cent of total returns from abroad in December 2025 (IOM, 2026a; 2026c).

Map 2. Overview of newly recorded arrivals from abroad in Syria, by sub-district (December 2025)



This map is for illustration purposes. The boundaries and names shown and the designation used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by IOM.

Source: IOM, 2026a.

Key informants (KIs) in Syria consistently cited improved security conditions as a primary factor influencing individuals' decisions to return across all governorates of reception, and while the number of returnees has increased, conditions for safe, dignified, and sustainable reintegration are not yet uniformly met across the country (IOM, 2026a). Likewise, the EU Agency for Asylum (EUAA), though indicating improvements in security conditions inside Syria, continues to maintain a cautious position regarding access to services and humanitarian conditions in Syria (EUAA, 2025a). In January 2026, Magnus Brunner, the European Commissioner for Home Affairs and Migration, indicated that large-scale returns are premature as Syria "is not yet safe under European Union rules" (ANHA, 2026). The EU and its member states are increasingly supporting the voluntary return of Syrians with financial aid and reintegration packages that include cash grants of varying amounts, travel arrangements, and post-arrival aid. The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees reported a significant rise in voluntary returns to Syria with nearly 6,000 applications between January and December 2025 (The Syrian Observer, 2026).

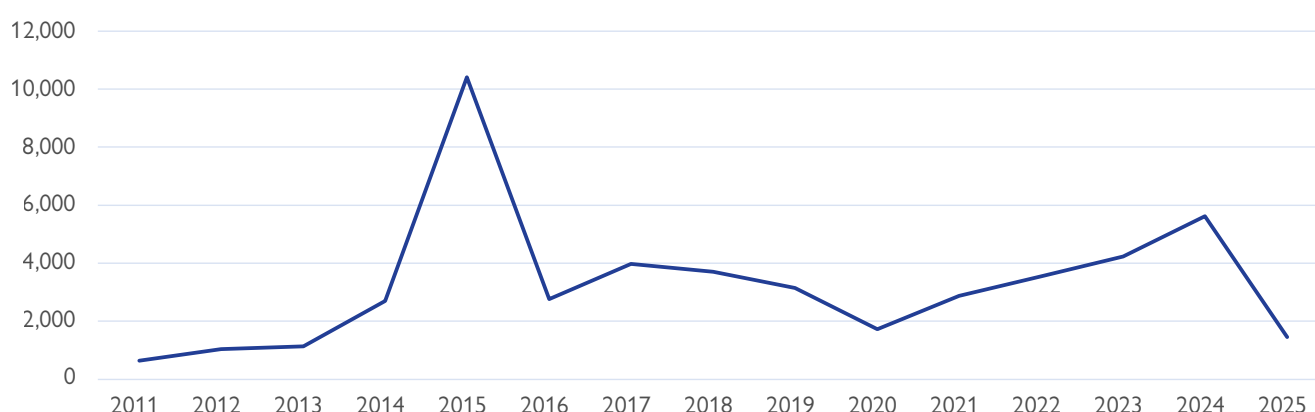
In addition to the developments related to the political transition, the security conditions in Syria, and the availability of return

options in EU countries, return dynamics are also influenced by the length of time Syrians have spent abroad, their level of integration, and their residency status in their current countries of residence (McCollum, 2025).⁶ As of June 2025, nearly 111,000 asylum cases of Syrians were pending across EU+ countries (EUAA, 2025b), while nearly one million Syrians held long-term residency, and nearly 400,000 acquired citizenship between 2017 and the end of 2023 (Eurostat, 2026a).⁷

SYRIANS IN BELGIUM

The presence of Syrians in Belgium is relatively recent. Prior to 2011, around 5,000 individuals of Syrian origin were residing in the country. Between 2011 and 2017, arrivals increased, peaking in 2015 at close to 11,000, and were largely comprised of individuals applying for asylum independently, with a smaller share arriving through resettlement or relocation programmes (Vause and Schoumaker, 2020). Many had previously resided in Türkiye, Lebanon or Jordan.⁸ Following the political changes in 2024, asylum applications dropped below 1,500 in 2025, representing a 174 per cent decrease compared to 2024 (IBZ, 2026).

Figure 2. Number of asylum requests of Syrians in Belgium (2011–2025)



Source: IBZ, 2026.

Note: The number of asylum requests refers to the number of persons who have submitted an application for international protection (first and subsequent) or who have been included in such an application as a family member.

The demographic composition of Syrian migrants and refugees in Belgium has evolved significantly over time. In 2015, the year of peak arrivals, adult men represented nearly half of asylum applicants (47% compared with 20% of adult women), while

children under the age of 18 accounted for approximately one third of applicants. By 2017, the share of adult women (28%) and, notably, young people (40%) had increased, indicating a shift towards family-based migration and family reunification.⁹

6 Directive 2011/95/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 13 December 2011 lays out standards of protection, but it is a non-binding rule, and it is up to each country to incorporate them into its own laws, so there are differences among Member States (Directive 2011/95).

7 For specific insights on the intentions and perspectives of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe, please refer to the UNHCR online survey report, conducted in May 2025 (UNHCR, 2025a).

8 Since 2013, Belgium has committed to hosting a contingent of vulnerable refugees every year. As part of this programme, and between 2014 and 2019, 2,890 Syrians refugees were resettled in Belgium (Fedasil, n.d.).

9 In 2017, 52 per cent of first residence permits were granted for international protection and 43 per cent for family reasons (versus 70% and 27% respectively in 2015), which includes some children of Syrian origin born in Belgium. The increase in family migration was linked to the more favourable conditions granted to refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection to have their family members joining them in the first year after their recognition. Nevertheless, even if facilitated, reunification remained challenging as family members still had to apply from abroad (Vause and Schoumaker, 2020).

During the second wave of arrivals beginning in 2020, young male migration increased again, peaking at 38 per cent in 2022 (Eurostat, 2026b). In parallel, the number of unaccompanied and separated children has grown, with nearly 850 applications submitted for vulnerable Syrian children during the 2023–24 biennium (IBZ, 2025).

During the Syrian conflict, most early Syrian asylum-seekers in Belgium were granted protection, with recognition rates exceeding 90 per cent and access to accelerated asylum procedures (Vause and Schoumaker, 2020). As of January 2025, around 31,000 Syrian nationals held residence permits, the majority granted for refugee status (60%), family reasons (25%) and subsidiary protection (10%) (IBZ, 2024). In December 2025, around 6,000 Syrians had asylum applications pending a first-instance decision in Belgium (Eurostat, 2026c).

Naturalisation rates among Syrians were relatively high across the years compared to other foreign nationals. Between 2011 and 2024, 18,709 Syrian nationals acquired Belgian citizenship through naturalisation or birth (StatBel, 2025). In 2023, the

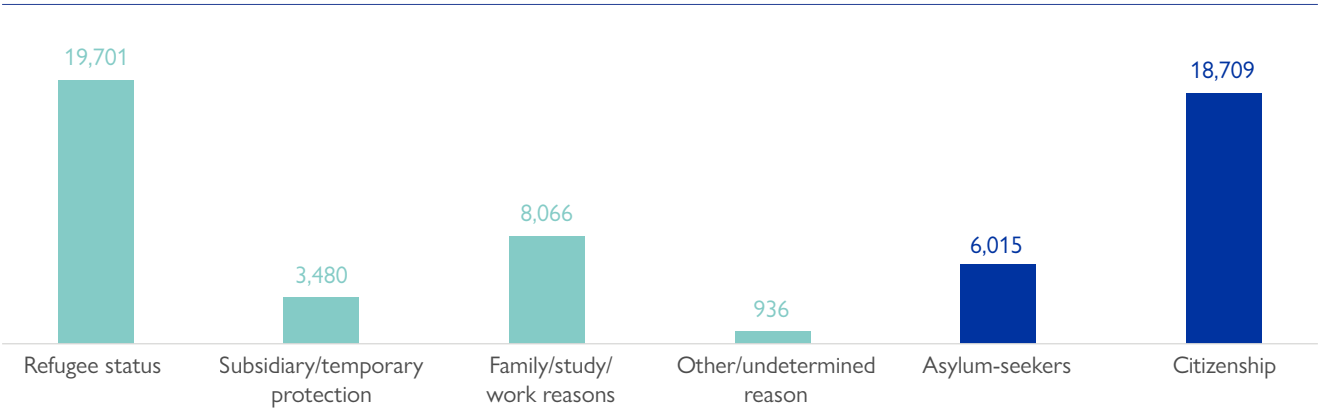
likelihood of acquiring Belgian citizenship was around 13 per cent for Syrians, compared to an average of 3 per cent for all foreign nationals (Myria, 2024). The majority of naturalised Syrians live in Flanders (68%), followed by Brussels (18%) and the Walloon Region (13%) (StatBel, 2025).



The asylum journey is too dangerous to risk with one's family. I actually did take the risk once, in August, with my son. He was 10 at the time. We stayed four days in the mountains in Türkiye, in an area where there were literally no birds, no wild animals – nothing. Four days with almost no food, waiting for a boat – a decent boat. We had an agreement with a smuggler, and in the end, he sent a small rubber boat at 1:30 a.m. They pushed us into it and shoved us off into the sea. Halfway across, the boat sank. We were only saved by God.

Respondent 13, Male, 30–44

Figure 3. Number of valid permits by reason, asylum requests of Syrians and acquisition of Belgian citizenship



Source: Eurostat, 2026d (accessed 9 April 2026); StatBel, 2025.

Note: Data on valid permits (as of January 2025) and asylum requests (as of December 2025) are from Eurostat, which are based on Belgian administrative sources. Data on citizenship are based on StatBel and refer to the 2011–2024 period.

Though protection rates remained high over the years, the recognition of refugee status or the granting of subsidiary protection declined significantly in 2025, falling below 10 per cent between September and November 2025 (EUAA, 2026). This trend reflects broader EU patterns, largely driven by procedural factors, including the suspension of Syrian case processing during the first ten months of 2025 (CGRS, 2025) and the prioritisation of applications from individuals already protected in other EU Member States, which mostly resulted in inadmissibility decisions (EMN, 2026a).¹⁰ In addition, some Syrians decided to withdraw their asylum applications following recent political developments, which could indicate evolving

intentions, such as potential return or secondary movement (EUAA, 2026).

In January 2026, the Belgium Minister of Asylum and Migration announced targeted measures to encourage the voluntary return of Syrian nationals. The initiative includes enhanced reintegration assistance for Syrians choosing to return, including packages of up to 5,000 euros for asylum-seekers and 3,000 euros for Syrians residing irregularly in Belgium. Assistance will be delivered in the country of origin and coordinated with local partner organizations, covering housing, education, health care, and economic activities (EMN, 2026b).

10 Similar to other EU countries, in December 2024, the Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) suspended the processing of Syrian applications and resumed processing them in November 2025.

METHODOLOGY

The study targeted Syrian nationals aged 18 and above who used to live in Syria before 2011 and who subsequently came to live in Belgium. Data were collected between 15 October and 30 December 2025 using a mixed-methods approach, drawing on quantitative phone surveys and in-depth qualitative phone interviews.

In total, 351 adults were surveyed, gaining insights on 1,016 people (the respondents and their family members currently living with them in Belgium), for an average family size of 2.9.¹¹ All surveys were conducted by trained Syrian interviewers, nearly all of whom were women, to ensure

cultural and linguistic sensitivity. For more information on the outreach campaign, sampling and data analysis, please refer to [Annex 1](#).

To contextualise the survey findings and gain further insights into the return-related decision-making, perceived barriers, and motivations, 20 semi-structured interviews were carried out. Efforts were made to ensure diversity across the sample, including both male and female respondents, a range of legal statuses in Belgium, varying age groups, and differing views on return. For more detailed information on the data coding and analysis, please refer to [Annex 1](#).

11 Outreach proved quite difficult in Belgium. In addition to connectivity issues due to the call centre being in Türkiye, which made the 'caller' unidentifiable for respondents in Belgium, a significant share of leads (phone numbers linked to social profiles) were not working. Securing respondent participation proved challenging throughout the data collection period. Response rates reached 46 per cent for surveys and 16 per cent for qualitative interviews. The timing of data collection coincided with a sensitive period, during which discussion around voluntary return measures for Syrian nationals and proposed changes to Belgian nationality regulations were underway, which may have contributed to some hesitancy among potential participants. Different outreach strategies were tested and the ad campaign was regularly adjusted introducing new ad visuals to maintain engagement and broaden outreach.

Some areas remain hard-to-reach, and IOM, with support from ECHO, ensures water provision. © IOM 2026/May Mahmoud



THE SAMPLE: PROFILES OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS (AND THEIR FAMILIES)

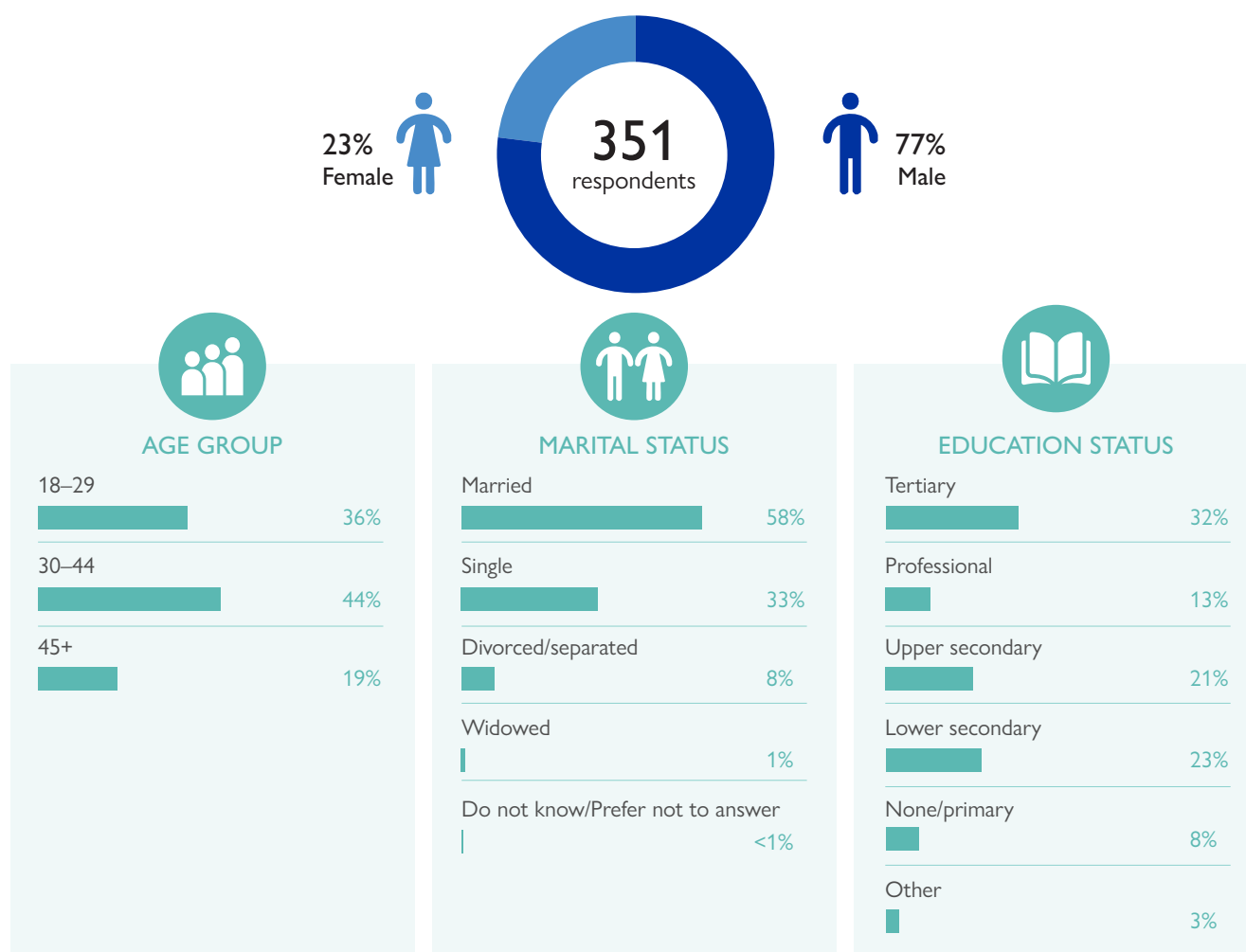
A total of 351 Syrian nationals participated in the survey.¹² The majority of respondents were male (77%) and aged between 18 and 29 years (36%) or 30 and 44 years (44%).¹³ Most respondents were married (58%), around one third were single (33%) and around one in ten were divorced (8%) or widowed (1%). Nearly half of the respondents held tertiary (32%) or post-secondary degrees (13%). Women in the sample displayed higher levels of education (56%) but were less likely to be working (27%) than their male counterparts (42% and 57%, respectively). They were also more likely to be separated or widowed (18% versus 6%) and less likely to be single (25% versus 36%).



We left Syria from Idlib via Türkiye. At the border we suffered a lot. We spent about 40 days between Syria and Türkiye. It was a journey harder than death. There were many attempts, and each time the authorities caught us and sent us back to Idlib. Sometimes they even fired live bullets at us, and once a smuggler died with us. It was a horrific ordeal. After around 11 attempts we succeeded.

Respondent 15, Female, 45+

Figure 4. Respondents' sociodemographic profiles (n = 351)¹⁴



Note: Some percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

¹² The sample included 346 individuals holding Syrian citizenship, and five respondents self-identifying as stateless persons.

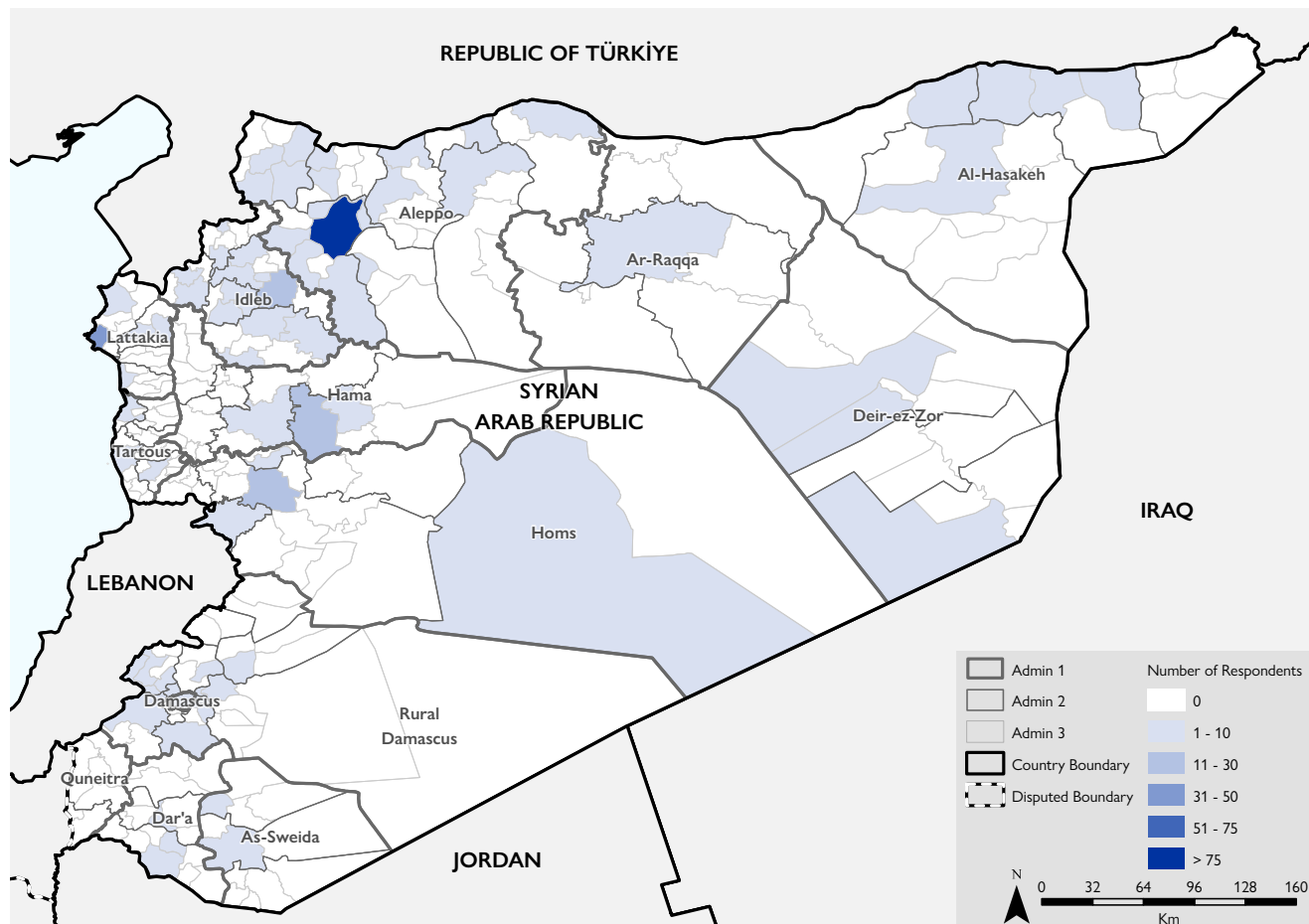
¹³ Soft quotas were set for sex, main age groups and year of arrival of respondents (see Annex 1. Methodology).

¹⁴ The 'n' refers to the number of respondents.

One in two respondents originated from Aleppo (35%, mostly from the two subdistricts of Jebel Saman and Al-Bab) or Idlib (15%, mostly from the two subdistricts of Saraqeb and Idlib

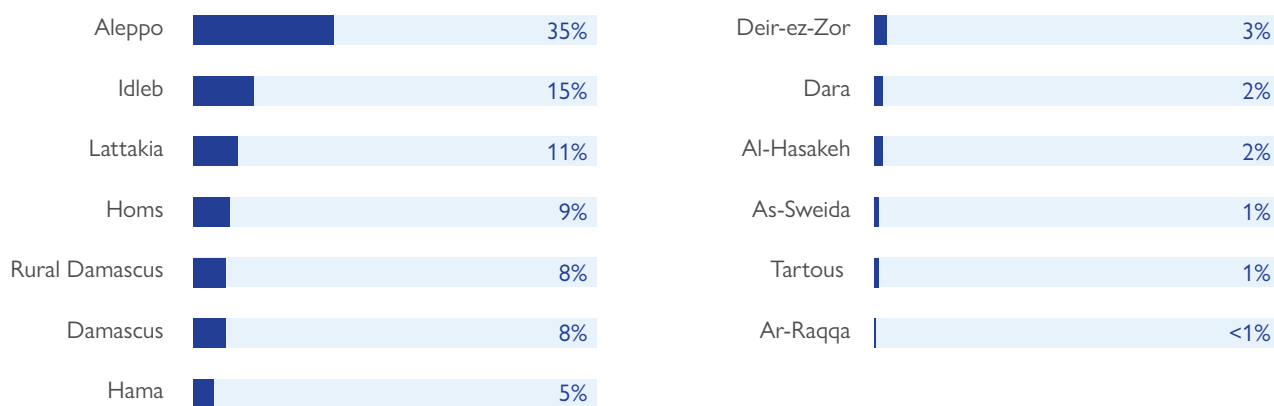
city). The other main governorates of origin are Lattakia (11%), Homs (9%), Rural Damascus (8%), and Damascus (8%).

Map 3. Respondents' sub-districts of origin (n = 351)



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Figure 5. Distribution of respondents by governorate of origin (n = 351)

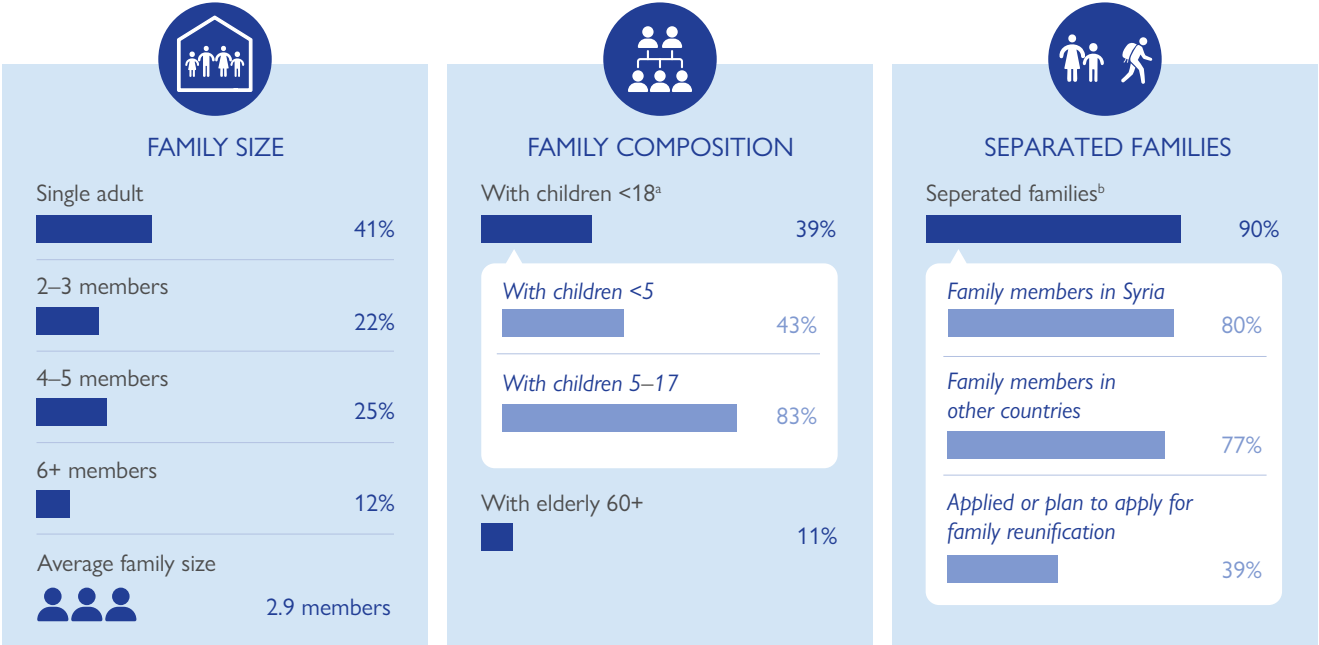


“
I left my children in Syria because the journey was extremely dangerous. It is the same route on which my husband and my brother were killed. My son wanted to leave, but I could not take him with me because he is young and an adolescent, and I was very afraid for him. The journey is also very expensive, and I was not able to take them with me, so I was forced to leave them behind and leave alone because of the recent security harassment that I was subjected to. The hardest thing for me is that I am separated from my children.

Respondent 19, Female, 45+

Respondents collectively represented a total of 1,016 individuals, with an average family size of 2.9 members (compared to an estimated average family size of around 5 members in Syria).¹⁵ Nearly all respondents (90%) indicated that their families were geographically separated. Among them, 80 per cent reported having close family members residing in Syria, and 77 per cent had close family members living in other countries. This pattern is consistent with the high share of single adults and small families present in the sample. Over one in three respondents separated from their families stated that they had applied or planned to apply for family reunification (39%).

Figure 6. Characteristics of respondents’ families (n = 351)



Note: ^a Percentages for families with children do not add up to 39 per cent due to overlapping categories.

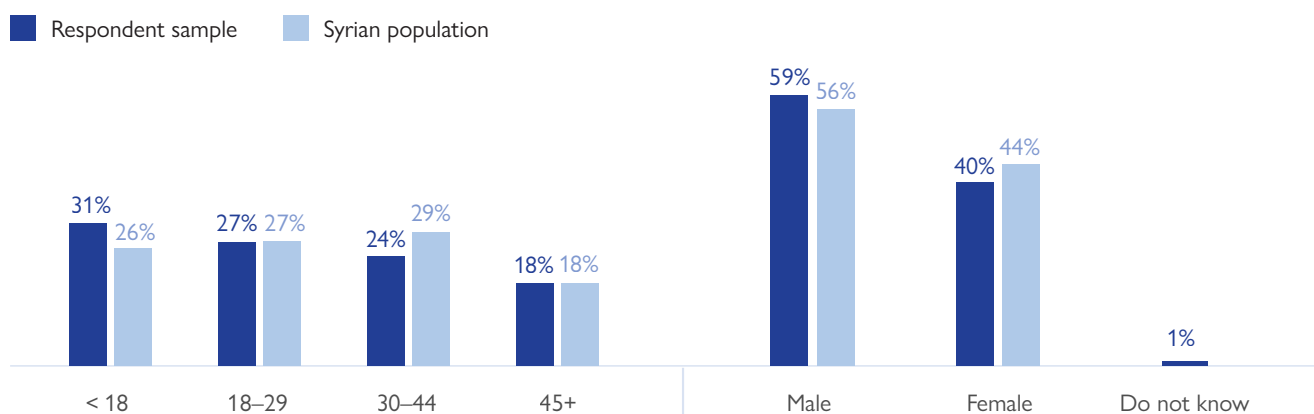
^b Percentages for seperated families do not add up to 90 per cent due to overlapping categories.

15 It is difficult to estimate the current average household size of Syrians. However, several studies and reports on the Syrian population living in host countries tend to report an average of around five members (UNDP, 2025).

Overall, the sample of respondents and their family members appears to broadly align with the demographic structure of the Syrian population in Belgium, though it includes a larger

representation of children under 18 years (31% versus 26% for the broader population of Syrians in Belgium)¹⁶ and a slightly lower share of females (40% versus 44%).

Figure 7. Profile comparison between the sample and the Syrian population in Belgium (n = 1,016)

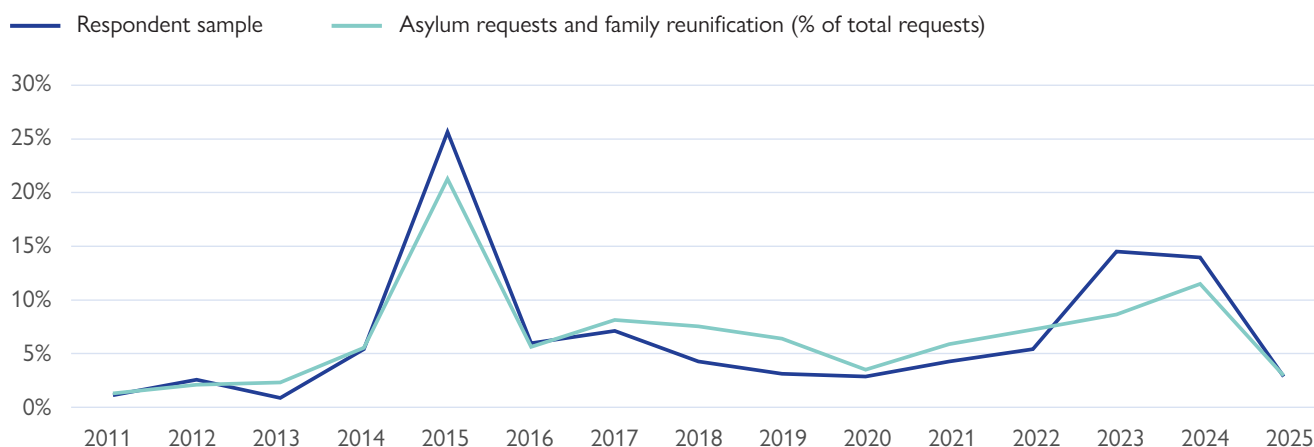


Source: Data shared by StatBel (2026).

The distribution of respondents by year of arrival in Belgium is also largely aligned with national asylum trends, although the sample includes a higher proportion of individuals who

arrived during the 2015 peak and slightly more recent arrivals, particularly between the 2023–2024 biennial.

Figure 8. Year of arrival in Belgium of survey respondents compared to the overall Syrian population in Belgium (n = 351)



Source: Data shared by StatBel (2026).

Respondents live throughout the country, with over half (53%) residing in the five largest cities: Antwerp, Gent, Charleroi, Brussels and Liège. Around one third (32%) live in smaller cities and towns, while 15 per cent live in rural areas. The levels of socioeconomic integration broadly reflect the period of arrival in Belgium. A more established cohort, comprising individuals who arrived between 2011 and 2015, tends to demonstrate higher levels of integration: most acquired Belgian citizenship (75%), live in either owned (20%) or rented housing (76%),

possess post-secondary or tertiary education (53%), and are economically active (63%). A relatively settled cohort of those who arrived between 2016 and 2019 shows mixed legal status, with 46 per cent holding Belgian citizenship and 39 per cent holding other types of residence permits. The majority live in stable housing (95%), primarily in major cities (64%).

In contrast, individuals who arrived in 2020 or later are more likely to experience precarious living conditions, particularly in terms of housing and legal status. This group is predominantly

¹⁶ The discrepancy is likely due to the inclusion of the Belgian-born Syrians in the family members of the respondents in the sample compared to the population of Syrian origin in Belgium which includes only individuals born in Syria.

composed of single men (55%), many of whom are still in the asylum process (55%). They are more likely to reside in reception centres (20%), social or temporary housing (12%), or to be hosted by others (7%). They also rely more heavily on state support, including daily allowances, accommodation, food, health care and education. Recent arrivals are more likely to work in lower-skilled occupations that do not match

their qualifications (42%), such as cleaning or other forms of low-skilled occupations.¹⁷ These patterns reflect both the expected trajectory of settlement over time and the particular challenges faced by more recent arrivals, who have entered at a time when Belgium's reception system has been under considerable strain.¹⁸

Figure 9. Legal status in Belgium (n = 351)



Box 1. Challenges and precariousness experienced by asylum-seekers

Qualitative findings shed light on the specific challenges that recent arrivals have encountered within the reception system. Some interviewees who were in the process of seeking asylum described extended periods without stable accommodation, particularly single men who do not automatically qualify for a place in a reception centre, as explained by one respondent who shared his experience: *"The hardest thing I faced in Belgium was that after I did the fingerprints, they told me 'you're on your own,' and I was on the street. For ten months, I kept moving from place to place until I secured housing. That period was very hard, very hard because debts piled up on me. It was extremely difficult. Since I'm alone, I didn't qualify for housing. Those with families enter the camp. Those ten months caused me a psychological crisis because of the amounts I borrowed from friends and brothers; it was quite a lot. It cost me \$14,000 to reach Belgium, and after I arrived, during those ten months, I was spending about 700–800 euros per month – just for accommodation, food, drinks and train tickets so I could sleep somewhere"* (Respondent 3, Male, 30–44). For those who were allocated a place in reception centres, the locations of centres frequently posed additional difficulties, especially when situated in rural or peri-urban areas with limited transport connections, far from where employment opportunities, language courses and community networks were concentrated.

17 Around one third of respondents hold Belgian citizenship (36%), nearly one in four hold a residence permit based on family, work, or study reasons (22%), 8 per cent hold refugee status, and 7 per cent have temporary or subsidiary protection. One in four respondents is an asylum-seeker (24%). Most respondents reside in stable housing, either privately rented (68%) or owned (12%). One in five respondents lives in reception centres or social housing (17%) or is hosted by other people (3%). Half are engaged in the labour market (50%). Among those unemployed, 36 per cent are actively seeking work or willing to work, and 41 per cent are enrolled in education. Half of the respondents reported receiving some assistance and/or social benefits from Belgian institutions (50%). For overall figures, refer to Table 2 in Annex 1. Methodology.

18 According to a report published in 2025 by Amnesty International, a persistent shortage of adequate reception capacity has resulted in significant numbers of asylum-seekers, including families, being left without shelter; with disproportionate impacts on those at the earliest stages of the asylum procedure (Amnesty International, 2025).

Box 1. (continued)

The precariousness experienced by recent arrivals has been compounded by significant delays in the processing of asylum claims, as well as by the suspension of Syrian asylum file processing by the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (CGRS) following the change in authorities in December 2024. For interviewees who arrived in 2023 and 2024, this suspension extended waiting periods, in some cases leaving individuals in a state of legal uncertainty: *"For two years I haven't been able to study, work or enrol in vocational training. I had planned, when I arrived, to study and take a professional formation for work. That was my goal. I'm still waiting for documents. I want to study and specialize to work. I came here to be a productive member of society. For Syrians in Belgium, the biggest issue is the lack of documents. My plan was that within a year to a year and a half, I'd be working. I searched for jobs, found some opportunities – but after two years, I only just managed to secure housing, because without papers you lack everything"* (Respondent 2, Male, 18–29).

The psychological dimensions of prolonged uncertainty were raised consistently across qualitative interviews with asylum-seekers. Respondents described chronic anxiety, sleep difficulties, an inability to concentrate on language learning or education, and a sense of stalled lives: *"We're exhausted, honestly. I feel neither here nor there. This isn't a life. You can't travel; even with money, no one rents to you. If you work 'off the books,' they exploit you, pay 6–7 euros when it should be 13–15. I won't work illegally. I'm lawful. I lost many opportunities due to file 'freezes.' I lost a lot professionally, financially, and personally – because of the delays and my unresolved status. Honestly, I just want residency so I can feel like a recognised human being – a citizen, not a number in this country – and start to settle, work, study, and build my future"* (Respondent 6, Female, 30–44).

The reopening of Syrian files, which occurred around the same time as data collection, was welcomed with cautious optimism, given the duration of preceding delays. Several respondents noted that some Syrians had made decisions to leave Belgium during the suspension period, and a few interviewees suggested that for some, this reflected an accumulation of pressures rather than a genuine choice to return: *"Most of those who return to Syria or consider returning are affected by the suspension of the processing of asylum claims. Imagine having a case stuck: you don't get a residence; you don't get anything. There's legal pressure, whether you're in a camp or not. All that creates very strong anxiety, so people end up returning. For me, this is forced return, not voluntary return. We must emphasize that most people returning to Syria today are returning under pressure, even if they sign 'voluntary return' papers"* (Respondent 4, Male, 18–29).

Beyond the challenges faced by those interviewees who had arrived more recently, language acquisition emerged as the most consistently cited challenge, compounded in Belgium by the country's multilingual landscape. Several interviewees described investing considerable time and effort in learning one national language, only to find that a change of region or employment context required learning another, setting them back months, and in some cases, years. Language barriers also directly affected access to employment, with interviewees describing how the combination of language requirements, employer preferences for candidates with established residence, and the practical demands of life in the asylum process placed significant constraints on labour market access.

Qualification recognition presented a further challenge raised across several interviews, particularly for those who had completed higher or professional education in Syria. Respondents who had worked as pharmacists, university lecturers, hospital administrators and school principals described finding that their qualifications were either not recognised or required extensive additional steps before they could be applied in a professional context. The discrepancy between prior qualifications and available opportunities was reported across cohorts, with interviewees describing either being unable to access the labour market entirely or finding only manual or low-skilled work available to them.



"I'm in my thirties, I can't just sit doing nothing. I used to be a manager, supervising staff, evaluating performance, and so on. I was very active. I can't simply sit down now, it exhausts me psychologically if I don't work. I've always done intellectual work, never manual labour. Here they say 'go clean', but honestly, I don't even clean well at home. I can iron trousers and dust, that's my ceiling. I've been comfortable all my life; then the war made things hard, and the hardship continued here."

Respondent 6, Female, 30–44

FUTURE INTENTIONS

“

It [the shift in power] was indescribable! I was so happy. The former regime was the reason for our suffering, our displacement, all the hardship we went through. But now, I honestly don't know where Syria is heading. I have hope that Syria can improve a lot with a new leadership or new system, but I'm also afraid – things are uncertain, unstable. It's not yet ready for people to live there comfortably.

Respondent 11, Female, 18–29

This section examines respondents' future mobility intentions, including potential return to Syria, continued stay in Belgium or moving to a third country. Responses are assessed according to reasons and across different time frames of return, short term (within the next 12 months) and medium to long term (within one to five years or beyond), to better understand who is more likely to return, when and why.

Caution characterises attitudes towards return, despite the change in authorities in Syria. As previously observed in the Netherlands, large-scale voluntary returns from Belgium appear unlikely in the near future, with only 7 per cent of respondents indicating an intention to return within the next 12 months (IOM, 2025c). Over a longer period, however, an additional 38 per cent of respondents expressed a willingness to consider returning to Syria in the medium to long term. The timing of potential returns remains contingent on conditions in Syria, with 46 per cent of them reporting that their plans would depend on future developments in the country.¹⁹ As one interviewee explained, return is often perceived as conditional and gradual: *“God willing, we will return. For now, it needs time. We have a vision of four to five years, meaning on a slightly longer-term basis. But if the situation in the country*

becomes better and the condition improves, then maybe earlier, maybe even much earlier. Here, there is comfort: heating comes to the house, gas comes to the house, and electricity does not cut off. All these things, if they are not available in the country, then, honestly, it is not easy for us to adapt. So, we leave the matter as a hope and a somewhat distant plan – not very far, but there is a plan, God willing” (Respondent 17, Male, 18–29).

Over half of respondents indicated that they do not intend to 'ever return' to Syria (48%) or remain undecided about their future plans (7%).²⁰ In the near term, the majority reported that they are likely to remain in Belgium (87%). Only a small number of respondents (16) reported that they were considering onward or secondary movements within 12 months, primarily to the Gulf countries. Qualitative findings reflect this complexity, with intentions ranging from firm decisions to remain in Belgium permanently, aspirations to maintain connections with Syria through visits and other transnational activities, to an openness to return that is contingent on improved living conditions. For many, the change in authorities introduced new possibilities to consider rather than concrete plans: *“Before, I thought I'd stay in Belgium forever – study, work, live here. Now, I'm starting to think maybe I can work between both countries, open a project in Syria related to my field, something beneficial. But I'm still unsure”* (Respondent 11, Female, 18–29).

“

If the situation in Syria stabilizes as all the Syrian people hope, I will return to Syria. If Syria becomes a free country that is economically strong and socially, politically, culturally, and religiously stable in all aspects, if this country flourishes, why would I stay abroad? But honestly, it needs years.

Respondent 19, Female, 45+

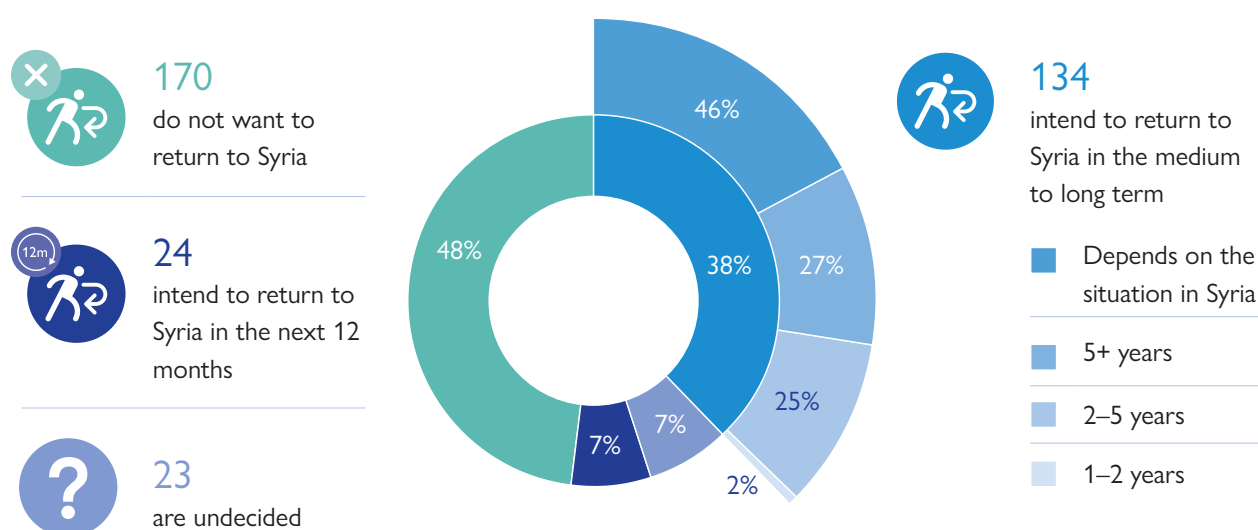
¹⁹ This finding is consistent with existing data on large-scale refugee situations which show that the post-conflict return is often a medium- to long-term phenomenon, happening in successive waves, usually about one to three years after the end of the conflict, and slowing down afterwards (World Bank, 2023).

²⁰ With only 23 respondents (7%) reporting uncertainty about their future plans, this subgroup was too small to analyse separately.



In 2025, IOM and the International Humanitarian Relief Association initiated a project to repair damaged homes in Kafr Nouran to help displaced families rebuild their lives in safety and dignity.
© IOM 2025/Enver Muhammed

Figure 10. Future intentions (n = 351)



In order to gather more insights into return-related decisions of Syrians living in Belgium, respondents have been categorised and aggregated into two large groups: those willing to return, regardless of the time frame, and those who stated no intention to return to Syria now or in the future. Meaningful differences across different profiles are further discussed below (see [Annex 1. Methodology](#)).

RETURN TO SYRIA

158 RESPONDENTS, 45%



No matter how long you stay outside the country, you remain a stranger, a foreigner, you never truly become from here. In Belgium, they call a person 'vreemdeling,' a foreigner, even if they were born here. I don't want to pass that label on to my daughter. I want her to feel that sense of belonging.

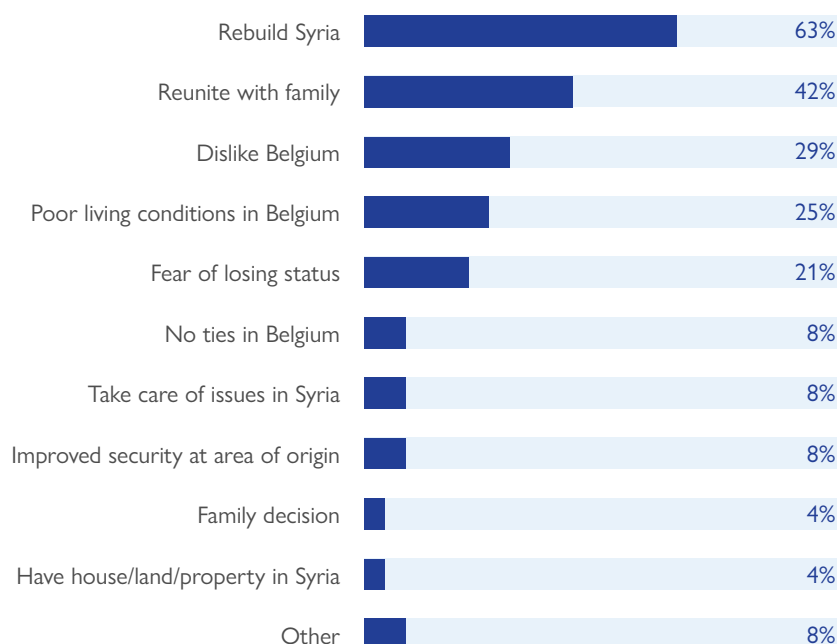
Respondent 14, Female, 18–29

Syrians interviewed in Belgium display a cautious attitude towards returning, with less than half of survey respondents willing to consider return (45%), and most of them considering return in the medium to long term (85%) rather than in the next 12 months (15%).

Among those considering returning in the short term, intentions are primarily driven by a strong sense of attachment

to Syria and a desire to participate in the country's reconstruction (63%), alongside the wish to reunite with family members (42%). These motivations are often reinforced by push factors experienced in Belgium, including difficult integration (29%), poor living conditions (25%) and fear of repatriation (21%). Qualitative interviews provide further context for these findings, highlighting the role of identity and belonging: *"We don't want to stay here forever. Belgium has given us many benefits, and we have also contributed. But I'm afraid for my children's future; I don't feel that education, religion, and social life are best served by us staying here"* (Respondent 14, Female, 18–29).

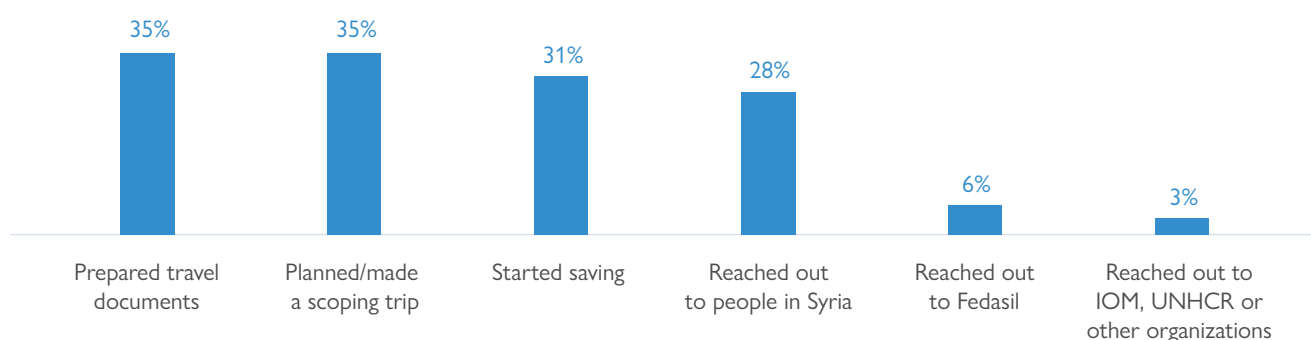
Alongside personal and family considerations, a sense of responsibility towards Syria's reconstruction emerged as a motivating factor, with several interviewees describing the change in authorities as having reopened a sense of both possibility and duty: *"At first, I planned my future as if it were my only option. I had no other. Since the previous authorities fell, Syria became a possible option. This, I think, is where one's sincerity is tested. I remember when I chose my field of study, I chose it for Syria, because Syria needs me. Now I can actually contribute. So, will I? Yes. My long-term plans changed, and even psychologically I changed. Before, visiting Syria was an impossible dream; now it's within reach"* (Respondent 10, Female, 18–29). While the desire to contribute to Syria's reconstruction was shared by several interviewees, reconstruction aspirations were consistently tempered by concerns about financial capacity, with several respondents noting that returning without sufficient means risked adding strain to Syrian society rather than contributing to it – a theme explored further in the section on [barriers to return](#).

Figure 11. Reasons to return within 12 months (% of respondents, n = 24)

Note: Up to three reasons were given by 24 respondents for a total of 53 responses.

Around one third of respondents considering return, whether within a year or in the medium to long term, had made or were planning to make a trip to assess the current situation in Syria (35%), had prepared travel documents (35%) and/or had started saving money for return (31%). Nearly all planned

returns were self-organized, with very few reporting having reached out to the Fedasil (6%) or international organizations such as IOM or the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (3%).

Figure 12. Steps taken to prepare for return (% of respondents, n = 158)

Note: Multiple responses per respondent were possible, with a total of 219 responses from 158 respondents.

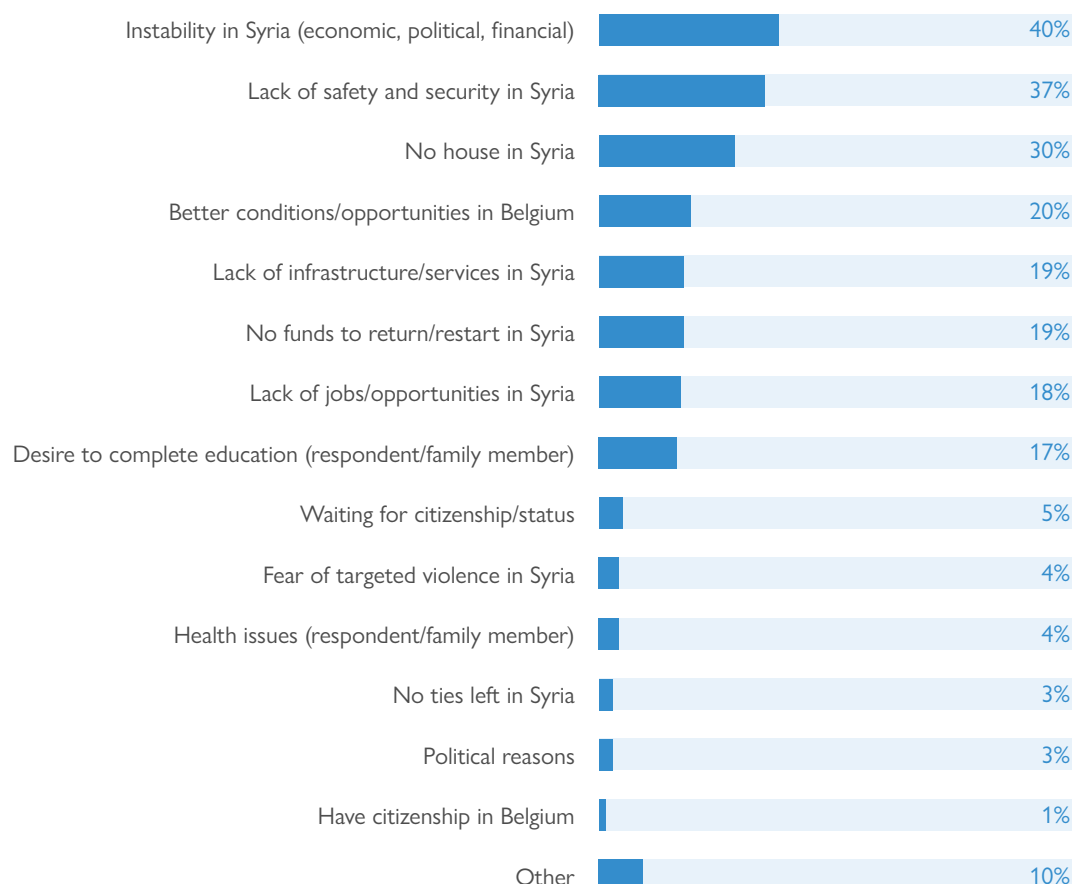
Survey findings tend to confirm the importance of country-of-origin conditions in shaping return dynamics in the medium to long term. Political, economic and financial instability (40%) and lack of safety (37%) were ranked as the first and second most important reasons for postponing return. Respondents willing to return in the medium to long term also mentioned the lack of housing (30%), infrastructure and services (19%), and jobs and business opportunities (18%) in areas of origin, underscoring the need for substantial change in structural conditions in Syria. Qualitative interviews reinforce these

findings, with respondents consistently indicating that return intentions, where they existed, remained contingent on improvements in Syria that most viewed as unlikely to be met in the short term: *“Maybe the situation will improve in the coming years, or hopefully months, but it will take a long time. There’s been a lot of haste: the moment the authorities changed, files were suspended in Europe the same day or the next. We need to stress this: please, take it slow with us; be patient, and hopefully things will get better, but not overnight”* (Respondent 4, Male, 18–29).

Around one in five respondents postponing return identified the need to complete their own or their family members' education among the reasons influencing their plans (17%), reflecting the high share of respondents currently studying or attending training and the proportion living with school-aged children between 5 and 17 years of age. Qualitative interviews support the finding that concerns about educational quality and continuity in Syria weigh heavily in return decisions: "My

children affect all the decisions in my life. First and last, I want to see my children's future. I want them to have finished their studies. Schools there are not like here" (Respondent 18, Female, 45+). These concerns were widely shared, with several interviewees pointing to the gap between educational standards in Belgium and those currently available in Syria as a significant factor in shaping their plans, a theme explored further in the section on [reintegration support](#).

Figure 13. Reasons for postponing an immediate return (% of respondents, n = 134)



Note: Up to three reasons were given by 134 respondents for a total of 308 responses.

Most intended returns, regardless of the time frame, are directed towards areas of origin (75%), mainly in the three governorates of Aleppo (23%), Latakia (15%) and Idlib (13%). For those who do not plan on returning to their areas of origin, Damascus Governorate emerged as an alternative destination where conditions were considered most conducive to return, offering better security, access to services and economic opportunities than rural areas. Qualitative interviews also point to significant variation in conditions across Syria's governorates, with Damascus viewed as comparatively stable: "In governorates like Damascus, they go in and out with safety and security, nothing

is happening, people are comfortable" (Respondent 17, Male, 18–29). The choice of Damascus may also reflect the familiarity with urban environments that respondents have acquired while living in Belgium, particularly among younger respondents.

Most respondents willing to return were living with their family (65%) – especially large families of four or more members (45%) rather than small families (20%). Around one third of them were considering flexible return strategies, pursuing 'split' return arrangements (31%), where only some members return, or 'staged' returns, where someone goes first to prepare for the return of others (49%).²¹ Staged return

21 Flexible return strategies encompass different approaches to lead to gradual and organized return processes. For instance, in May 2025, Cyprus announced the establishment of a new voluntary return programme for Syrian families that included the provision of a one-off sum to assist resettlement while allowing the main income earners to remain in Cyprus for up to three years to work in exchange for renunciation of their asylum claim or granted international protection status. The aim was to support Syrians willing to return, but who may struggle to find employment opportunities in Syria (AP News, 2025).

tends to be the case in families where more than one adult is present, allowing, for instance, the main income earner to stay in Belgium and financially sustain the initial return of the spouse and children. Qualitative interviews highlight concerns regarding split returns, with several respondents expressing strong reservations about the implications of family separation for well-being and cohesion: *"Enough of people giving us solutions that tear families apart. What does it mean that the father stays in Cyprus while the entire family goes down to Syria? The family will fall apart. We want solutions that preserve our dignity and make us feel that we are human beings"* (Respondent 14, Female, 18–29).

UNWILLING TO RETURN TO SYRIA



170 RESPONDENTS, 48%



People have been battered and traumatised. The main issue is the lack of safety, that's number one. Where there is safety, there is life. Right now, there is no safety, there are accusations, arbitrary judgements, and everyone thinks their opinion is the absolute truth. People went out and protested for 'freedom,' but now that space of freedom has shrunk again. I'm not blaming them, it's the result of what they went through. But still, this is how it is. Everyone thinks 'I am right and you are wrong. If you're not with me, then you're against me.' There's no room for pluralism in opinions yet.

Respondent 13, Male, 30–44

Around half of the respondents indicated that they do not intend to return to Syria under any foreseeable circumstances (48%). Most explained that their intentions were related to the prevalence of insecurity and violence in Syria (55%), and one in five reported fearing targeted reprisals (23%). Heightened safety concerns are associated both with the intensity of conflict experienced in Syria, often along ethno-sectarian lines, and with greater distrust of the political changes in authorities among this group (15% versus 3% for potential returnees). Qualitative interviews shed further light on factors around safety underpinning unwillingness to return, revealing concerns that go beyond general insecurity to encompass community-specific and personal fears. Across interviews, the fragility of law and order emerged as a key theme, with participants consistently describing, based on accounts from family and contacts remaining in Syria, conditions characterised

by the presence of armed groups, kidnapping, and a sense of personal insecurity: *"Simply living in a place where a person does not feel safe – being afraid to go out at night for fear of kidnapping, or having masked individuals suddenly appear in broad daylight – is enough to create insecurity. These are not stories from imagination or hearsay; I hear them firsthand"* (Respondent 20, Female, 30–44).

While some interviewees acknowledged improvement in certain areas since the change in authorities, most described a security situation that remained deeply unstable and highly variable across regions, with fears of renewed sectarian conflict adding a further layer of uncertainty: *"The fear of a civil war or sectarian conflict is very real. If a sectarian war erupts, it will be far worse than the war we lived through. Among the sects, there is still no reconciliation. If reconciliation happens, and trials take place for criminals, and they settle issues with the Kurds, then after two or three years, life might become more normal"* (Respondent 16, Male, 45+).²² These concerns were particularly acute for members of religious and ethnic minority communities, for whom safety concerns extended beyond generalised insecurity to include fears of targeted persecution, reflected in the survey finding that 23 per cent of respondents unwilling to return reported fearing targeted reprisals. Several respondents from minority backgrounds described a sense that the change in authorities had not resolved, and in some cases had intensified, the risks they faced: *"Most of those considering returning to Syria are from the Sunni sect because they do not fear the other sects. I do not know anyone from the Druze sect who is thinking of returning; in fact, I see the opposite, a continued emigration. Even among the Alawites, there is no desire to return; all want to leave and take their families abroad. Other minority groups, Christians, Ismailis, Rashidis, Syriacs, Assyrians, Kurds, those who have the opportunity, they leave"* (Respondent 20, Female, 30–44). The experiences of specific minority communities are explored further in the section on [barriers to return](#).

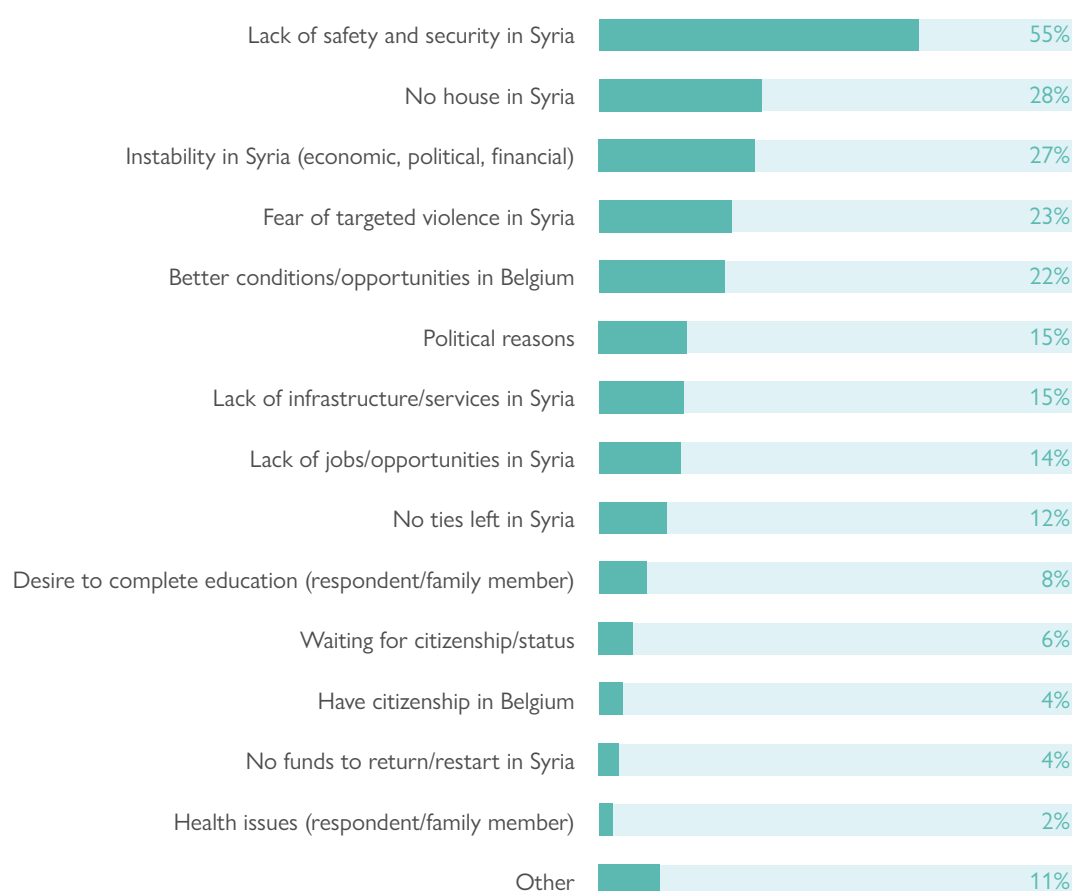
Forty-one per cent of people unwilling to return are originally from Aleppo (versus 30% of potential returnees), where, despite the reduction in active hostilities following the ceasefire agreement between the Government of Syria and the Syrian Democratic forces, concerns regarding the presence of mines and threats to security in homes and streets prevail (IOM, 2026d). Qualitative interviews reflect these concerns, with one respondent describing the situation in Aleppo, where family members remain: *"Here, there is safety and rule of law; in Syria, people die over nothing. In Aleppo, you can't even walk with money. If someone notices you have a small amount of cash, they might kill you for it. A woman could have her hand cut for a simple gold ring. Here it's completely different – like night and day"* (Respondent 2, Male, 18–29).

²² While the situation in Damascus and the main cities remains mostly secure, in regions outside the capital, establishing law and order remains a major challenge and priority. Significant concerns persist regarding the treatment of certain profiles and population groups, such as persons affiliated with the previous authorities; Alawites, Kurds and other religious and ethnic minorities; women and children; journalists and human rights defenders; and LGBTIQ+ persons (EUAA, 2025a).

Respondents unwilling to return were more likely to be recent arrivals and relatively less established in Belgium: 62 per cent arrived in 2020–25 (versus 27% of respondents who expressed an intention to return to Syria), and 26 per cent have Belgian citizenship (versus 46%). This tends to confirm a trend already observed in the Netherlands, where local integration does not necessarily act against the decision to return, and stability in the host country, including factors such as permanent status, steady housing and employment, may actually support aspirations for sustainable returns (IOM, 2025c). Qualitative interviews shed light on a further dimension of this finding, pointing to the importance of personal and

financial investment made in reaching Belgium as another factor shaping unwillingness to return: *"Anyone who lived in Syria all that time always hoped tomorrow would be better, but ended up longing for yesterday. I have no hope and no intention to return, regardless of what I'm told. From the moment I decided to leave Syria, and given what I endured just to cross borders, that alone is enough to rule out going back. Return is impossible. Everyone who left Syria for Europe risked their lives – some didn't make it. After all that, someone forces me back? I risked drowning at sea, dying at borders, all sorts of dangers – just to reach Europe."* (Respondent 2, Male, 18–29).

Figure 14. Reasons for not wanting to return to Syria (n = 170)



Note: Up to three reasons were given by 170 respondents for a total of 418 responses.

Comparisons between potential returnees and non-returnees regarding their reasons for deferring or being unwilling to return should be treated with caution, as other influencing factors would need to be taken into account for a more conclusive

analysis. Nonetheless, the diverse experiences documented in this section highlight the importance of considering individual circumstances, rather than treating all Syrians as a homogenous group, in any analysis of the factors that drive or hinder return.

BARRIERS AND INCENTIVES TO RETURN

This section examines specific barriers to return and the conditions and circumstances that respondents identified as preventing or delaying return in more depth. It also presents findings on respondents' perceptions of current and potential return policies, the types of support they consider most helpful, and the priority needs that must be addressed in Syria to enable sustainable and dignified return. Several barriers stood out as preventing or delaying return, including unresolved Housing, Land and Property (HLP) issues, legal and administrative obstacles, and personal concerns regarding safety and health. Questions covering the second part of the section, which explores attitudes towards incentives to return and reintegrate, were asked only to respondents who displayed an interest in return or were undecided about it (n = 181).

Qualitative interviews vividly illustrate the scale and complexity of this challenge. Several respondents described former homes that had been destroyed, looted or occupied during the conflict, with efforts to reclaim them further hindered by prohibitive reconstruction costs, corruption and the absence of functioning mechanisms for legal recourse: *"I went there and saw the situation myself. Life is very difficult. Permanent settlement is hard, especially since I don't have any houses still intact. My own house is destroyed, and the house where my father passed away is also destroyed. Renovating a house in such conditions, while the situation is unsafe, is very difficult. I might rebuild from here, and then if war happens again, everything gets destroyed again. And renovations need money – sometimes renovation costs are as high as rebuilding from scratch, depending on the level of damage. The house becomes like bare land"* (Respondent 16, Male, 45+).

BARRIERS TO RETURN



HOUSING, LAND AND PROPERTY (HLP) ISSUES

Housing emerged as a key barrier to return: 77 per cent of respondents used to live in owned houses or apartments in Syria, but only one in four former homeowners believes they would be able to live there in case of return (25%). The most frequently cited reason for not being able to return and live in their homes was home damage or destruction (62%).²³



Your homeland is your home; if your home is gone, your homeland is gone. Your homeland is your house, and the homeland of the village is the houses of the village, and the homeland of the state is the houses of the state. The geography, yes, but if you don't own anything, then you have no homeland.

Respondent 12, Male, 45+

²³ As of 2025, approximately 1.3 million housing units in Syria, nearly one-third of the total housing stock, had been entirely destroyed or severely damaged, leaving 5.7 million people in need of shelter assistance (UNDP, 2025). According to Round 4 of the DTM Communities of Return Index, 44 per cent of communities reported severe damage to shelters, and, among them, 70 per cent indicated that no reconstruction efforts had been initiated at the time of the assessment (IOM, 2026e). Moreover, 65 per cent of communities reported instances of HLP disputes in the past three months, with Ar-Raqqa and Homs Governorates reporting higher rates of disputes (69% and 49% respectively) (IOM, 2026e).

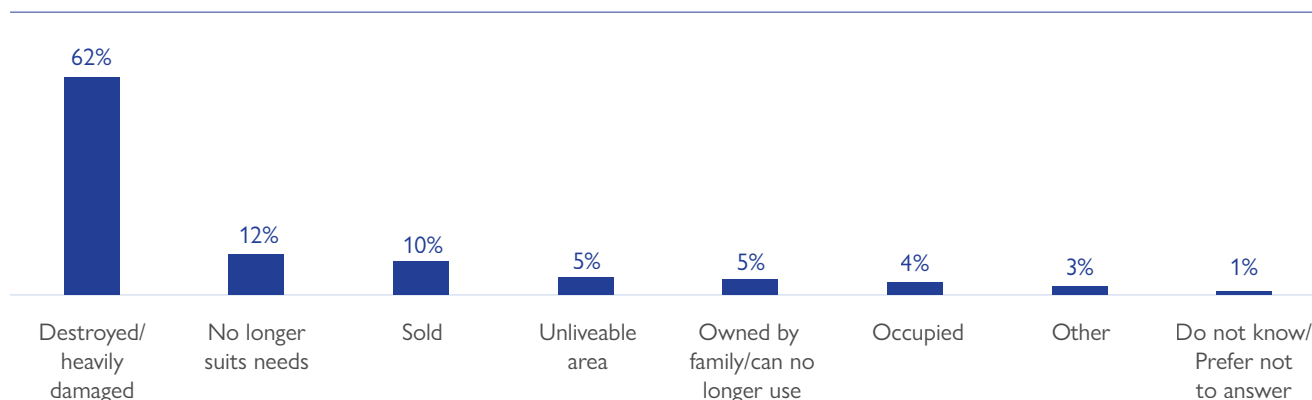
In 2025, IOM established five Community Protection Centres across the Aleppo and Idleb Governorates, with funding from the Syria Cross-border Humanitarian Fund and in partnership with local organizations, including various education activities. © IOM 2025



Former homeowners also mentioned different housing needs (12%), unsafe area or site (5%), ownership issues (5%),²⁴ and home occupation or confiscation (4%). Ten per cent of respondents reported having sold their homes. One interviewee's account illustrates how these challenges compound one another, from occupation and sale under duress, to structural barriers in attempting to reclaim the property: *"The house was stolen, destroyed and looted. They sold it for \$3,000. I came to take it back, I told him: 'You bought*

it for 24 million.' He said: 'I want 250 million.' Since the change in authorities, many people got their houses back through bribes, but I don't have money. I can't pay 250 million, which is about \$25,000. If they gave it back to me, it would require reconstruction. Just to have a corner to live in would need at least \$10,000. Will organizations here help me? Absolutely impossible. And will I get a loan there? They won't give me one, because I live abroad" (Respondent 12, Male, 45+).

Figure 15. Housing issues as a barrier to return (n = 198)

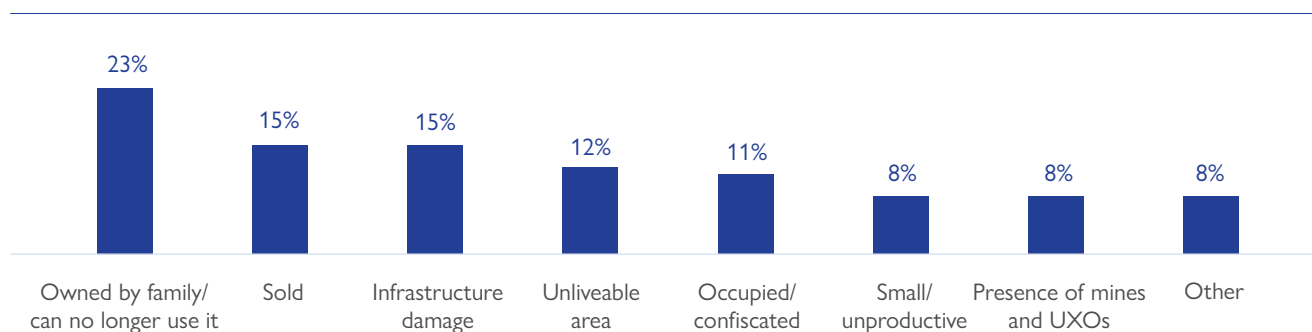


Note: Percentages refer to respondents who used to live in owned houses and could no longer return there. Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

Land-related issues are somewhat less prevalent but remain a significant barrier limiting livelihood prospects of potential returnees: 36 per cent of respondents used to own land in Syria, but less than half of former landowners believe they would be able to use it in the case of return (44%). Land-related challenges include damaged infrastructure (20%),²⁵ land occupation (10%), unproductivity (9%) and mine contamination (5%).²⁶ Moreover, around one in five landowners indicated that they had sold their land (21%). Qualitative interviews illustrate the scale of loss many respondents had experienced

across both housing and land: *"I personally have nothing now. We had a house, land and an olive press – it was looted. Our olive trees were uprooted and taken to Türkiye. The land lies fallow or is planted with wheat and whatever comes in goes to wages and inputs, no real income for us. Our house was looted. We had a roof that was stolen for the iron and mesh. The tiles were removed. To fix and refurbish the house to be liveable would cost over a billion and a half [lira]. Windows gone, tiles gone – it's a skeleton"* (Respondent 6, Female, 30–44).

Figure 16. Land issues as a barrier to return (n = 65)



Note: The percentages refer to respondents who previously owned land and could no longer use it if they returned to Syria.

²⁴ In most cases, respondents reported that the house is too small for their needs or that their family status has changed and the house is no longer available to them. This can be the case of divorcees or children who no longer reside in the family's house.

²⁵ Productive infrastructure in Syria has witnessed severe damage. This includes roads, bridges, power plants, grain mills and storage facilities, often deliberately targeted by warring parties to weaken or harm opponents (UNDP, 2025).

²⁶ Approximately 11.5 million Syrians across the country are at risk of explosive contamination, which impacts 146 subdistricts (54% of all subdistricts) across Syria. The widespread contamination has significantly reduced agricultural productivity in north-east Syria, worsening food insecurity in the region (MAG, n.d.).

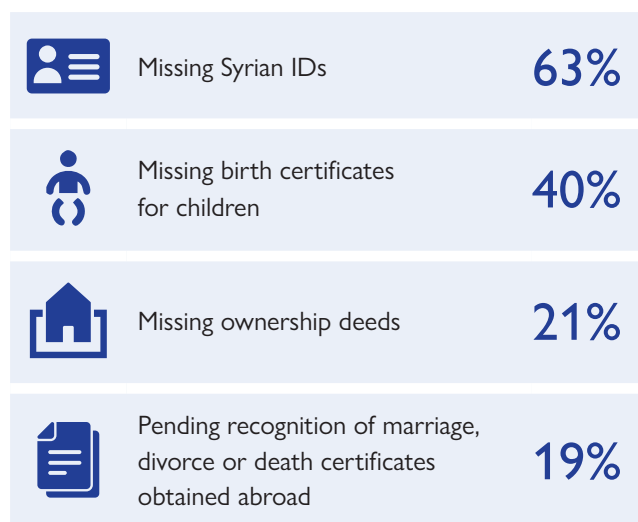
The ability to reclaim and re-establish access to their properties is also often intertwined with the ability to restore the necessary documentation. Overall, around one in five respondents owning house, land or both were missing ownership deeds (21%).



CIVIL DOCUMENTATION AND LEGAL ISSUES

Most respondents reported lacking identification documents issued by the Government of Syria (63%), which is one of the prerequisites for entry into Syria.²⁷ Respondents also mentioned lacking other civil documents, particularly those related to civil status, such as birth certificates for children (40% of respondents living with children), or recognition of documents obtained abroad (19%), such as marriage, divorce or death certificates, which may impact the resolution of disputes relating to inheritance matters or custody of children.²⁸ Interviewees also mentioned several issues related to the (re)issuing of Syrian documents, including the unavailability of offices for civil documentation in areas of origin, as well as the prohibitive costs and lengthy processes associated with document replacement.

Figure 17. Lack of documentation as a barrier to return (n = 351)



Note: The percentage for birth certificates refers to respondents living with children, and the percentage for ownership deeds refers to respondents owning a house or land. Respondents could select all that applied.



PROTECTION AND HEALTH-RELATED CONCERNS



I don't feel that the situation has reached a level that would make life very comfortable for the people. I am not with extremism, and I am not with the suppression of freedoms. As I say, we moved from under the drainpipe to under the gutter: before, there was political repression; now the repression comes in the name of religion. But in the end, it is still repression, and this is not acceptable – that's my opinion.

Respondent 15, Female, 45+

Over one third of respondents (124 individuals, 35%) indicated having personal concerns about returning to Syria, primarily due to fears for their own safety or that of their family members.²⁹ Concerns were particularly pronounced among members of religious and ethnic minorities and other groups at heightened risk of targeted persecution.³⁰ Several interviewees described how the risks facing their communities had heightened since the shift in authorities: *"I wouldn't want anyone I love to stay in Syria. After the massacres, it's dangerous, especially for minorities like us. As a minority, it's frightening. Relatives in Sweida were killed; some had guns pointed at their heads just for being Druze. University students can't attend safely, so much frustration. The situation terrifies me. We, as Druze, faced massacres. Students, doctors, and engineers were thrown from balconies and shot. Why go to a country that kills its educated people?"* (Respondent 5, Female, 30–44). A Christian respondent described how her community was facing religious coercion and a broader limiting of rights: *"As Christians, we face a lot of harassment, and we can't exercise our rights. Our Muslim neighbours harass us. It wasn't like this before; now it's become open, because to them, we, Christians, are infidels. We have 'Daesh' in Latakia; the ISIS slogan is widespread. Massacres happened. As a Christian, we can't adapt to such a situation. I cannot, for example, wear hijab. They want to impose hijab on us. In Latakia, in Christian villages and in churches, priests are told either you convert or pay the jizya so we 'leave you alone.' I'm in contact with my family and siblings; the situation is very bad, and they live in fear and terror. Maybe if I belonged to another sect, if I were Muslim, I might consider returning. But as a Christian, I can never make that decision"* (Respondent 9, Female, 45+).

²⁷ Syrian nationals returning to Syria must present valid identification, such as a national passport or ID card. Documents issued by the former government remain accepted. Those registered in Syria's civil registries, but lacking documentation, may be admitted after identity verification via the Civil Affairs database. Syrian diplomatic missions abroad can issue temporary travel documents to facilitate returns (EUAA, 2025a).

²⁸ Two third of communities in Syria (67%) reported challenges in accessing civil documentation, especially caused by long distances to government offices (45%) and the lack of available services in the area (39%) (IOM, 2026e).

²⁹ The actual proportion of individuals at risk may be significantly higher, given the sensitivity of these topics and the potential reluctance to disclose such information.

³⁰ While the situation in Damascus and the main cities remains mostly secure, in regions outside the capital, establishing law and order remains a major challenge and priority. Significant concerns persist regarding the treatment of certain profiles and population groups, such as persons affiliated with the previous authorities; Alawites, Kurds and other religious and ethnic minorities; women and children; journalists and human rights defenders; and LGBTIQ+ persons (EUAA, 2025a).

Fears of persecution were not limited to minority communities. Several respondents described a broader climate of arbitrary accusation, particularly for those perceived as affiliated with the former authorities. Interviewees explained that the term *shabbiha*, originally used to refer to militias and armed loyalists of the former government, has taken on a wider meaning, becoming a label applied to individuals, families and entire communities regardless of their individual history (Üngör, 2020). For Alawites in particular, this has had serious consequences: *"I'm from the Alawite sect. We suffered massacres in the third month [after the previous authorities fell]. The Alawites are currently the most oppressed sect in Syria. They consider all of us 'shabbiha.' What happened to people from Idlib, Hama, or Damascus fleeing service also happened to us, but because the regime was Alawite, they assume all of us were loyal. I won't lie and say Alawites are the best people; there is a segment that benefited from the previous government. But the rest of the population suffered just like everyone else. We Alawites don't wear hijab, but many Alawite women have started wearing it just to cover themselves, so people think they're Sunni, to avoid being killed. They fired all Alawite employees, including my family, just because they're Alawite. In my area, if someone gets a university placement and needs to study in another governorate, for us as Alawites, that's unacceptable. We're afraid to leave our homes, let alone study in another governorate. We saw what happened to university students in Damascus. It's not 'prohibited' by law, but it's dangerous, like walking to your death"* (Respondent 7, Male, 18–29).

The fear of arbitrary accusation extended beyond interviewees who were part of the Alawite community, with one respondent describing how this mentality affected anyone who had worked in public positions under the previous authorities: *"One of my family members worked in a public position, he's not allowed to go out or speak. Should everyone stop working and let the country collapse? Many of those attacking have parents still in Syria working government jobs; are their parents 'shabbiha' too?"* (Respondent 6, Female, 30–44). For some, this perceived climate of accusation and retribution made return not just difficult, but unthinkable: *"The society's mentality is fundamentally problematic: the culture of revenge. I have personal threats. As long as there's a threat to my life, there's no hope of returning. It's like telling someone: 'Go to the guillotine.' The idea of return doesn't exist. My life is at risk. I won't put my head under anyone's blade – or under anyone's 'stone,' as we say"* (Respondent 8, Male, 30–44).

Personal concerns around safety and freedom were also raised by female interviewees, who described fears specific to their gender. Several participants described a deteriorating environment for women and girls in Syria, characterised by threats to personal safety, the erosion of legal rights, and increasing social and religious pressure. One respondent, who

had visited Syria since the change in authorities, described what she had observed: *"I fear for women in general. Life is much harder for them than for men, socially and professionally. Their job opportunities aren't equal, and workplaces aren't completely safe. Women are watched constantly. Personally, I couldn't live in that environment"* (Respondent 10, Female, 18–29). Others feared religious and social coercion, including restrictions on dress and freedom of movement: *"No safety, no freedom of speech, I can't live in this social environment again. Here I can dress as I want without harassment. In Syria, my sister was handed a niqab and an abaya in the park by random women. They called her 'infidel.' This rising extremism – I can't handle it. My sister said that if she didn't have a car, she couldn't go out after sunset; her husband escorts her to the car and waits at night when she returns. They declared women can't be judges. I won't return. Even if we set aside safety and services – women have no voice. I need freedom of expression"* (Respondent 6, Female, 30–44).

In addition, over one in five respondents reported having concerns regarding access to adequate health care upon return to Syria,³¹ reporting that they or a family member are currently living with a disability or chronic medical condition that requires ongoing specialized care (28%). Concerns over the health-care system were raised by qualitative participants who, drawing on accounts from family and friends inside Syria, described a system struggling to meet basic needs: *"Hospitals are 'open,' but there are no real services. You might be referred from one hospital to another until the case gets worse"* (Respondent 8, Male, 30–44). Interviewees also described the prohibitive cost of care: *"In Syria, we know public hospitals are 'free,' but you become a practice case. Private hospitals are outrageously expensive now. A relative's child broke his leg and needed pins; it cost about 8 million SYP. Families can't afford that; they go into debt just to get treatment"* (Respondent 2, Male, 18–29). The availability of medicine and medical equipment posed a further concern raised by several interviewees: *"Regarding health care and medical treatment, there is severe suffering; there is a shortage of medicines and a shortage of equipment"* (Respondent 19, Female, 45+).

SUPPORT FOR RETURN AND REINTEGRATION³²



RETURN-RELATED INTERVENTIONS

When asked about their opinions regarding return-related interventions under implementation and consideration by various host countries, including Belgium, respondents expressed mixed views. In general, respondents seemed more interested in reintegration support rather than return support.

31 These concerns are well-rooted given the devastating destruction of social infrastructure. As of 2024, nearly half of Syria's public hospital facilities were either non-functional or only partially functional (43%) (WHO, n.d.).

32 Questions presented in this section were asked only to a total of 181 respondents who displayed an interest in returning to Syria, regardless of the expected time frame, or were undecided about the possibility of return.



For me personally, the main issues are psychological and related to safety, weapons, crime, and lack of housing. I won't move my family into a tent or the street. And there are barely any familiar faces left, so financial incentives alone won't change my decision. Even if they gave me money, I wouldn't know what to do with it. It's like if I gave you 100,000 euros and told you to go 'develop the desert.' You wouldn't know what to do. Right now, Syria is a desert in every sense: psychologically, socially, ideologically, ethnically, religiously, criminally.

Respondent 13, Male, 30–44

The majority of people willing to return were planning self-organized and self-sustained returns. Less than half of them indicated that they would value counselling services to assess opportunities to return (45%) and practical travel-related assistance, such as help with purchasing plane tickets or acquiring travel documentation (37%). This finding coincides with the limited share of respondents who had contacted official institutions or partner organizations in Belgium dealing with voluntary returns.

Respondents who are not holding Belgian citizenship also expressed caution towards interventions supporting voluntary returns, especially if they involved a degree of conditionality.³³ Only 30 per cent of them expressed an interest in financially supported voluntary return schemes,³⁴ while the majority were reluctant to consider them, given that they involve the loss or cessation of legal status in Belgium. Unconditional forms of support that do not affect legal status in host countries were viewed more favourably. Qualitative interviews shed light on the reasoning behind this reluctance. Opinions on financial incentives were largely dismissive, not because respondents were uninterested in return, but because many of them viewed return decisions as not primarily driven by financial calculations: *"They're good if someone truly wants to return. These programmes feel like a 'polite exit.' If not, they can't be forced. It's barely a plane ticket and some food at the airport. This is a life-changing decision; such money makes no difference. Returning home is a life decision, not a financial one"* (Respondent 10, Female, 18–29). For many respondents, the conditions that would enable return, including factors such as safety, stability or legal certainty, were simply not present, and no financial incentive

could substitute for them: *"I don't care about money. I didn't leave for money. If my husband and I, with our children, lived in a single room with stability and safety – that's all the money in the world to me. Money is the least of our concerns. I want safety so I can feel secure going to my home. If that's missing, I couldn't go back even if they gave me the world's treasures, without safety, what do treasures mean to me? I'm afraid of Syria"* (Respondent 9, Female, 45+).



Yes, I know about the 1,350 euros. Honestly, it does nothing. A woman from our centre took the 1,350 euros and a ticket and returned – she regrets it deeply. Even if they gave me a million euros, I wouldn't return. The country no longer resembles me. I used to go out at 2 a.m. to watch the sunrise and drink coffee. Now I can't even get there safely. They even put a prison-like gate at the Citadel – when did that happen? They're tampering with history and memory. My outlook on life isn't material; it's about values and those are being distorted.

Respondent 6, Female, 30–44

Amongst those who did engage with the question of financial incentives more directly, most said that they viewed the incentives as insufficient relative to the scale of what would be needed to rebuild a life in Syria: *"The 2,000 or 3,000 euros plus a ticket is good, but not enough. It cannot help a person start a life in Syria; it might support him for only a few months. If they want to encourage return, the amount must be higher. Denmark, for example, offers about 27,000 euros. With that, you can buy a small house for 10,000–15,000 euros and use the rest to start a small project. But 2,000 or 3,000 euros? Impossible"* (Respondent 16, Male, 45+).³⁵ Some drew a comparison between the costs incurred in reaching Belgium and the amounts being offered to support return: *"I know they provide a plane ticket and maybe around 1,350–1,500 euros as pocket money for someone returning to Syria. But for those thinking of returning, most came here through smuggling routes to reach Belgium. Someone who paid 15,000 or 20,000 won't care about 1,500 euros from the government. Just today, my friend and I were talking, and he said the Netherlands is offering 5,000 euros to encourage people to return. I told him I wouldn't go back even for 5,000. What would I do with that in Syria? I'd die there for 5,000 euros! I didn't apply for asylum to get a couple of euros from the EU to go back, I applied*

33 Unlike 'go-and-see' schemes, voluntary return schemes affect the refugee status and eligibility for protection and assistance. Recent trends indicate how EU countries are increasingly focusing on a managed approach to the return of Syrians. In contrast, IOM and UNHCR's position on Syria returns from December 2024 remains unchanged and supportive of safe, voluntary, informed, and dignified returns (IOM, 2025d), contextually urging all States to grant civilians fleeing Syria access to their territories, uphold the right to seek asylum, and ensure full respect for the principle of non-refoulement (UNHCR, 2025b).

34 In January 2026, the Ministry of Asylum and Migration announced targeted measures to encourage the voluntary return of Syrians, including enhanced reintegration support. Voluntary return will be supported by reintegration packages of up to 5,000 euros for asylum-seekers and 3,000 euros for Syrians who are irregularly staying in Belgium. The assistance, covering housing, education, health care, or economic activities, will be delivered in Syria and coordinated with local partner organizations (EMN, 2026b).

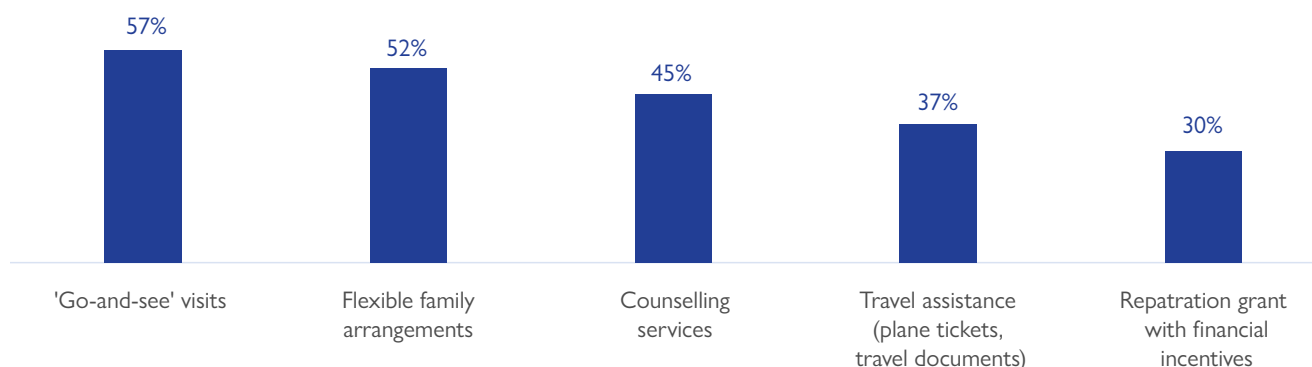
35 Data collection occurred between October and December 2025, which may explain the discrepancy between the amount respondents mention and the financial packages announced by the government in January 2026.

because there's a real danger to my life" (Respondent 7, Male, 18–29). Another respondent reflected on what such a sum could realistically achieve on the ground: *"1,800 euros won't do anything in Syria. What would that do for someone whose house is rubble? And maybe it's not even 1,800 euros, maybe 1,300 euros or something like that. What will that build – one wall?"* (Respondent 8, Male, 30–44).

Over half of the respondents with temporary status (57%) stated that they would conduct temporary 'go-and-see' visits³⁶ to assess conditions in Syria first-hand before deciding whether to return. A similar share expressed interest in the possibility of undertaking 'staged' returns (52%), where the primary earner is allowed to temporarily stay in Belgium to financially support the return of the other household members to Syria. Several interviewees expressed a desire to visit Syria to assess conditions on the ground before committing to any

return decision: *"My feelings are mixed. Many people talk to you: some tell you very positive things, and sometimes others tell you negative things, so you can't form a clear picture anymore. I feel the picture is very blurry. I don't want a blurry image; I'd rather go myself and see"* (Respondent 14, Female, 18–29). At the same time, respondents emphasized the importance of guarantees that any visit or engagement with return processes would not jeopardise their legal status in Belgium, and several described the risk of losing residency rights in Belgium as a key barrier to engaging with such schemes: *"Many people here are afraid to visit Syria because they fear losing residency. If Belgium offered guarantees that residency won't be revoked, many would visit Syria to evaluate the situation. If they feel the situation has improved, they might return permanently. Belgium should offer guarantees for residents that visiting Syria won't put their status at risk"* (Respondent 16, Male, 45+).

Figure 18. Return support (n = 181)



Note: The percentages for 'go-and-see' visits and repatriation grants refer to respondents who do not hold Belgian citizenship, and the percentage for 'flexible' family arrangements refers to respondents living with family and not holding Belgian citizenship. Respondents could select all that applied.



REINTEGRATION SUPPORT

Interest in reintegration support generally reflected respondents' perceptions of conditions in areas of origin (see [Situation in areas of origin](#)) and the need for the establishment of substantive measures and comprehensive packages to support reconstruction and reintegration if return were to take place. Economic reintegration support emerged as the top priority among respondents, with financial support to restart or establish a business (77%) and vocational support to re-enter

the job market (54%) cited as the measures most likely to support sustainable reintegration.³⁷ Qualitative interviewees frequently raised concerns around the economic conditions in Syria, most commonly citing high living costs and lack of suitable jobs as key obstacles to sustainable reintegration: *"Salaries are 700–800 thousand lira, while daily expenses are 200–250 thousand. A month's salary is spent in three days without paying for electricity or rent. I don't have any job I could do there right now. Even in the private sector, the 'lucky' ones earn a million to a million and a half a month (about \$150)"* (Respondent 8, Male, 30–44).

³⁶ The 'go-and-see' policy was implemented by Türkiye between January and July 2025. It allowed Syrian heads of household or adult family members under temporary protection to make a maximum of three visits to Syria to assess the situation. The aim was to help Syrians make informed decisions about returning home without termination of their temporary status (UNHCR, 2026b).

³⁷ The economic situation is characterised by high inflation, damaged infrastructure, and severely constrained access to basic services and livelihoods. According to KIs, agriculture and livestock remain the main livelihood activities across locations of return, though they are often only partially or non-operational. The industry and commerce sectors are also functioning unevenly across governorates, underscoring the reliance on often informal and seasonal work (IOM, 2026e).



A person always feels emotional ties to his homeland. Syria is my motherland. This is the beginning of recovery, and recovery from such a massive destruction takes time. I saw it with my own eyes. I drove for half an hour and everything around me was destroyed. I'm almost 60. If I return and don't work, what will I do? There is no unemployment support, nothing. If I don't work, I cannot live. And at my age, job opportunities are limited. Here I work, my life is stable, and I'm not ready to gamble. I love Syria, but I'm not ready to risk everything.

Respondent 16, Male, 45+

Several interviewees also questioned what kind of work they would realistically be able to do in Syria, given both the nature of available jobs and the skills they developed abroad: *"You might go down to look for a job and not find one because there is no economic cycle, no economic growth. I work as a machine operator and currently, this type of work does not exist there. So, if I wanted to work in the same profession, it doesn't exist. Where will you work? What will you do? How will you handle things?"* (Respondent 17, Male, 18–29). For respondents from minority communities, the prospect of return raised additional concerns about discrimination in the labour market, with some expressing doubt that they would be able to access employment on equal terms given the sectarian dynamics described earlier in this report. Taken together, the combination of high living costs, inadequate wages and limited job opportunities represents a significant structural deterrent to return. **As previously noted, most respondents who have separated families are also supporting members abroad (67%), adding to the complexity of return dynamics and sustainability.**

Housing and land emerged as a key priority area for reintegration support. Over half of the respondents mentioned the need for comprehensive and adaptive support packages addressing all aspects of housing and land issues, including financial assistance for home repairs and reconstruction (67% of homeowners), provision of temporary housing and rental support (51%), and legal assistance to address housing and land rights and property restitution (52% of house and landowners). Qualitative interviewees highlighted that these needs may vary considerably depending on the area of origin: *"The scale of destruction – it's beyond imagination. I used to live in East Aleppo, which suffered extremely heavy bombardment. West Aleppo, which stayed under the authorities' control, has much less destruction and services are better. But we in the east, our infrastructure is destroyed: communication towers, the Internet doesn't work,*

electricity is broken, water systems are damaged, and collapsed buildings. Hundreds of tons of debris are being removed now in East Aleppo" (Respondent 16, Male, 45+). **The diversity of conditions across regions highlights the importance of flexible and geographically differentiated approaches to housing and land.**



Private school fees are very high. To keep my daughter at today's standard would be difficult; tuition is terrifying. Here, social assistance allows a decent minimum. In Syria, I doubt I could reach the same standard, particularly for her education. She grew up here. Syria to her is relatives and her grandfather's house; she'd like to visit, not live there. Her belonging is here; French is now her dominant language.

Respondent 5, Female, 30–44

Education support emerged as another priority intervention among respondents, mentioned by a large majority of respondents living with children (77%). **Like housing, effective measures would need to support different aspects, including educational assistance, curriculum equivalence, and Arabic language courses, which would be particularly relevant for children who have spent their formative years abroad.**³⁸ Qualitative interviews illustrated why respondents saw education as an important factor in their decision-making. Several interviewees described the quality of education in Syria as a significant concern, pointing to outdated teaching methods and curricula, as well as damaged infrastructure. One respondent whose children remain in Syria explained: *"Education is very poor. In school buildings, some walls are collapsed, you have safe buildings, partially damaged ones, completely destroyed ones, all next to each other. It's very random. My children still aren't adjusting. Teachers are not teaching properly"* (Respondent 13, Male, 30–44). Beyond the quality of available services, some interviewees expressed concern about the public-school curriculum, while also noting the prohibitive cost of private schooling as an alternative: *"The teaching methods there are still very old, from the 1950s I think; the teaching style is very outdated. We have seen how they teach here, the tools and methods and schools here, there is a big difference. I feel that you would need to pay huge amounts of money to put your child in a private school, and even then, that private school might not be at the level you want"* (Respondent 14, Female, 18–29).

In addition, half of the respondents voiced the need for administrative assistance for obtaining or replacing civil

38 According to UNDP, the impact of the 14 years of Syrian conflict on education infrastructure has been severe: 30 per cent to 50 per cent of schools are out of service, damaged, destroyed, or repurposed due to war-related destruction or lack of maintenance. The crisis also led to a surge in dropout rates. As of 2024, an estimated 2.5 million children from 6 to 15 years old were out of school. Primary education gaps are particularly serious, while around one third of students in secondary schools complete their studies (UNDP, 2025).

documentation (51%). This includes birth, marriage, and death certificates, family booklets and national identification cards and passports. Over one in four respondents emphasized the need for legal assistance in dealing with family law issues (28%) and support for family tracing and reunification (27%).



If I go down now, my heart will burn even more when I see all the places I studied, played, and worked in completely destroyed, and the people gone. I'll gain nothing. Of course, I miss Syria – but the country is not just soil and concrete. When people say 'the soil of my homeland' and recite poetry, what they really mean is the people. Every country has soil and buildings. In our case, the people are gone, places are ruined, faces are worn and exhausted.

Respondent 13, Male, 30–44

Nearly half of the respondents mentioned psychosocial support (44%), underscoring the long-term mental health impacts of displacement and conflict, and/or specialized services to deal with people living with disabilities, chronic conditions or elderly people (44%), which is consistent with the high share of respondents

who reported having concerns regarding access to adequate health care upon return to Syria. Qualitative interviews supported this finding, with several respondents describing the psychological weight of their experiences before fleeing Syria and during their journeys – including individual persecution, the loss of loved ones, exposure to violence and torture, as well as years of uncertainty – as something that continued to shape their daily lives and influenced their thoughts about return. One interviewee reflected on how the memory of departure continued to shape her sense of home: “When we left Syria, we left seeing it as a black dot in the world. Whenever you imagine the idea of Syria, you think only of the last thing you lived there – and even if it becomes good, your mind will remain stuck on the last thing you experienced” (Respondent 15, Female, 45+). For others, the loss of loved ones was a barrier to considering return: “We lost people. This barrier of loss creates in us a barrier and a fear of returning – that the people you wished to see in Syria are no longer there” (Respondent 18, Female, 45+). Another reflected on how the psychological weight of conflict and displacement extended across generations: “Our generation and the generation of our parents are all psychologically destroyed. Personally, if I see the military boot or the military uniform even now, I feel a strange feeling – a truly strange feeling” (Respondent 17, Male, 18–29).

Figure 19. Reintegration support (n = 181)



Note: The percentages for housing repair and reconstruction and temporary shelter assistance refer to respondents owning a house, the percentage for legal assistance to deal with HLP issues refers to home and landowners, and the percentage for education support refers to respondents living with children. Respondents could select all that applied.

PERCEPTIONS ON SYRIA'S CURRENT SITUATION AND FUTURE OUTLOOK

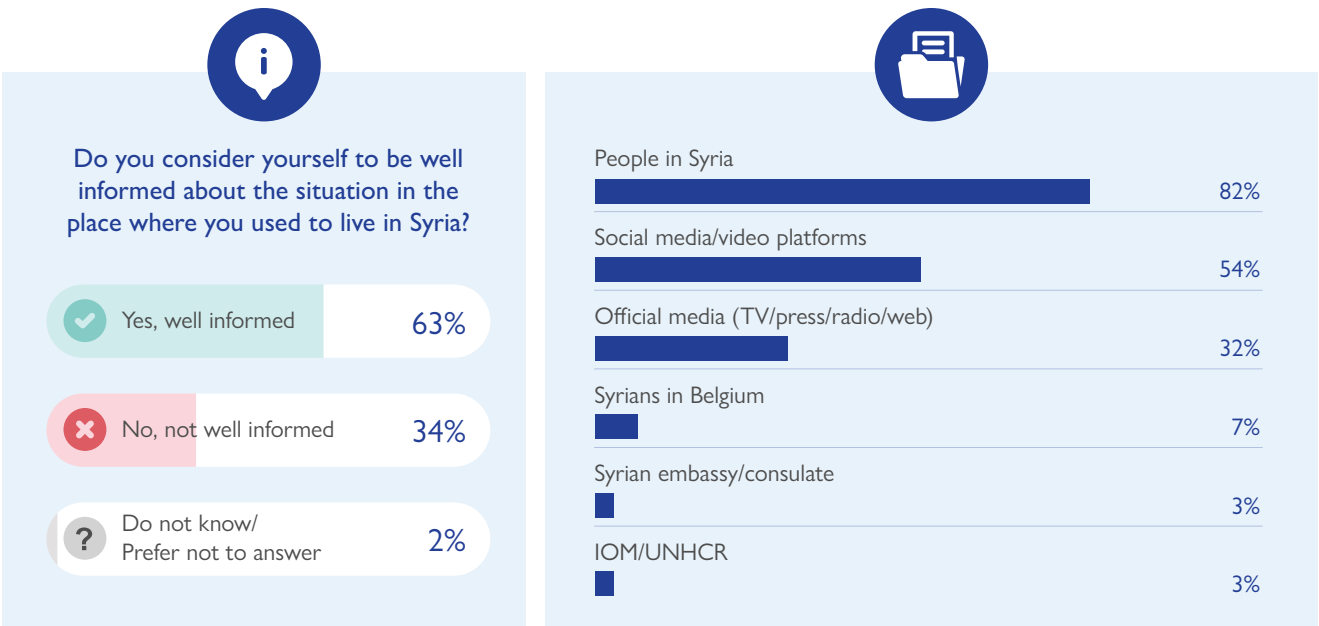
This section examines how respondents stay informed about current developments in Syria and conditions in their areas of origin, and explores their perceptions of the political transition and outlook on Syria's future. Respondents were asked to assess current and anticipated conditions across four key domains: safety and security, availability of services, quality of infrastructure, and employment opportunities.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Most respondents consider themselves well informed about the situation in their area of origin in Syria (63%).

Respondents maintain first-hand ties with people in their areas of origin, with relatives and friends serving as their main source of information (82%). Just over half also rely on social media and video platforms (54%), and around one third receive information from official media outlets (32%). Official sources, such as Syrian representations in Belgium (3%) or international organizations (3%), including IOM or UNHCR, were cited far less frequently and mainly by respondents who expressed intentions to return and are in the process of planning and preparing their return to Syria, often in connection with the need for travel assistance.

Figure 20. Sources of information consulted for updates about the situation in Syria (n = 351, multiple responses)



SITUATION IN AREAS OF ORIGIN



In Syria, they wait for running water once a week to bathe. My family there can't even cover basic household needs. In just the last 15 days, everything got more expensive – electricity bills skyrocketed despite barely having power. Those who haven't lived in Syria can't grasp what people endure. The most basic necessities are missing.

Respondent 2, Male, 18–29

Perceptions regarding the current conditions in Syria were largely negative across the four key domains assessed – safety

and security, availability of services, quality of infrastructure and employment opportunities – with over half of respondents assessing them as 'poor' or 'very poor'. Qualitative interviews reinforced these findings, with respondents describing both the physical and institutional dimensions of reconstruction as still in their early stages: *"The physical infrastructure – buildings, streets and facilities – is almost demolished, almost non-existent. As for the institutional infrastructure – systems, laws, governance – it is also in a rebuilding phase. I'm sure I wouldn't live the same life there"* (Respondent 1, Male, 30–44).

However, while employment opportunities and infrastructure scored poorly or very poorly for most respondents regardless of their characteristics, views on safety and security showed larger variations, particularly in relation to return intentions,

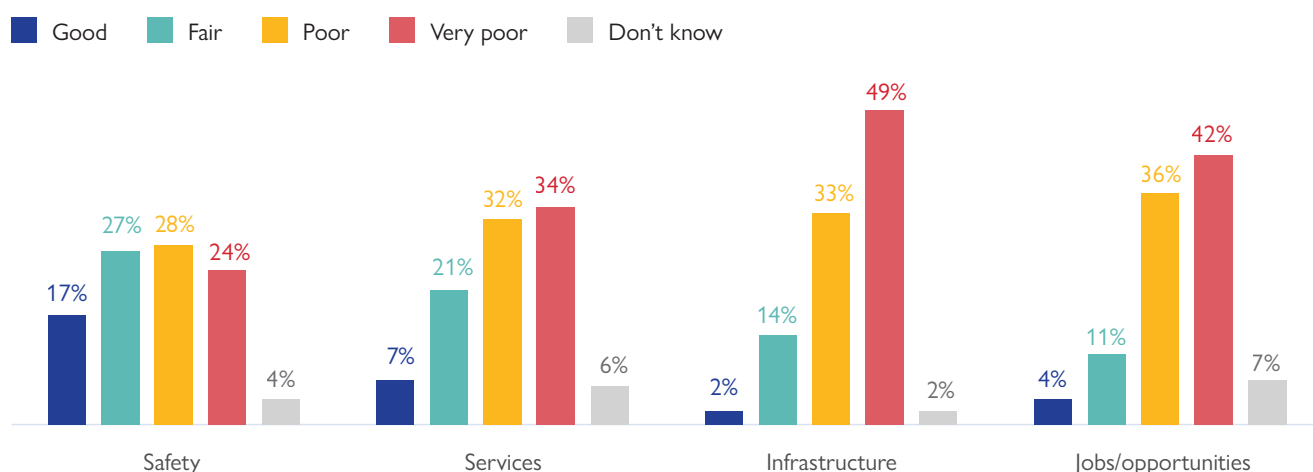
underlining once again the importance of safety as a key factor in return decisions. Respondents who were willing to return or undecided were more than twice as likely to rate safety as 'fair' or 'good' than people unwilling to return (61% versus 25%). Views on safety also reflected varying levels of control across the country, with respondents from Damascus more likely to rate safety conditions as 'fair' or 'good' compared to respondents originally from Aleppo, North East Syria and As-Sweida.³⁹ In addition to the geographical component, perceptions of safety were also influenced by ethno-religious affiliation, as described by qualitative interviewees and discussed in the section above.



Right now, there is no safety. None. Because after people have been exposed to so much killing and violence, they're not going to become model citizens in a day or two and fully commit to the law and say: 'This is my country, I'll be calm now.' They want to get revenge, to settle scores, to correct the record in their own way. So, there is no safety now. The situation is quite difficult.

Respondent 13, Male, 30–44

Figure 21. Rated perception of the current situation in the area of origin in terms of safety and security, availability of services, quality of infrastructure and access to jobs or business opportunities (n = 351)



FUTURE OUTLOOK

Despite predominantly negative assessments of the current conditions, perceptions of the future were relatively more optimistic, with 49 per cent of respondents expressing a positive outlook regarding the situation in their area of origin over the next year, compared to 19 per cent who expected no change, 17 per cent who expected conditions to deteriorate and 15 per cent who were uncertain of how the situation would evolve. Expectations were higher among respondents with intentions to return, with 68 per cent of those willing to return or undecided expressing a positive outlook, compared

to 33 per cent of those unwilling to return. The former were also slightly more likely to report that they personally knew someone who returned to Syria since December 2024 (45% versus 37%), though no follow-up information was available on whether the return had been temporary or permanent.



Both feelings are present. I don't know how such feelings can coexist in a person, but they do – there's hope and fear.

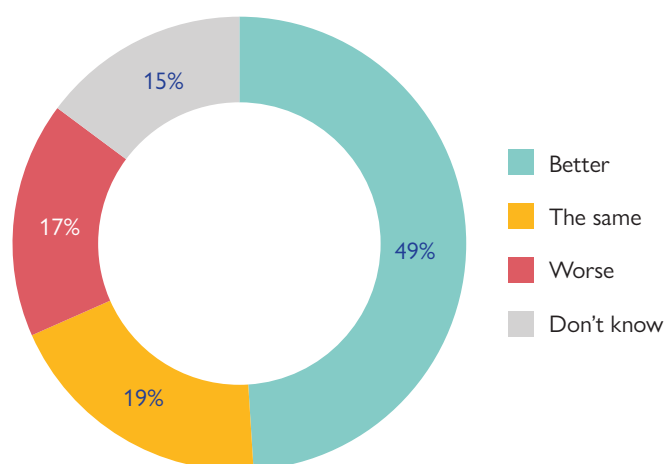
Respondent 3, Male, 30–44

³⁹ Shares vary from 0 per cent in As-Sweida to 22 per cent in Al-Hasakeh, 33 per cent in Deir-ez-Zor and 35 per cent in Aleppo. Note that the number of respondents in some governorates of origin is very low, and findings should be read accordingly.

Qualitative interviews reflected this cautious sense of possibility. While the joy over the change in authorities was widely shared, with several respondents describing it as having opened new possibilities for their future, most respondents tempered this with concerns about what had followed, and many described the future as deeply uncertain. One respondent who had visited Syria described conditions on the ground: *“After the liberation and victory, I went down to Syria, and what I saw there doesn’t match what’s shown online at all. The reality is far better*

in every way. The country is beginning to rebuild, and there’s real hope, but it requires patience. Just as we were patient in building our future here in Belgium, rebuilding Syria will take time. It’s a country destroyed for more than fifty years” (Respondent 10, Female, 18–29). Not all respondents shared this outlook, however, and among those unwilling to return, pessimism about Syria’s future was often profound and deeply rooted in personal experience.

Figure 22. Future expectations regarding the area of origin (n = 351)



A Syrian migrant returning from Sudan to Syria with support from IOM Syria and IOM Sudan. © IOM 2025/May Mahmoud



CONCLUSION AND KEY MESSAGES

The findings presented in this report point to a complex and highly diverse landscape of intentions, experiences, and needs of Syrians in Belgium. Return intentions are shaped by individual histories of displacement, the conditions respondents face in Belgium, the situation in Syria, and the aspirations of people who have often rebuilt their lives under considerable difficulty. This section synthesises the main findings and presents ten key messages that emerge from the analysis, pointing to the same underlying conclusion: **for return and reintegration efforts to be effective and sustainable, they are best designed to reflect the lived experiences of Syrians, prioritising safety, stability, dignity, and essential services over financial incentives alone.**

1. RETURN INTENTIONS ARE SHAPED BY INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY CIRCUMSTANCES

Return aspirations among Syrians in Belgium are personal and highly diversified, reflecting a population with widely varying profiles, experiences, and conditions. Individual histories of displacement, legal status, family composition, length of stay, area of origin in Syria, and socioeconomic situation in Belgium all shape how respondents think about return. Some have built stable lives in Belgium and consider return a realistic future aspiration; others remain in precarious legal situations that make planning impossible; and others have ruled out return entirely, for reasons rooted in factors such as safety, loss and identity. **These findings point to the importance of recognising this diversity in the design of return and reintegration support, rather than treating Syrians as one homogenous group with uniform needs or intentions.**

2. VOLUNTARY AND INFORMED ENGAGEMENT REQUIRES TRUST-BASED, COMMUNITY-ROOTED APPROACHES

Syrians in Belgium rely almost entirely on personal networks, family members, friends and community contacts, as their primary source of information about conditions in Syria (82%), with very limited engagement with official sources such as Syrian representations in Belgium or international organizations (3% each). Outreach for this study proved particularly challenging, with an overall response rate of 46 per cent for surveys and 13 per cent for interviews, reflecting both the limited relevance of return for some Syrians at their current stage of settlement, and the wariness of Syrians in more precarious situations about engaging with processes that could affect their status or be interpreted as an indication of willingness to return. The challenges of outreach documented in this study should not be read as indifference. Once trust was established, respondents engaged openly and in depth, providing perspectives and experiences that are often otherwise largely inaccessible to policymakers. **The experience of this study underlines that building trust is a prerequisite for understanding the needs of Syrians in Belgium, alongside designing policies that are genuinely responsive to them. Sustained, trust-based engagement**

could play a meaningful role in supporting informed, voluntary and dignified decision-making across the full spectrum of intentions.

3. LARGE-SCALE VOLUNTARY RETURN FROM BELGIUM IS UNLIKELY IN THE NEAR FUTURE

Large-scale voluntary return from Belgium is unlikely in the near future. Only a small number of respondents indicated a willingness to voluntarily return within the next 12 months (7%), while a larger share considered return a medium- to long-term aspiration contingent on developments in Syria (38%). This means that **preparedness, flexibility, and a long-term perspective are key considerations for any return and reintegration support framework.**

4. INTEGRATION IN BELGIUM AND VOLUNTARY RETURN TO SYRIA ARE NOT COMPETING OBJECTIVES

The profile of Syrians in Belgium reflects recent arrival patterns, which may have direct implications for return dynamics. A substantial proportion of respondents were still in the asylum process at the time of the survey, many having experienced extended periods without stable housing, employment or legal status. The survey findings show that Syrians who have achieved higher levels of stability in Belgium, through factors such as secure residence status, employment and strong social networks, tend to express greater willingness to return than those in more precarious situations. This suggests that socioeconomic integration in Belgium and voluntary return to Syria are not competing objectives. **Rather, stability in the host country may provide individuals with the agency and confidence needed to make genuinely voluntary and informed decisions about their future, including return. Longer-settled cohorts appear to have attained relative stability, making return more feasible, whereas more recent arrivals often rely on social benefits and face barriers to labour market entry.** While such circumstances can, in some contexts, encourage return, they primarily discouraged return among more recent arrivals by reducing both the overall feasibility of return and the prospects of sustainable reintegration in Syria.

5. IMPROVEMENTS IN SAFETY ARE A PRECONDITION OF RETURN

Safety and security concerns consistently emerged as one of the most decisive factors shaping return intentions, both in survey findings and qualitative interviews. Respondents who rated safety conditions in Syria as 'fair' or 'good' were significantly more likely to express a willingness to return, while those who felt unsafe overwhelmingly ruled it out. **Perceptions of safety varied considerably by area of governorate, with respondents from Damascus more likely to rate conditions positively than those from Aleppo, Northeast Syria and As-Sweida, underlining the importance of geographically differentiated assessments rather than a single national picture.** Safety

improvements are viewed as essential not only for physical protection but as the foundation for livelihood restoration, access to services and dignified reintegration. This underlines the centrality of safety conditions in Syria as the foundation for any sustainable reintegration process.

6. RESTORATION OF ESSENTIAL SERVICES AND RESOLUTION OF HLP ISSUES INFLUENCE THE SUSTAINABILITY OF RETURN

The restoration of essential services and the resolution of housing and land issues in areas of origin emerge as key preconditions for sustainable reintegration. Only one in four former homeowners believed they would be able to return to, and live in their home, with damage, and destruction, occupation, missing documentation and prohibitive reconstruction costs among the most frequently cited obstacles. Concerns about education quality, language barriers for children raised abroad, and the availability of specialized health care further compound the picture. For many respondents, the question is not only whether it is safe to return, but whether Syria can offer the basic conditions needed to rebuild a life with dignity. **These findings point to the importance of addressing these structural conditions through investment in service restoration, legal assistance for property restitution, tailored education and health transition support, and accessible temporary housing, as part of a comprehensive and sustainable return framework.**

7. FLEXIBLE RETURN ARRANGEMENTS CAN MITIGATE THE RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH RETURN

Most respondents in Belgium were separated from their families at the time of assessment, with many providing financial support to relatives in Syria or in third countries. This family fragmentation shapes return decisions in profound ways – primary income earners whose income sustains family members abroad may be unable to consider return without putting those dependents at risk, while others described the prospect of family separation as an insurmountable barrier. **Flexible, cross-border arrangements that allow for staged or partial returns, circular mobility, and the maintenance of socioeconomic ties to Belgium could play an important role in the near-term to enable families to recompose and sustain households without placing individual members at risk.** Such flexibility could also help mitigate risks if conditions in Syria remain uncertain, economic opportunities limited, or essential services not yet fully restored.

8. TEMPORARY AND UNCONDITIONAL VISITS COULD SUPPORT INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

Syrians in Belgium rely on a reliable network of people in their areas of origin for information regarding the situation on the ground. Nonetheless, over half of respondents with temporary

status expressed an interest in conducting temporary and unconditional go-and-see visits, that do not affect legal status in Belgium, to assess conditions in Syria. **Several qualitative interviewees described firsthand observation as the only reliable basis for such a consequential choice, given the difficulty of forming an accurate picture from a distance and with the mixed information they were receiving.** Such visits would allow individuals to directly assess the security situation, their property, local services, prices, and living conditions, thereby bridging uncertainty and informed planning. In doing so, temporary visits may help build the trust and confidence that more permanent decisions require, and support gradual, voluntary and dignified return processes over time.

9. DIVERSIFIED SUPPORT BEYOND FINANCIAL INCENTIVES COULD SUPPORT SUSTAINABLE REINTEGRATION

Around one third of respondents with temporary status would be willing to consider voluntary return procedures with financial incentives. However, return incentives consisting of one-off financial support were widely viewed as insufficient to influence return decisions, with interviewees describing return as a pivotal life decision, in which financial calculations are important but not the determining factor. **The amounts currently available were considered inadequate relative to the investment required to rebuild a life in Syria.** Interviewees also expressed concerns that such measures may encourage premature return without addressing long-term needs and ensuring that conditions are conducive to sustainable reintegration.⁴⁰ Survey respondents indicated a stronger interest in a range of reintegration support measures, including housing and livelihood support, legal assistance and service restoration in Syria, pointing to the importance of diversified and tailor-made forms of support that correspond to the conditions and needs on the ground.

10. AT-RISK GROUPS WHO ARE UNLIKELY TO RETURN VOLUNTARILY REQUIRE CONTINUED PROTECTION

Around half of the survey respondents reported that they do not see return as a viable option for themselves and their families (48%). This group was more likely to report the prevalence of insecurity and violence in Syria, fear of targeted reprisals, and greater distrust of the political change in Syria, reflecting both the intensity of conflict experienced and concerns about future exposure to violence. Interviewees who were members of religious and ethnic minority communities described return as a genuine impossibility rather than a deferred aspiration, given the specific risks they face in Syria. **For at-risk groups – including religious and ethnic minorities, those with a specific political background, and others facing targeted risks – continued and durable protection in Belgium remains essential, regardless of evolving conditions in Syria.**⁴¹

40 According to Round 4 of the Communities of Return Index, returnees continue to face fragile housing conditions, returning to damaged homes, living in temporary shelters and/or facing HLP issues, hindering sustainable reintegration, which may trigger future displacement (IOM, 2026e).

41 A 2023 study on Syrian refugees in Lebanon highlighted how conditions in refugees' home country are the main drivers of return intentions compared to conditions in host countries, which may play a minor role. Only once a basic threshold of safety at home is met (which is not tradable for other 'goods'), refugees compare other factors in the host and home country to assess the feasibility of return (Alrababah, Masterson, Casalis, Hangartner, and Weinstein, 2023).

ANNEX I. METHODOLOGY

The study targeted Syrian nationals aged 18 and above who lived in Syria before 2011 and who subsequently came to live in Belgium. Data collection occurred between 15 October and 30 December 2025 using a mixed-methods approach, drawing on quantitative phone surveys and in-depth qualitative phone interviews. In total, 351 adults were surveyed, gaining insights on 1,016 people (the respondents and their family members currently living with them in Belgium), including 315 children aged below 18 years. To contextualise findings and gain further insights, 20 qualitative interviews with diverse profiles of interest were carried out.

Given the absence of an existing representative database of Syrians living in Belgium with available phone numbers, non-probability sampling was employed. Soft quotas were

set for sex, large age groups (18–29 years, 30–44 years and 45+ years) and year of arrival of respondents, using the most recent available data from the StatBel (2026).⁴²

The questionnaire was developed with contributions from the research consultancy Multicultural Insights and was tested during focus group discussions with Syrians living in reception centres in the Netherlands, where the first wave of the survey was conducted. The questionnaires were subsequently translated into Arabic, pretested with 15 Syrian respondents living in Belgium and adapted to the situation in the country. The fieldwork, including pretesting and translation of the questionnaires, interviewers' training and advertisement, respondents' recruitment, data collection and data processing, was carried out by Multicultural Insights.

Table 1. Overview of the recruiting campaign (leads, contacts and response rate)

REACH OF AD CAMPAIGN	NUMBER OF LEADS
Meta leads	1,110
Snowball sampling	169
Total mobile phone numbers	1,279
TOTAL SAMPLE	1,279 MOBILE NUMBERS
TI. Total completed interviews	351
A. Refusal	198
B. Ineligible (screened out respondents)	374
C. Duplicate/invalid numbers	12
D. Break-offs	21
E. Not reached/no answer	323
Response rate ⁴³	46%
RECONTACT RATE	351 RESPONDENTS
340 respondents	97%

42 Soft quotas were set to ensure that the final composition of the sample approximated the demographic characteristics of the Syrian population in Belgium and their length of stay in the country. Quotas were open early in the field period and their progression was closely monitored to minimize the risk of bias and low-quality responses. Quotas were only partially met due to difficulties encountered in outreach during data collection. Nonetheless, the overall sex and age distribution of the respondents and their family members provides a good match with that of the broader Syrian population in Belgium and the sample of respondents. There is a slightly greater share of children under 18 years (31% versus 26% for the broader population of Syrians in Belgium), and the discrepancy is likely due to the fact that the families in the sample include children born in Belgium, which are not included in the Syrian-born population. There is also good alignment between the sample and the Syrian population in Belgium in terms of year of arrival, though the sample includes a higher share of individuals who arrived in 2015 and between 2023 and 2024.

43 Formula for calculating the response rate: $RR = TI / ((TI + A + D + E * ER))$, where $ER = ((TI + A + D) / (TI + A + D + B)) * 100$

The contact database was built through a targeted digital recruitment campaign using paid advertisements on Meta (Facebook and Instagram).⁴⁴ Ads were designed in Arabic to specifically reach users of Syrian nationality and residency in Belgium, using location, age and gender filters, and adjusted several times to access specific profiles.⁴⁵ A TikTok campaign was also designed to reach younger audiences, though it generated a low number of leads. Offline promotional material was disseminated through outreach to Fedasil single points of contact for reception centres and to Syrian diaspora leaders in Belgium. Dedicated meetings were also held with diaspora leaders to present the campaign and its objectives. The use of snowball sampling, where respondents were asked to provide contact information for other individuals who met the study's criteria, was also employed to expand the contact database and target hard-to-reach profiles, such as women and recently arrived individuals.

All surveys and qualitative interviews were conducted by trained Syrian interviewers, nearly all of whom were women, to ensure cultural and linguistic sensitivity. Upon initial contact, all respondents were screened to ensure that they met selection criteria (e.g. were adults living in Syria before the onset of the 2011 war and currently residing in Belgium). A total of 70 interviews, accounting for 20 per cent of the sample, were validated through online listen-ins. Data were processed using the SPSS statistical package software, which was also used for deriving the necessary statistical analysis.

This survey is part of a larger project to assess the aspirations and intentions of Syrian nationals who have moved to EU countries after 2011. The first wave was conducted in the Netherlands in May 2025, followed by data collection in Belgium and Sweden in October 2025. The survey is intended to be longitudinal, with future rounds at 12–15 months to assess intentions over time. This report can therefore be seen as a baseline measurement.

QUANTITATIVE PHONE SURVEY

Quantitative survey data were collected using Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) and conducted by trained Syrian interviewers to promote openness and trust. A non-probability convenience sampling strategy was used to recruit 351 respondents representing a total of 1,016 individuals (the respondents and their family members living with them in Belgium), for an average family size of 2.9 individuals. Respondents were predominantly males (77%), between 18 and 44 years (80%), and relatively well educated (32% completed tertiary education). Half were working (50%) and around one quarter were attending school or training (21%). Most were married (58%) and living with other family members (59%). Most had arrived in Belgium before 2020 (56%). The main governorates of origin were Aleppo (35%), Idleb (15%), Latakia (11%), Homs (9%), Damascus (8%) and Rural Damascus (8%). The average duration of the survey was 20 minutes.

Table 2. Overview of survey respondents and their family members (n = 1,016, including the 351 respondents)

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS		N	%
Gender	Male	272	77%
	Female	79	23%
	Total	351	
Age group	18–29	127	36%
	30–44	156	44%
	45+	68	19%
	Total	351	

⁴⁴ The Syrian case has been analysed for the recognised role that digital media played in the civil war and the migration process. New media acted as a “digital infrastructure for movement” at all levels. Social media platforms were used for supporting the search for information necessary to organize the migration journey (money transfers, online maps), for following the news and discussing political events, for keeping in contact with family or friends in Syria or (re)connecting with diaspora abroad, and for settling in the new country and building a new sense of community (Miconi, 2020).

⁴⁵ Outreach proved quite difficult in Belgium. In addition to connectivity issues due to the call centre being in Türkiye, which made the ‘caller’ unidentifiable for respondents in Belgium, a significant share of leads (phone numbers linked to social profiles) were not working. Securing respondent participation proved challenging throughout the data collection period. Response rates reached 46 per cent for surveys and 16 per cent for qualitative interviews. The timing of data collection coincided with a sensitive period, during which discussion around voluntary return measures for Syrian nationals and proposed changes to Belgian nationality regulations were underway, which may have contributed to some hesitancy among potential participants. Different outreach strategies were tested and the ad campaign was regularly adjusted introducing new ad visuals to maintain engagement and broaden outreach.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS		N	%
Marital status	Married	202	58%
	Single	117	33%
	Divorced/separated	28	8%
	Widowed and not remarried	3	1%
	Don't know	1	<1%
	Total	351	
Education level	Tertiary	114	32%
	Post-secondary professional	44	13%
	Upper secondary	73	21%
	Lower secondary	82	23%
	None/primary	29	8%
	Other	9	3%
	Total	351	
Employment status in Belgium	Working	175	50%
	Unemployed/Looking for work	53	15%
	Unemployed/Willing to work but no permit	11	3%
	Attending school/training	73	21%
	Housework/caring for family members	10	3%
	Retired	3	1%
	Long-term illness/disability	18	5%
	Doing unpaid voluntary work	6	2%
	Other	2	1%
	Total	351	
Household size	Single adult	145	41%
	2–3 members	76	22%
	4–5 members	87	25%
	6+ members	43	12%
	Total	351	
Type of household	Separated family	315	90%
	Non-separated/reunited	36	10%
	Total	351	
Year of arrival in Belgium	2011–2015	125	36%
	2016–2019	72	21%
	2020–2025	154	44%
	Total	351	

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RESPONDENTS		N	%
Governorate of origin	Aleppo	123	35%
	Idleb	54	15%
	Lattakia	40	11%
	Homs	30	9%
	Damascus	27	8%
	Rural Damascus	28	8%
	Hama	17	5%
	Deir-ez-Zor	9	3%
	Dar'a	8	2%
	Al-Hasakeh	6	2%
	As-Sweida	5	1%
	Tartous	3	1%
	Ar-Raqqa	1	<1%
	Total	351	
SEX AND AGE DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS AND THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS		N	%
Age group	<18	315	31%
	18–29	274	27%
	30–44	244	24%
	45+	183	18%
	Total	1,016	
Gender	Male	606	60%
	Female	410	40%
	Total	1,016	

Note: Due to rounding, the percentages may not add up to 100 per cent.

QUALITATIVE IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with purposively selected participants to gain deeper insights into the factors shaping decision-making around returns. These qualitative interviews complemented the survey findings by exploring return-related decision-making, perceived barriers, and motivations in greater depth. Interviews were conducted via telephone by trained female Syrian interviewers to promote comfort and openness. The interview protocol was translated into Arabic to ensure full comprehension, allowing participants to respond with ease. All respondents provided consent to be

recorded. Recordings were then transcribed and translated into English for analysis. IOM conducted thematic analysis using inductive coding to identify patterns and themes aligned with the core research questions. Efforts were made to ensure diversity across the sample, including both male and female respondents, a range of legal statuses in Belgium, varying age groups, and differing views on return. In total, 20 interviews were conducted, including 10 male and 10 female participants, representing three legal status categories (asylum applicants, residence permit holders, Belgian citizens) and ranging in age from 18 to over 45 years old. The average interview length was 49 minutes.

Table 3. Overview of qualitative interviewees (n = 20)

RESPONDENT	SEX	AGE	MARITAL STATUS	LEGAL STATUS
1	 Male	30–44	Married	Citizenship
2	 Male	18–29	Married	Asylum-seeker
3	 Male	30–44	Married	Asylum-seeker
4	 Male	18–29	Single	Temporary protection
5	 Female	30–44	Divorced	Residence permit
6	 Female	30–44	Single	Asylum-seeker
7	 Male	18–29	Single	Asylum-seeker
8	 Male	30–44	Married	Temporary protection
9	 Female	45+	Married	Asylum-seeker
10	 Female	18–29	Single	Belgian citizenship
11	 Female	18–29	Single	Belgian citizenship
12	 Male	45+	Separated	Belgian citizenship
13	 Male	30–44	Married	Asylum-seeker
14	 Female	18–29	Married	Belgian citizenship
15	 Female	45+	Married	Belgian citizenship
16	 Male	45+	Separated	Belgian citizenship
17	 Male	18–29	Married	Belgian citizenship
18	 Female	45+	Married	Residence permit
19	 Female	45+	Married	Asylum-seeker
20	 Female	30–44	Single	Asylum-seeker

HOW TO READ AND INTERPRET THE RESEARCH FINDINGS⁴⁶

Due to the non-probabilistic nature of the survey, results cannot be considered representative of the broader Syrian population in Belgium and should be considered as indicative only. Even if the sample of respondents and their family members provides a good demographic match to the broader population of Syrians in Belgium, survey respondents may have different intentions, plans and needs from non-participants

who share the same demographic characteristics. To interpret findings, note that large differences (of around 10 percentage points or more) between groups are more likely to indicate real differences in opinion rather than random variation, as opposed to smaller differences, which must be viewed with caution. Similarly, consistent trends across multiple questions provide stronger evidence than isolated differences. If a group repeatedly shows higher or lower figures across multiple items, this suggests a reliable and meaningful pattern. Differences between respondent groups presented in this report were

⁴⁶ As further detailed above, soft quotas were applied to match the sex and age distribution of the Syrian population in Belgium, and their year of arrival in country. Other characteristics of respondents were unknown and could not be controlled for. Especially where snowballing was employed, profiles may be skewed over the 'seeds,' e.g. the initial participants who were used to start the chain of referrals and present some distinctive and peculiar features.

tested using a combination of non-parametric tests, including Pearson's Chi-square test (χ^2) on contingency tables – including Cramer's V post-hoc effect size measure for assessing the strength of association – and Fisher exact test (when sample and expected frequencies in the contingency table were small), with significance tested at $p = 0.05$.⁴⁷

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical safeguards were applied throughout the data collection process to minimize potential risks associated with the sensitive nature of the research topic. Special care was taken in the design of tools and protocols to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants and to avoid causing distress or prompting the reliving of traumatic experiences. As such, participants were not directly asked to disclose sensitive information; instead, questions were framed more generally to allow respondents to share only what they felt comfortable disclosing.

All interviewers involved in data collection received comprehensive training on ethical research principles, including protocols for collecting data on sensitive topics, avoiding pressure for additional information, and maintaining confidentiality and informed consent. A standardised consent script was integrated into both survey and interview tools, and data were only collected from individuals who provided informed and voluntary consent. Participants were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, that they could skip any questions, end the interview at any time, and that refusal to participate would have no negative consequences. They were also assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses.

All data were collected anonymously and securely stored in full compliance with IOM's data protection standards and ethical guidelines.⁴⁸

47 Non-parametric tests, such as the Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests, are essential statistical tools for analysing categorical data when assumptions of normality are not met. The Chi-square test assesses independence between variables for large samples, while Fisher's exact test provides precise results for small sample sizes, particularly in contingency tables. These methods are commonly used to analyse survey data and group differences, ensuring robust analysis for non-normal or ordinal data.

48 For more information on data protection, see IOM's [data protection page](#) and [guidelines](#).

A boy who dropped out of school to sell fruits and vegetables and support his family. © IOM 2026/May Mahmoud



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