

Finding Home:

The Return of Syrian Refugees One Year Later



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Purpose and Scope

This report explores the lived experiences of Karam program participants who have returned to Syria from Turkiye since December 2024. Rather than measuring intent or aspiration as in previous surveys, including the one Karam conducted in summer 2025, this analysis documents participants' motivations, living conditions, livelihoods, emotional well-being, and the practical and psychological challenges of reintegration.

Karam's findings are situated within the broader landscape of return data, including surveys conducted by UNHCR, which provide an important baseline for understanding overall return trends. This comparative approach allows us to examine how return experiences differ when individuals have previously participated in long-term, structured programs, especially those designed to build skills, leadership, and a sense of agency over time.

Central to this report is a continued exploration of what we call the Karam Effect, a concept we initially defined through earlier intention surveys, where Karam participants consistently demonstrated higher levels of preparedness, agency, and emotional awareness than baseline reports. This report assesses how those qualities translate into lived outcomes after return, offering early insight into how long-term investment in people shapes the decision to return, and the ability to rebuild with dignity, resilience, and purpose.

“

I was very optimistic and still am, but the prevailing pessimism in **Syria is enough to shatter your dreams if you listen to the negative talk.** However, I remain optimistic that the future of my Syria will be better.”

- Khalid, 27, Aleppo

Photo: Ahmed Akacha



UNHCR reports document large-scale returns from Turkiye following the fall of the Assad regime. Most returnees report widespread damage to housing, limited access to basic services including water, electricity, internet connectivity, healthcare, and weak economic opportunities. Most returns are as families, with their destinations largely in areas of origin.

Karam's data is consistent with these observations and adds additional dimensions by capturing who is returning, where they are settling, and how they relate to being home. We start from understanding the trend, but seek to analyze the lived experience of Syrians who have completed the physical journey home, recognizing that the emotional journey is longer, more complex, and still unfolding.

Return Patterns Across Karam's Community

Given the size of the Karam Studios program, we anticipated a youthful respondent cohort. In fact, 34.5% of respondents were 18 years old or younger, and the median age of respondents was 27. A strong majority of respondents (62%) were women.

Nearly 60% reported living in rural or countryside areas, with a strong concentration in Idlib (38%), followed by Homs (29%), Damascus (18%), and Aleppo (13%). There was a strong preference for the governorate of origin (89%), and only about half were able to make an exploratory trip before their return trip.

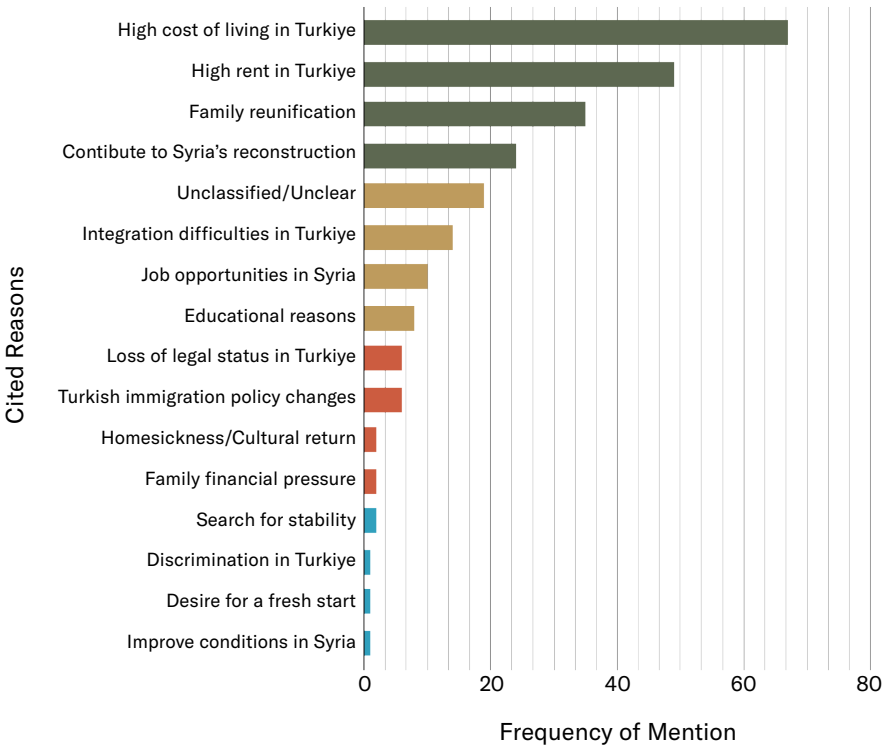
While the youth concentration in our survey demographics influences the data, it points to a young, rural returning population. This has direct implications for access to education, health services, and rural infrastructure. High female participation further shapes how return is experienced and reported, particularly through roles as caregivers, aspiring students and employees, and heads of households.

This analysis recognizes that we are surveying a cohort that left Turkiye while in one of Karam's core programs (Karam Families, Karam Studios, or Karam Scholars) or as Karam Leaders (graduates of one of these core programs). Respondents consistently describe themselves as students, caregivers, and providers for themselves and their families. This is reflected in the expanded analysis of the Karam Effect.

Motivations for Returning Home: It's Complicated

The return to Syria is primarily driven by the belief that a better life can be rebuilt in the home country. Survey findings show that factors pushing Syrians away from Turkiye played a significant role in shaping return decisions, particularly the high cost of living and housing. At the same time, many respondents described motivations that extend beyond economic pressure. The desire to reunite with family and to participate in rebuilding Syria emerged as a powerful driver of return anchored not only in material considerations but in purpose, belonging, and the hope of a different future.

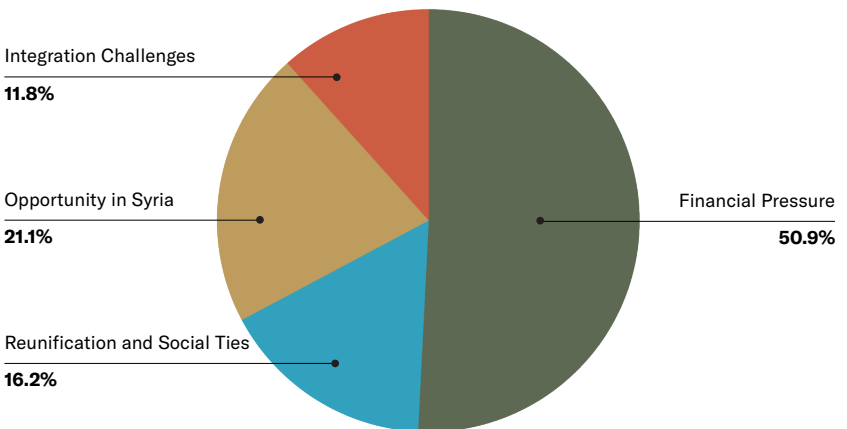
Primary Cited Reasons for Return





When respondents describe their return as a “search for stability” or use similarly broad language, it often suggests that the displaced refugee population is tired of the fragile circumstances and years of uncertainty in their country of resettlement. Many are seeking a sense of belonging and control in their country of origin, but the return home does not happen under ideal circumstances. It is less about certainty and more about looking for solutions in a place that, despite everything, still feels like home.

Classification of Reasons for Return



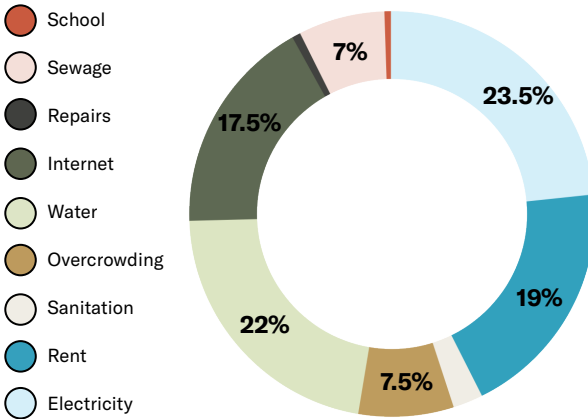
Housing and Infrastructure at Home

Motivations for return vary widely, much like the housing conditions people encounter in the months after arriving home.

61% of respondents reported being unable to repair their homes, while 13% were actively restoring a family house. As a result, 45% were renting at the time of the survey, and less than a third (29%) were living in a house they own. Nearly 20% were staying with family or friends.

Even among homeowners, housing quality is lacking. Gaps in basic infrastructure and service are common, especially in rural areas where most respondents live. Limited access to utilities, ongoing damage, and isolation compound the challenges of return and shape daily life in the early months of resettlement.

Housing and Infrastructure Challenges



Our findings mirror UNHCR’s reporting; however, Karam’s data and analysis link these limitations with their impact on emotional well-being and expectations across genders and generations.

Employment and Financial Security



The age profile of respondents shapes reported employment outcomes. Overall, 16% report being employed. Among respondents over the age of 18, that figure rises to 24%. At the household level, employment is more common, with 71% reporting at least one household member is working.

When describing barriers to employment, several themes emerged. These include limited qualifications, a lack of available opportunities, illness or special needs, and transportation challenges.

Despite a relatively high household employment rate, 63% of respondents report being worse off financially than they were in Turkiye. Rising living costs and low wages were cited as the primary drivers, with rent, food, and healthcare expenses placing the greatest strain on household finances. Only 8% reported being better off financially since their return home.

In today's Syrian context, employment does not guarantee financial security. Instead, it often coexists with ongoing financial stress and worry, as this report will reveal in later sections.

Education Stabilizes and Motivates



Over 80% of households report having at least one person enrolled in school or university. On average, there are nearly three students per family, and one-third report that a student is attending university. Many households include students across multiple levels of education.

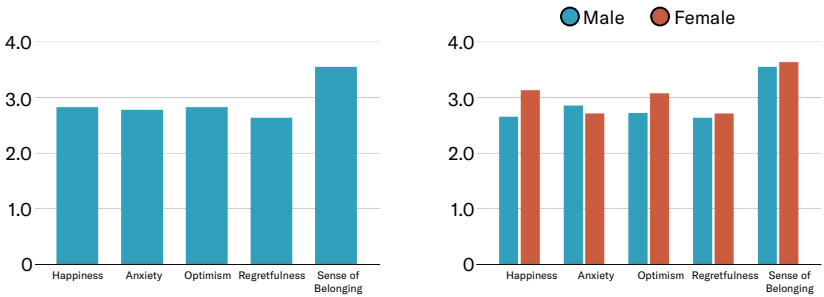
Despite financial strain and ongoing uncertainty, education remains a continued priority. Employment among respondents aged 18 and younger is just 10%, suggesting that education and its potential impact on future outcomes remain a motivation and stabilizing force for families navigating return.

Respondents' participation in and graduation from Karam programs likely contribute to this pattern. Across Karam Families, Karam Studios, and Karam Scholars, education and learning are central priorities. This emphasis, a core aspect of the Karam Effect, persists after return, shaping the entire family's focus as they acclimate to home.

Emotional Wellbeing: Belonging is the Anchor

Across all reported emotional indicators (happiness, anxiety, optimism, regret, and belonging), belonging registers the highest average score. This pattern is also observed across genders.

Average Reported Emotion (5=Highest)



The overall emotional register is moderate, with regret scoring the lowest on average. Within these means, however, emotional experiences vary widely.

Alongside gender disaggregation, distinct emotional patterns emerge. Men's strongest secondary emotions are happiness and optimism, whereas women's are anxiety and optimism. Youth aged 19-25 report the highest levels of emotional well-being, while older adults, particularly women, report the lowest sense of belonging. Strong correlations indicate that as feelings of belonging increase, levels of anxiety and regret decline sharply.

Housing, Employment, and Emotion Shape the Feelings on the Return Home

People living in their own home reported higher levels of happiness and optimism, but also higher regret. Renters' lower regret might reflect fewer expectations or greater flexibility of not being tied to a property that is often damaged.

Respondents from employed households report higher belonging but lower happiness and optimism. Work availability is a source of stress and insecurity and often highlights gaps in opportunities, skills, transportation, or other infrastructure. Employment may build community ties and expand local networks.

The material stability of homeownership and employment strongly affects emotional well-being, but not necessarily in expected ways. They create stability, but also more burdens and responsibilities. Not having them may create a sense of flexibility and additional options.

“

A new life has begun; it's time to adapt to it.”

- Amina, 35, Homs Countryside

The Karam Effect in Practice

The Karam Effect first appears as agency. For people who participated in or graduated from our programs, return is not a consequence; rather, it is a choice that is intentional, planned, and prepared for, with conditions and a recognition of new responsibilities. Participants discuss timing, their futures, and the family unit. Even when the return is delayed or unlikely, as shared in the intentions report, the decision is still framed as owned and deliberate, rather than reactive. This represents a clear shift from narratives of waiting or uncertainty. Engagement with Karam empowers people to identify options, recognize flexibility, and move toward active decision-making.

The effect also appears in the expression of emotions and belonging. Respondents report a range of emotions, often describing anxiety and optimism held in balance rather than extremes.

“

That’s the feeling; it’s both **comfortable and uncomfortable.**”

- Rasha, 42, Homs

They explain why they feel both. Housing, work, and family obligations weigh heavily, yet many still describe a strong sense of identity and place. People recognize that circumstances can generate anxiety or regret, while also understanding that being in and belonging in Syria—and contributing to rebuilding the country—matter. These emotions can occur simultaneously, and the ability to hold mixed emotions points to psychological grounding rather than confusion.

Finally, the Karam Effect appears in the forward mobilization of the respondents, particularly in women’s responses. Interest in education and rebuilding remains present, despite immediate circumstances that postpone action. In Karam’s earlier intentions survey, delays in return were paired with future-oriented planning

that included a journey home and participation in rebuilding Syria. At the same time, women emerge as central narrators of these futures. They speak often, clearly, and with authority about family decisions, risks, and hopes, even when the circumstances are extreme.

“

Because I lived through many important moments in my life in Turkiye, I feel a **stronger sense of belonging to Turkiye**. Even now, I find it difficult to accept the idea of Turkiye not being in my life and my settling in Syria. But **I am optimistic, and I know that these feelings are temporary.**”

- Jaafar, 23, Idlib

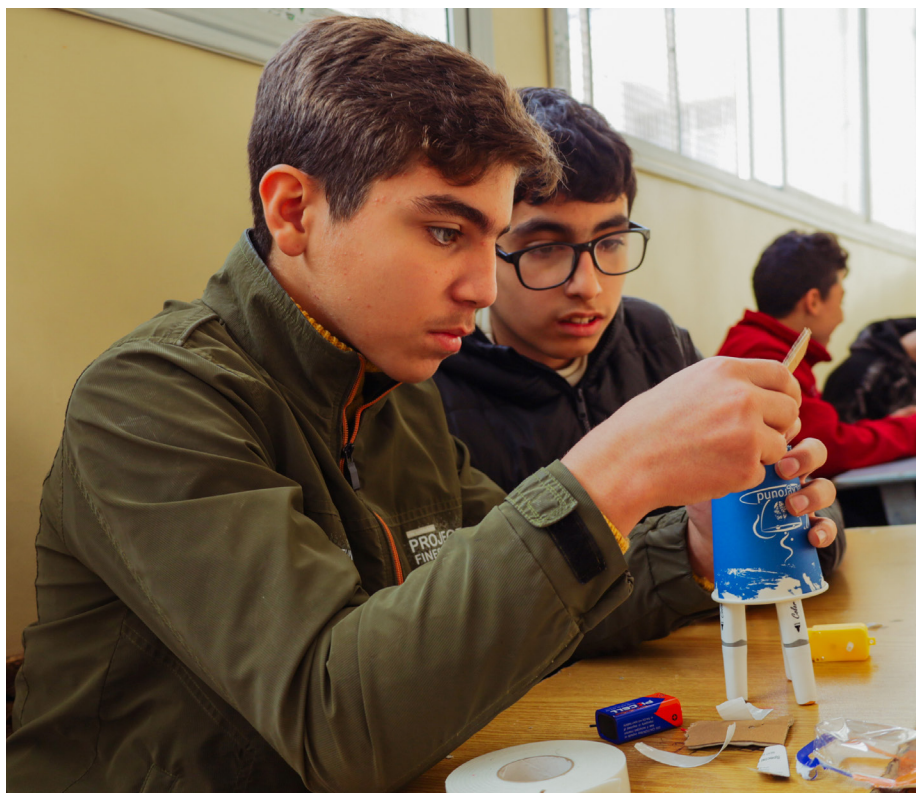
This is not incidental. It reflects programs that create space for women’s participation and leadership.

Taken together, these patterns show that Karam does more than prepare people for return. Karam supports agency, clarity, and forward thinking in lives shaped by long-term displacement.

“

Given the challenges we face, **it’s only natural that after a 10-year absence we would encounter difficulties.**”

- Fatima, 37, Homs Countryside



For Karam participants, return is not an endpoint but a part of an ongoing personal and national journey. Anxiety, regret, and optimism coexist with belonging, agency, and drive. The evidence suggests that structured engagement before return does not remove challenges; it reshapes how people understand and face them.

“

I'm not happy at all, but **I feel optimistic**, my living conditions are improving, and I live with hope for better times.”

- Fatima, 40, Homs

This is the Karam Effect.

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