



**The Journey Home:
Karam Foundation's Insights on The Hopes and
Challenges of Refugees Returning to Syria**

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Executive Summary

A Fragile Ending, A Historic Beginning

On December 8, 2024, Syria’s 14-year war ended with the fall of the Assad regime, closing one of the century’s darkest conflicts. Over a decade of unimaginable suffering left more than 650,000 people killed, over 100,000 forcibly disappeared and 56,000 detained. More than 13 million Syrians—60% of the 2011 population—were displaced, the largest proportional displacement in decades.

Cities like Aleppo, Homs, Raqqa, and Idlib, once full of life, were reduced to rubble. In Syria today, over 60% of infrastructure is destroyed, 90% of the population lives in poverty, more than 2.5 million children are out of school, and at least 5,000 schools lie in ruins.

And yet, despite this devastation, something extraordinary is happening. Since December, more than 2.7 million Syrians have returned home. These first steps are fragile, uncertain, and full of risk. But they are also full of hope. The dream of return — carried for over a decade in the hearts of millions — is no longer just a dream. The journey home has begun.

“The happiness of the Syrian people in liberating their country will surely generate positive energy that will drive them to work hard to rebuild and develop it.” (18-year-old male in Reyhanli, originally from Idlib)

Karam’s Role in the Journey Home

From the earliest days of the conflict, Karam Foundation has asked not only if Syrians would return but how. How would families rebuild lives broken by war? How would children, educated in exile, rejoin classrooms in Syria? How could dignity and opportunity be restored after years of displacement?

Karam means “generosity” in Arabic. With authenticity, expertise, bravery, and generosity, Karam Foundation (Karam) restores the dignity and opportunity for communities affected by conflict. Karam builds pathways to leadership and self-determination through a holistic model of innovative learning, entrepreneurial development, and community-driven aid, aiming to empower 10,000 Young Leaders by 2028.

Since 2011, Karam has created long-term, locally-led solutions to address the needs of displaced Syrian communities. Through our interconnected programs—Karam Studios, Karam Scholars, and Karam Families — delivered from our flagship Karam House innovation centers, we have helped thousands pursue higher learning, heal from trauma, and become changemakers.

Now, with Syrian liberation and return underway, our mission is entering a new chapter. In spring 2025, Karam established **Beit Karam** in Syria to serve both returnees and those who never left. Our work now bridges exile and return — ensuring Syrian youth are not only surviving, but thriving, and leading the rebuilding of their homeland.



Karam Definitions

Karam Families

To ensure refugee youth can stay in school, we provide conditional cash stipends, awareness workshops, and language courses to vulnerable Syrian refugee families, eliminating the financial constraints that otherwise force youth into child labor and early marriages.

Karam Studios

Our core informal, innovative learning program, developed with expertise from MIT, includes a series of six-week design-based learning courses, or “studios”, focused on technology, arts, design, and critical thinking. Through this two-year innovative education program, students also receive mentorship, psychosocial support, and access to college preparatory workshops.

Karam Scholars

To foster continued leadership development, we support Syrian refugees to pursue higher education by providing scholarships, grants, social support, entrepreneurship workshops, and peer-to-peer interactions with current university students.

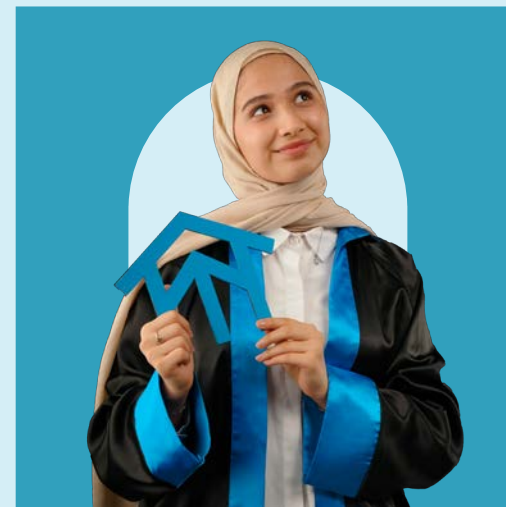
In response to the collapse of the Assad regime and rising returns to Syria, Karam is scaling its direct programming inside Syria to ensure that youth can move beyond survival and access world-class learning and opportunity.

Karam Leaders

Karam Leaders are individuals who have completed one of Karam's programs (Karam Families, Karam Studios, or Karam Scholars) and continue to carry forward the values of resilience, creativity, and service. They are empowered to lead in their communities, careers, and personal lives.

To sustain their growth, Karam provides ongoing pathways for leadership development: mentorship opportunities, advanced skills training, and connections to regional and global networks. Leaders are invited to re-engage as mentors, facilitators, and collaborators, ensuring that their journey inspires and supports the next generation of youth entering Karam's programs.

Participants *'On the Pathway'* are those enrolled in or directly impacted by Karam programs. They embody what is possible when opportunity meets determination: a community of changemakers shaping the future of Syria and beyond.



Listening to Syrians on the Brink of Return

Karam's approach has always been to listen first. Since 2011, Karam has built long-term, locally-led solutions for displaced Syrian communities. With Syria's liberation, shifting refugee policies in Turkiye and evolving conditions in Syria created an urgent need for responsive programming.

In February 2025, Karam surveyed program participants in Turkiye on their return intentions; a second survey, the subject of this report, conducted in May–June 2025 reached over 2,000 Leaders and Pathway Leaders to explore needs and perspectives. Since then, hundreds of check-in calls and interviews have tracked planning or already returned, helping Karam adjust programs to address reported challenges.

Our goals were clear:

- (1) Track shifts in return intentions since January
- (2) Identify obstacles and align our programs to address them
- (3) Develop a strategy for scaling programs inside Syria
- (4) Understand long-term concerns of youth in Turkiye not yet ready to return

Complementing Other Surveys

This report builds on broader humanitarian data (UNHCR, IRC, and others) but offers unique, generationally focused insights. Unlike large-scale reports, our surveys connect directly to participants' journeys — revealing not only what families decide, but why, and how Karam's programs can make return more possible.

Cohort-Based Surveys:

Tied to participant records, Karam's surveys can refine results by age, generation, stage of life, and family role, providing essential generational perspectives on return.

Quantifying Emotional Motivations:

Karam tracks frequency and intensity of emotional drivers of return, analyzing variations across generations, genders, and educational background.

Understanding Gaps:

Unlike broad surveys, Karam's cohort approach yields targeted insights. While IRC and others show intentions fluctuating with events, Karam's data shows the desire to return is consistent, with only timing shifts. This allows Karam to link results directly to program outcomes.

Key Findings: Ready in Spirit, Stalled by Circumstances

“Because we have not been there for a long time, and we would be starting from zero. So I am both excited and also afraid and hesitant.” (25-year-old woman in Hatay, originally from Aleppo)

Return is a Multigenerational Dilemma: Perceptions of return vary across three generations. Karam Scholars are more excited but often balance plans with education investments or leaving to a third country with more opportunity. Families weigh children's education, housing, and stability with greater anxiety. Graduates (our Karam Leaders) feel strong ties but are anchored by responsibilities including housing, career, and dependents. Youth remain caught between ambition and circumstance, imagining return as an distant or abstract idea stemming from a sense of nostalgia.

Family Connection and the Desire to Rebuild Drive Intentions: Across all generations, the deepest motivators are reuniting with loved ones and helping rebuild Syria. The desire to belong and to give back remains a powerful current carrying families toward home, even in the face of immense challenges.

Women's Engagement Reflects Trust and Leadership: Women comprised the majority of respondents, especially as heads of household or caregivers. Their strong engagement underscores the trust Karam has built and highlights women's central role in shaping the future of return and reconstruction.

Obstacles are Specific and Shared: Housing, income, education, and basic services remain the greatest barriers. Families also need time and resources to prepare for the transition. These challenges are not insurmountable, but they must be addressed for return to be safe and sustainable.

The Karam Effect: From Survival to Agency

***“I know that I am capable of helping the country with the things I have learned.”** (20-year-old man in Istanbul, Originally from Aleppo)*

For over a decade, Syrian refugees in Turkiye and beyond have lived in survival mode — navigating exile, trauma, and the daily struggle to meet basic needs. Karam’s work has been to break that cycle and replace it with something radically different: spaces of dignity, learning, and leadership.

At the core of our mission is the belief that every displaced person deserves dignity, agency, and the opportunity to shape their own future. These desires are reflected in the participants’ perspectives on returning to Syria. Survey results show growing confidence and practical decision-making that were fostered through Karam’s community-driven programs.

The Karam Effect is the measurable difference that emerges when displaced youth and families are given not just aid, but tools, mentorship, and community. It is visible in how participants approach obstacles across emotional and generational dimensions. 34% of Karam Leaders, such as Karam Scholars, plan to return, compared with 19% in Support to Life’s and 27% in UNHCR’s data. Karam Studios youth (57% female) also show higher inclination (36%). These findings highlight confidence and empowerment that shift return from intention to realistic planning.

Beyond statistics, Karam’s programs restore a sense of possibility. Our participants describe return not just as an obligation, but as an opportunity to reunite families, heal communities, and rebuild with pride. The Karam Effect is a

mindset shift and articulates the difference between a refugee who dreams of return but feels powerless, and a refugee who sees return as possible, and themselves as essential to rebuilding Syria.

Shaping the Path Forward

Over the next 12-18 months, Karam will continue supporting families as they navigate the emotional and practical dimensions of return. These initiatives will shape core programs and guide strategy for Syria and future partnerships.

Information and Resources: Most respondents rely on social media or family for news on Syria, but this information can be incomplete or outdated. With moves often decided within 30 days, accurate resources are critical. Karam will expand workshops on transferring academic records, financial planning, psychosocial support, and building local networks.

Travel and Housing: Costs of travel and housing often determine feasibility. Covering these allows families to focus on emotional barriers, building professional networks, and education. In the coming months, Karam will expand access to The Journey Home, a return grant to help Karam Families, young professionals, and students afford relocation and start new lives in Syria.

Youth and Uncertainty: Karam Studios participants report anxiety and confusion about return. By integrating storytelling, digital memory-making, or “future self” activities into programming, Karam can help youth contextualize return as an unfolding story rather than a forced endpoint.

Community Advantages: Karam respondents have a lot in common with the broader Syrian refugee community, but also stand apart through the trust and loyalty built by what we call the Karam Effect—the power of connection, peer learning, and shared experience. From finding housing to rebuilding or transferring to universities, these peer-to-peer lessons prove as powerful as any resource. For Karam, this extends the staff’s decade-long role in Turkiye, making the exchange of testimonials and lived experience a key factor for successful return.

Karam Network: Karam is committed to learning from and supporting refugees’ return. Resources already connect those who have returned with others preparing to. We will continue to survey, collect data, and evaluate needs, successes, and challenges. The goal is to provide resources for all Syrians who wish to return voluntarily.

A Call to Action

Syrians cannot walk this path alone. Here are our recommendations for humanitarian organizations, governments, and donors.

Humanitarian Organizations: Humanitarian actors should shift from scale to rebuilding Syria. They should fund adaptive models of durable solutions, including local integration and circular mobility. Programs must reflect generational differences; diverse skills and ages are essential for return and a resilient society. Broad partnerships across organizations can strengthen return through shared expertise and community. Organizations like Beit Karam can play a critical role in co-creating solutions with youth whose voices are often excluded but essential for long-term sustainability.

Governments: Host governments must uphold voluntary return and avoid scapegoating resettled communities. Governments should allow extended “go-and-see” visas to help families assess and prepare for return. Given that the immediate future remains uncertain, circular return should be permitted so Syrians are not penalized if they need to come back to their host country. Progressive policies for cash remittances are also essential, whether through banks, electronic portals, or in cash.

The Syrian government faces a complex agenda but can ease reintegration by:

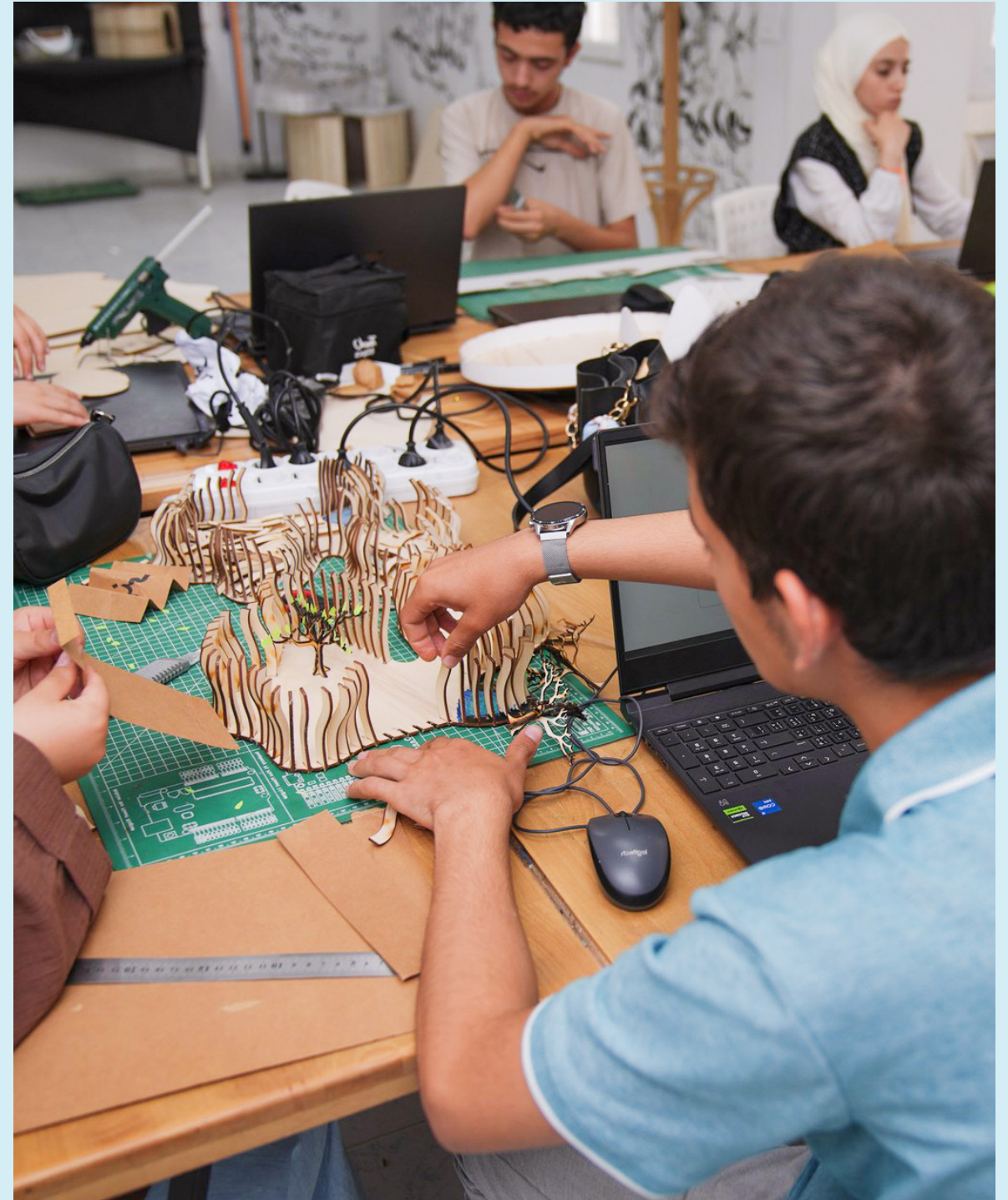
- Developing a catch-up curriculum to support academic pathways and ensure diaspora students compete fairly with peers.
- Prioritizing property restitution, documentation, and civil record recovery as part of transitional justice.
- Designing economic policies that incentivize local investment and prioritize Syrian entrepreneurs, ensuring assets—including intellectual property—have the opportunity to remain Syrian-owned.
- Collaborating with NGOs and nonprofit organizations to design robust, flexible educational and credentialing systems that bridge informal and formal learning, ensuring youth can access pathways to higher education and employment.

Donors: Donors play a key role in making refugees' return safe and sustainable. They should fund flexible, readiness-based programming rather than rigid cycles, and invest in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) as a core pillar of integration. Donors can strengthen the sector through pooled funds or challenge grants that enable creative readiness tools (e.g., a Return Readiness Index or storytelling-based assessments). They should also support cross-sector collaboration to build integrated solutions and adjust reporting requirements to better balance qualitative results.

Conclusion: Our Shared Future

The war stole years, homes, and lives. But it did not break the resilient Syrian spirit. Across every survey, one truth is constant: Syrians want to go home — not only to recover what was lost, but to rebuild what is possible.

Karam's role is to walk (and learn) alongside them and offer tools, networks, and hope, as they make the hardest journey of all: from exile back to belonging. The path forward is uncertain, but it is filled with possibility. And together, with radical generosity at our core, we will build a future worthy of Syria's youth.



Introduction

The January 2025 Survey

In the weeks following Syria's liberation in December 2024, the refugee community faced a new set of urgent questions: Could families return home safely? What obstacles would they encounter? And how could organizations like Karam adapt quickly to meet shifting realities?

For many Syrians in Turkiye, the prospect of return was hopeful yet uncertain. Infrastructure inside Syria remained devastated, services were limited, and housing was widely destroyed. Yet the pull of home was strong. Early reports from UN agencies and humanitarian groups painted a broad regional picture, but lacked the generational and program-specific insights Karam needed to guide its own work.

To address this gap, Karam launched its first community-wide survey in January 2025, building on years of monthly program check-ins but expanding the scope to reach over 1,100 displaced participants. This survey provided one of the first detailed snapshots of how Syrians in Karam's network were processing the possibility of return, capturing both their hopes and their fears, and setting the foundation for program shifts in the months ahead.

With a 66.8% response rate, this was the first effort beyond monthly program check-ins to gauge the refugee community's intentions and attitudes toward returning to Syria, as well as the barriers and obstacles they anticipated. The survey offered a benchmark of perspectives from the communities Karam serves and provided a more detailed picture than broader external research.

The results also helped validate the direction of Karam's new initiatives introduced after Syria's liberation.

Karam Responses to the January Survey

In early 2025, Karam shifted its programs to meet the realities of refugee return. For Karam Families, we replaced Turkish language lessons and tutoring with Arabic. Since 2011, over 800,000 Syrian children have been born in Turkiye, and many other Turkiye-educated children lack the Arabic needed for school and daily life in Syria. Karam now offers in-person and virtual Arabic and subject lessons to help students build literacy and rejoin the Syrian curriculum.

Workshops across all programs were updated in spring 2025 to cover Syrian systems and procedures. Returnees reported these sessions helped them plan, integrate, and secure documentation. College Prep workshops now include Syrian universities, and families completed Financial Management workshops to prepare for the costs of return and resettlement.



The June 2025 Survey

Overview

Following the January 2025 Survey and the initial steps we took to adjust our programs for the Syrian refugee community, we conducted a second, more in-depth survey six months later to track how return intentions and barriers were evolving.

This survey was designed to assess perceptions of return to Syria among participants in Karam's core programs. The aim was to better understand how return intentions vary across different age groups, program engagement levels, and family contexts, and to identify emotional and practical factors influencing those intentions.

Methodology

Program Groups

Respondents were drawn from three core programs:

- **Karam Families:** Heads of household with school-age children.
- **Karam Studios:** Youth ages 14–18 in the creative learning program.
- **Karam Scholars:** University students supported by Karam.

Each group reflects a distinct age cohort and stage in displacement, and was analyzed independently to account for age, program engagement, and role (youth vs. caregiver).

Survey Design and Distribution

The digital survey included quantitative multiple-choice and qualitative open-ended questions, distributed via Karam's outreach channels in Arabic and Turkish. The core segmentation question was:

“Do you or your family plan to return to Syria in 2025?”

Mandatory response options were:

- Yes, in 2025
- Yes, but after 2025
- Undecided
- No plans to return
- Already returned

Responses were further disaggregated by program and by participant status (Active vs. Graduated/Leader) to examine how engagement influenced emotional outlook, return intentions, and perceived obstacles.

Sampling and Response Rate

The survey used non-probability purposive sampling, inviting all active and graduated participants across programs. Participation was voluntary. The overall response rate was 56.8%, with 72.3% among current program participants.

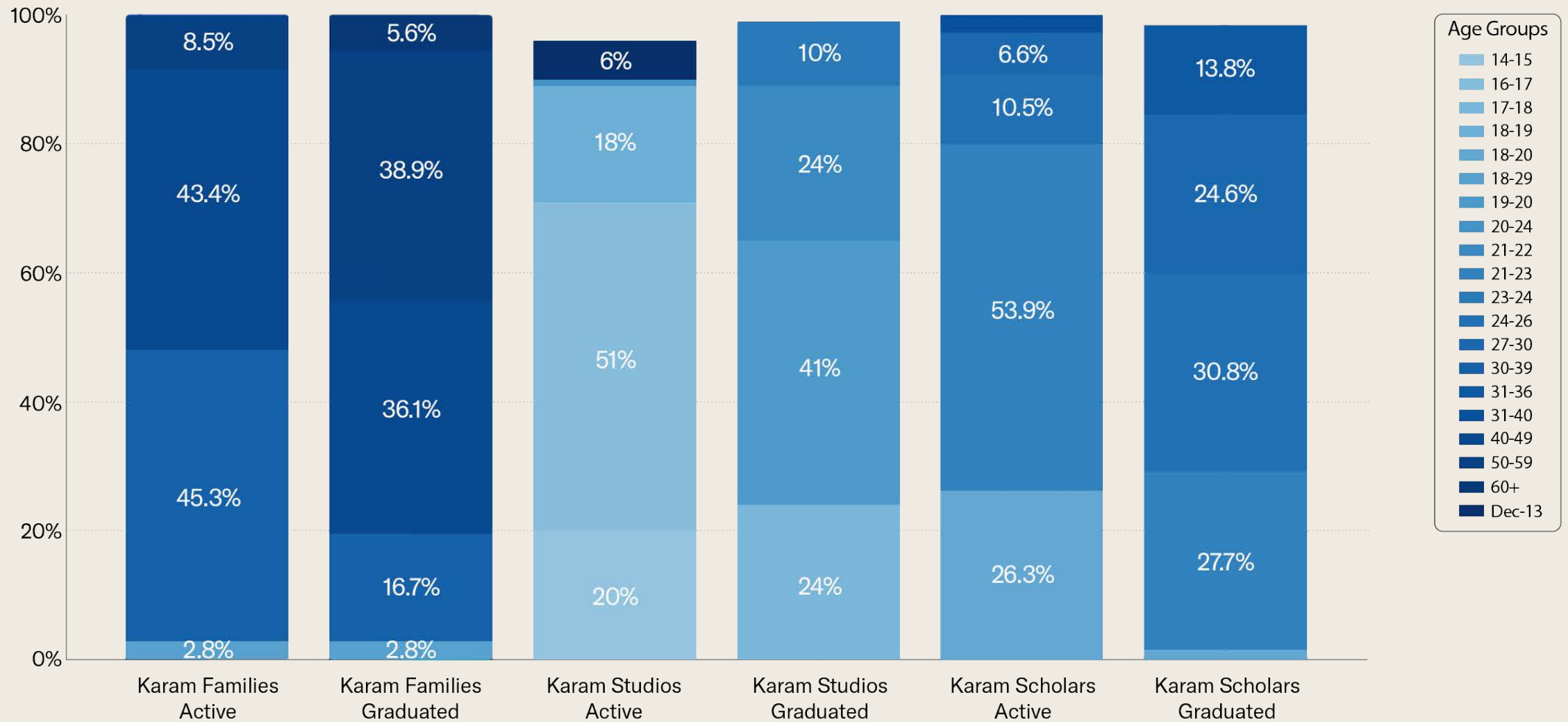
Respondents' Profiles

Age

The age distribution across Karam's core programs reflects the multigenerational nature of displacement, with cohorts spanning adolescence, early adulthood, and parenthood. Karam Studios and Karam Scholars primarily engage youth and young adults navigating identity, education, and aspiration, while Karam Families centers on caregivers making decisions rooted in stability, safety, and long-term planning for dependents and extended households.

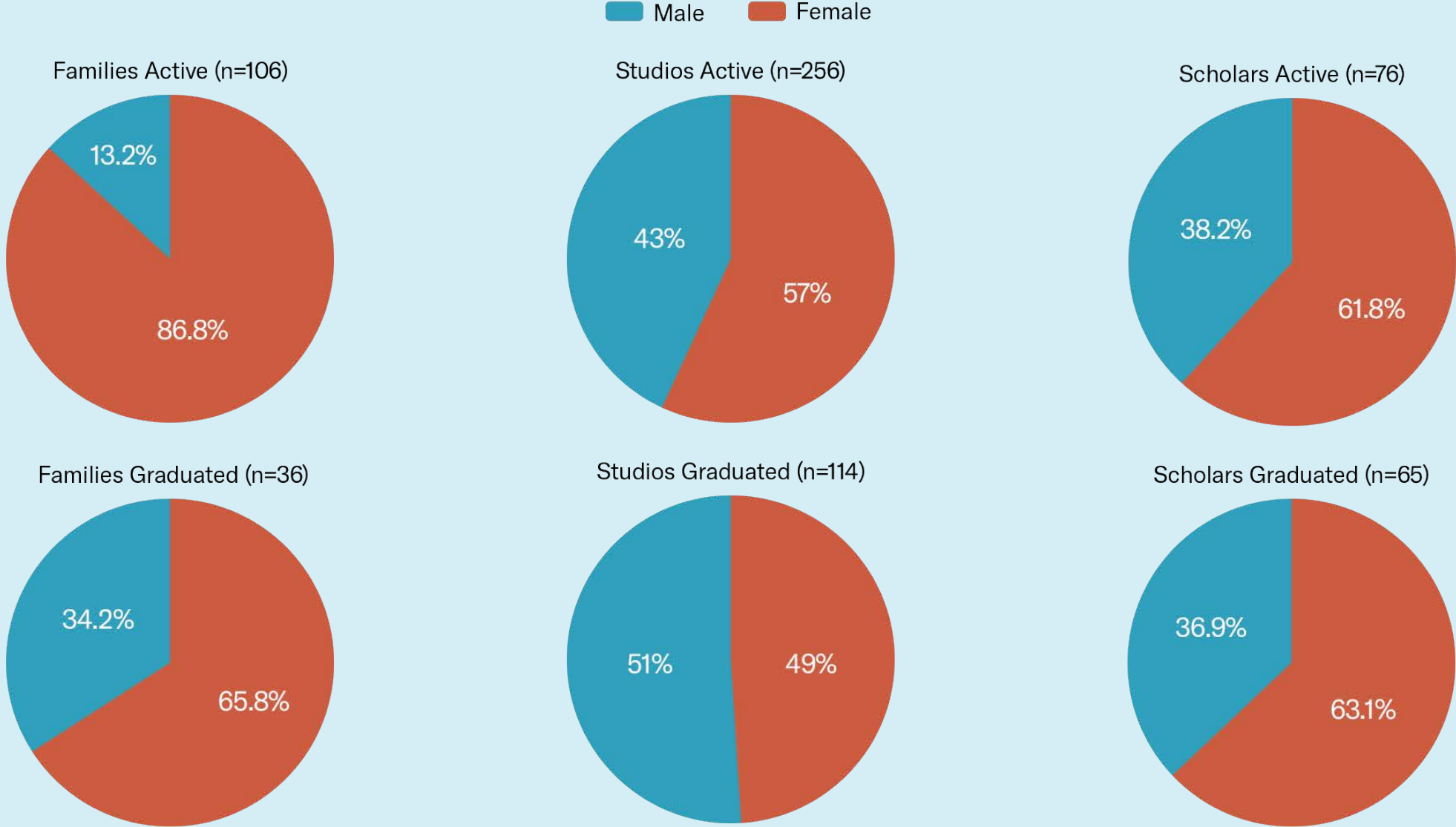
The overall average respondent age is 24, with a median age of 20, skewed lower by the large number of Studios participants. Age diversity is not only demographic; it shapes how return is understood. For adolescents (Studios), return is often abstract; for university students (Scholars), aspirational; and for adult caregivers (Families), conditional or improbable.

The chart below illustrates these dynamics across programs, offering both a snapshot of who is responding and the practical contexts shaping their outlook on return.



Gender

Gender data across all cohorts reveals a consistent pattern: Karam’s programming reaches both males and females in a way that reinforces balance, inclusivity, and responsiveness to gender dynamics. The gender split amongst respondents was 62.3% female and 37.7% male.



Cross-Cohort Reflections

Across all cohorts, women consistently out-respond men even disproportionately to their engagement in the program. Karam Families (66-87% women), Karam Studios (57-49% women), and Karam Scholars (62-63% women), and all demonstrate consistently high female engagement during and after program completion.

Importantly, girls and young women are not only accessing services at high rates but also responding more frequently to surveys. This indicates trust in the programs, personal investment, and a strong desire to shape their own futures.



Refugees' Intentions and Plans for The Journey Home

Return Intentions: A Cross-Program Overview

Survey responses across Karam Families, Karam Studios, and Karam Scholars show a generational, cautious approach to return. Each cohort views The Journey Home through its stage of life, balancing aspiration, responsibility, and uncertainty.

Karam Families

Nearly 90% of Karam Families head of households are between the ages of 30–49, deeply rooted in caregiving responsibilities. Their concerns focus on stability, safety, and their children's education. Over 80% want to keep their family units intact, but few have concrete plans due to insecurity and fragile services. None reported having returned, and their outlook is cautious:

- 33% intend to return (2025 or later)
- 38% are undecided
- 29% have ruled it out

Graduated Karam Families show slightly more readiness:

- 31.6% plan to return (split evenly between 2025 and later)
- 13.2% have already gone back
- 18% do not plan to return
- 37% remain undecided

These patterns suggest momentum, but also heavier burdens. Families are likely managing chronic stress, health concerns, and the toll of long-term exile. High undecided rates across both active and graduated cohorts reflect the weight of responsibility: return must be not only possible but safe, sustainable, and worth the upheaval of moving again.

Karam Studios

For youth raised largely outside Syria, return is often an inherited aspiration shaped by family and community rather than lived memory. With 71% of respondents under the age of 18, “home” is imagined more than remembered.

About 36% of active students express some intention to return, either soon or in the future, while over 60% are undecided or do not plan to return. Concerns focus on education, housing, basic services, and opportunities. Karam Studios offers a safe and creative space that equips students to navigate such complex challenges, while providing stability where they are now.

Graduates, no longer regularly engaged with the program, show a more cautious outlook: only 16.4% plan to return in 2025 and 20% later, while more than half are undecided or firmly against it. Two-thirds are over 18, contending with the personal, financial, and emotional realities of young adulthood in Turkiye. As one student reflected: *“Imagine being 16, raised in exile, and asked whether you’ll go ‘home’ to a place you’ve never known.”*

In short, active students are more open to near-term return, perhaps bolstered by the optimism of Karam House, while graduates grapple with the heavier burdens of independence.

Karam Scholars

For university students and graduates, the return to Syria is most often linked to education and careers. Nearly 80% of active Scholars are between the ages of 18–23. While none rejected the idea of returning, almost 70% are delaying it, balancing ambition with limited opportunities inside Syria. Around 25% expressed interest in moving to third countries such as Germany, the US, or the UK.

Survey results show:

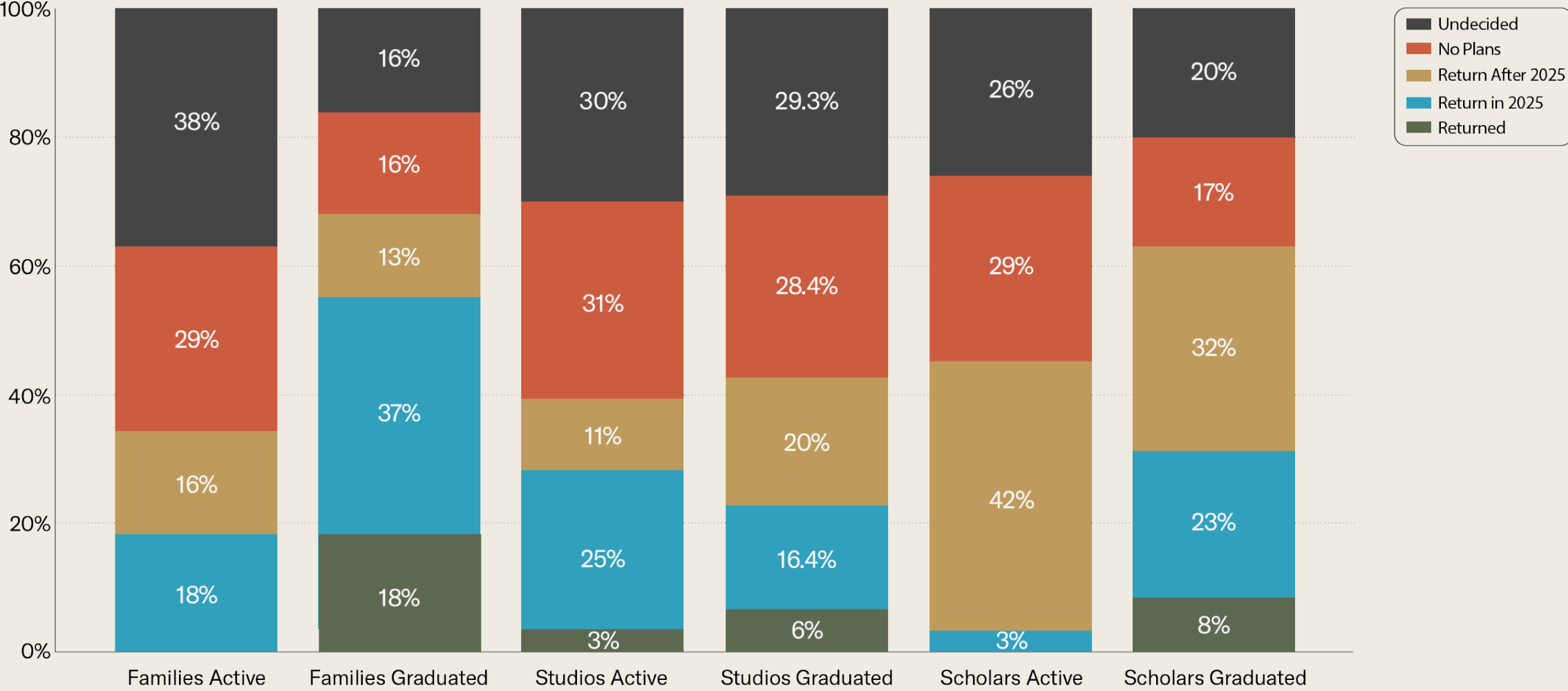
- 42% plan to return after 2025 (the highest “later return” rate of any group)
- 2.6% plan to return in 2025
- Nearly 30% rule out return completely

Graduates show stronger intent:

- 54% plan to return (32% in 2025, 23% later)
- 8% have already returned (the highest actual return rate)
- Only 17% said they would not return

Graduates also face precarious job markets in Turkiye, linking return to both professional opportunity and responsibility. Over one-third cited “supporting reconstruction” as a primary motivation, while many are weighing global ambitions against the pull of rebuilding Syria.

Key Takeaways by Program



Dominant Emotions by Cohort

The survey results reveal a clear emotional divide across cohorts.

Karam Families (active and graduated) are defined by anxiety. responses consistently reflect caregiving responsibilities and concerns over stability, education, and income. Program graduates, 13% of whom have already returned, are somewhat more prepared to relocate yet voice the same immediate worries.

“I can’t secure housing, afford rent, or find a stable job.”

“There are no job opportunities in Syria.”

“The living conditions there are very difficult.”

Karam Studios participants, both active and graduated, also report anxiety as the dominant emotion. Over 60% of active students are undecided or not planning to return, reflecting the perspective of a generation raised largely outside Syria, where “home” is more imagined than remembered. Graduates are even less open to return, shaped by new adult responsibilities and the unfamiliarity of a country they left long ago.

“I have been in Turkiye for 12 years. I got used to it, I don’t know if I can adapt again.”

“It has been nine years since I left Syria. Everything has changed.”

Karam Scholars (active and graduated) are the only group where excitement predominates. For them, return feels aspirational rather than burdensome. Their excitement stems from a desire to contribute to Syria’s regrowth, launch careers, and reconnect with family, even as they acknowledge the challenges of job markets, degree recognition, and infrastructure.

“[I can’t return now] because of my university studies in Turkiye.”

“We’re hopeful that things will improve and we want to be part of rebuilding Syria.”

“As a Syrian, I am very excited to return to my homeland.”

Across cohorts, return intentions are shaped as much by life stage as by circumstance. Those without dependents and with higher education tend to frame return in forward-looking terms, while caregivers balancing family responsibilities view it as riskier and more destabilizing.

Ready in Spirit, Stalled by Circumstance

Across most cohorts, “anxious” emerged as the dominant emotion, but rarely on its own. It was layered with uncertainty and, at times, cautious hope. Respondents described a kind of suspended decision-making: not outright rejecting return, but hesitating in the face of persistent realities like unemployment, unaffordable housing, and fragile infrastructure. Return to Syria was framed not as unsafe, but unlivable, especially for those responsible for families. Even hope carried a pragmatic tone.

Among younger cohorts, particularly Scholars, “excitement” appeared more often, though it was bound to the pressure of completing degrees and uncertainty about the future. This excitement was aspirational, linked to rebuilding or reconnecting with a homeland that holds symbolic weight, but not naive. It was consistently tempered by concerns about careers, recognition of qualifications, and stability.

Overall, the emotional data reflects not only how people feel, but how unsupported these feelings are. Programs that seek to enable refugee return must therefore address the structural conditions that anchor people in place, not just the desire to go back.

Barriers to Voluntary, Safe, and Dignified Return

Across all surveyed groups, the decision to return is more about feasibility than willingness. Logistics, financial strain, and structural barriers consistently halt the implementation of return plans. The relative weight of these obstacles varies by program status, age, and stage of life.

Karam Families identify financial costs as their dominant barrier, reflecting their caregiving role.

- For active Karam Families, income generation is the top concern (52.6%), followed by housing logistics (48.2%), travel costs, particularly for multi-generational households (48.2%), and children's schooling (43.9%). Karam Families see survival in Turkiye mirrored in Syria; for them, the decision rests on tight financial margins.
- For graduated Karam Families, the main obstacle is financial assistance for housing (81.6%), followed by children's schooling (44.7%) and travel costs (42.1%). Time to arrange housing (39.5%) and lack of services (31.6%) also feature prominently. Graduation from the program does not confer financial independence or stability.

Karam Studios participants show a progression of obstacles as they come of age. They are primarily concerned about work obligations in Turkiye and adjusting to Syria's higher education system post-graduation.

- For active Karam Studios students, concerns are diffused, with no single majority: housing assistance (40%), time to arrange housing (33%), and family schooling (24%) lead, with smaller shares citing income generation (17%) and lack of services (15%).
- For Karam Studio graduates, each concern is cited more frequently after leaving the program: housing assistance

(56%), family schooling (55%), time to arrange housing (50%), and income generation (35%). New issues appear as well, such as Syrian university system compatibility (31%) and work obligations in Turkiye (23%), reflecting a growing awareness of institutional and professional barriers.

Karam Scholars face primarily logistical and structural hurdles rather than financial ones.

- For active Karam Scholars, the top concern is time to arrange housing (73.7%), followed by financial assistance for housing (36.8%) and dependents' schooling (36.8%). Lack of basic services in Syria is also significant (32.9%). Travel costs are rarely cited (7.9%), underscoring that the main barriers are conditions inside Syria, not the expense of leaving Turkiye.
- For Karam Scholars Graduates, their leading concern is academic continuity—continuing specialization or transferring universities without losing progress (79.6%), followed by time to arrange accommodation (72.2%), lack of basic services (55.6%), and income generation (46.3%). The post-graduate shift highlights their forward-looking orientation: integrating professionally in Syria and shaping both their futures and the country's.

Top Barriers Across All Karam Groups

Across all cohorts, three barriers stood out consistently: securing housing, covering costs, and ensuring continuity of education. Housing is the most pressing challenge, cited consistently as the most pressing obstacle to return. Financial strain, especially housing costs weigh heavily on Karam Families and increasingly affects Karam Scholars and Karam Studios as they plan for the future. Children's education shapes nearly every family's decision especially for Karam Families with school-age dependents who are reluctant to disrupt schooling without clear alternatives in Syria.

Program and Policy Implications of *The Journey Home*

Program and Organizational Implications

Building on the findings of this report, Karam is translating insights into action. The following steps outline how we are adapting programs and designing new approaches in direct response to what refugee families, youth, and scholars told us. These adaptations reflect both immediate needs and long-term strategies for return, ensuring that what we learned from the survey is implemented hand-in-hand with the communities we serve.

Strategic Reflection and Program Design Adjustments

- The data suggests that intent to return is not a binary question, but a layered and evolving decision shaped by emotional readiness, household stability, and perceived opportunity. Karam therefore intends to adopt multi-phase return metrics and focus on indicators of preparedness, confidence, and conditions of return.

Program Adaptations

- **Test a “Return Readiness Index:”** (after several survey rounds): A light-touch tool to track emotional and practical readiness across cohorts. This can help identify when families or youth shift from hesitance to interest, enabling better-timed support.
- **Pilot “Return Simulation Workshops:”** Safe spaces for participants to imagine what return might entail logistically and emotionally. Ideally co-led by returnees, these workshops could overlap with civic engagement without pulling Karam into policy echo chambers.
- **Family-focused livelihood tracks:** Integrate livelihood simulation with financial literacy and repatriation planning, reflecting real economic prospects inside Syria.

Youth-Specific Recommendations

Karam Studios participants expressed significant anxiety and confusion about the return to Syria, especially those raised in exile. Activities like creative storytelling, digital memory-making, or “future self” exercises could help contextualize return as an unfolding story rather than a forced endpoint. These approaches also intersect with transitional justice mechanisms, by helping young people process displacement while imagining their role in rebuilding.

Data Implications

Program design should respond to emotional as well as socioeconomic data. Karam can lead in normalizing affective analysis as a program planning tool, especially for return contexts, while avoiding rigid or premature measurement frameworks.

Policy Recommendations

For Host Governments

- Remove or ease residency-based pressure mechanisms (tightening of permits, reduced service access) that force premature return.
- Develop legal pathways for circular return, ensuring refugees are not penalized if they need to re-migrate. Partnerships with Turkish entities may strengthen feasibility.

For the Syrian Government

- Ensure property restitution, documentation, and civil record recovery are prioritized in transitional justice processes.
- Partner with civil society to design reception and reintegration pathways, particularly in areas where local governance is weak or contested.

For UN & Multilateral Orgs

- Refine return frameworks to include psychosocial thresholds, not just physical safety and infrastructure.
- Fund longitudinal research and cohort tracking that centers the emotional, economic, and generational dimensions of return.

For Humanitarian Actors

- Shift away from return-focused assistance tied to fixed timelines. Instead, fund adaptive, durable solutions (including local integration and circular mobility).
- Create mechanisms for co-creation with diaspora and youth populations, who are often excluded from return policy but central to long-term sustainability.

For Donors

- Fund flexible, readiness-based programming rather than rigid “return implementation” cycles.
- Invest in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) as a core element of return preparation.
- Support pooled funds or challenge grants to allow organizations like Karam to test creative readiness tools (phased Return Readiness Index, storytelling-based assessments).



Comparative Analysis with Other Agency Reports

Comparative Analysis

The liberation of Syria from the Assad regime is a landmark event for the region and for displaced Syrians who long viewed return as impossible. Yet the possibility of return resonates beyond Syria, shaping global refugee dynamics. The Journey Home report builds on findings from Support to Life's January 2025 survey, UNHCR's February 2025 report and monthly flash updates, the International Rescue Committee's July 2025 Syrians on the Move survey, and Karam's own January 2025 study. Together, these sources provide a broader picture of return intentions, motivations, and barriers.

Placing Karam's July 2025 data within this landscape highlights both shared trends and distinct insights. Larger surveys from UNHCR and Support to Life offer regional overviews, while IRC's briefing provides host-country specifics, including Turkiye. UNHCR's flash updates track returnees from Turkiye, creating a complementary reference point. Karam's analysis, by contrast, focuses on refugees enrolled in or graduated from its programs, offering clearer insight into how participation shapes intentions, planning, and perceived barriers.

This comparative view underscores Karam's unique contribution: not only identifying how Syrians think about return, but showing how structured support influences their outlook. It also highlights how international agencies frame needs, and how community-based programs can respond effectively.

UNHCR Report

In February 2025, UNHCR released its *Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on*

Return to Syria, covering Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon but excluding Turkiye, which is central to Karam’s analysis. The survey showed how differing asylum conditions across host countries shape return intentions.

Support to Life Report

In January 2025, Support to Life surveyed over 2,500 refugees across multiple provinces in Turkiye, documenting immediate responses and intentions in the weeks after December 8. Its broad dataset offers a useful comparison to Karam’s more targeted survey. While both asked comparable questions, methodologies diverged: Support to Life surveyed households, while Karam focused on individual participants in its programs. This distinction allows Karam to capture how program participation shapes return attitudes, whereas Support to Life provides a population-level snapshot.

Support to Life found 60% of respondents were women and 40% men, with women comprising 47% of those intending to return. Karam’s May survey showed a similar gender balance, but placed greater emphasis on the conditions and aspirations shaping return, rather than on remaining in Turkiye.

International Rescue Committee Report

In July 2025, the IRC released *Syrians on the Move: Regional Refugee Intentions Briefing*, based on three rounds of surveys across Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkiye, covering over 3,000 households (17,000+ individuals).

Regionally, 29% intended to return to Syria (up from 17% in March), 37% were unsure, and 34% had no intention of returning. Turkiye, hosting over 3.2 million Syrians under temporary protection, stood out with the highest return intentions (68%) and the lowest rates of “no intention” (16%) and uncertainty (16%). These figures reflect economic hardship, anti-refugee sentiment, tighter residency rules, and government-backed repatriation projects.

By contrast, Karam’s June 2025 survey showed lower return intentions (36%), more indecision (29%), and higher “no plans to return” (28%). This gap reflects Karam’s participant profile—students and families with children—whose decisions are shaped by education and caregiving responsibilities. While national surveys capture broad inclinations, Karam’s cohorts highlight a more cautious, conditional outlook influenced by life stage and program engagement.

Gender Distribution	Karam (May)	Support to Life (Jan)	UNHCR (Feb)	IRC (July)
Female	60%	60%	38%	N/A
Male	40%	40%	62%	N/A

Cross-report Comparison

UNHCR’s Refugee Perceptions and Intentions Survey (February 2025), however, provided a more cautious regional snapshot (Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt, excluding Turkiye): 27% intended to return, 18% were unsure, and 55% had no plans to return.

Support to Life’s January 2025 Turkiye-focused survey showed that only 18.9% of respondents intended to return, while 61.9% planned to remain in Turkiye or move to another country. Another 19% were unsure, underscoring the uncertainty many families felt in the immediate aftermath of Syria’s liberation.

Karam’s own data reveals a more dynamic picture over time. Comparing its January and May 2025 surveys shows both an increase in participants who had already returned or intend to return, and a rise in those who ruled out return. The sharpest shift was in uncertainty, falling from 42% in January to 29% in May, suggesting that as time passed, more participants developed firm views, whether in favor of return or staying.

“I have gotten used to the lifestyle in Turkiye, and I don’t know if I will be able to adapt to the changes that will come with returning to Syria.” (19-year-old Syrian woman in Istanbul, originally from Aleppo)

By contrast, the IRC’s July 2025 Turkiye-specific survey found 68% intending to return, with only 16% reporting no intention and 16% uncertain. These figures stand in sharp contrast to both Support to Life and Karam’s findings, underscoring how national-level surveys capture broader trends, while program-based data reveals how life stage, education, and caregiving responsibilities shape more cautious outlooks.

“A new way of life, fear of not finding work, fear of the challenges of starting over—education and adapting these are all worries I have.” (21-year-old woman, originally from Hama)

Across all reports, including Karam’s June 2025 analysis, most individuals and families intending to return, plan to go back to their original city of residence. The top cities consistently named are Aleppo, Idlib, Damascus, and Hama. Support to Life’s survey highlighted Aleppo and Idlib in particular, while the IRC’s July 2025 survey confirmed the same trend: nearly half of respondents intending to return cited Aleppo (46%), followed by Idlib (22%) and Damascus (14%), with smaller shares naming Hama and rural areas of Aleppo. UNHCR’s flash reporting on return cities reflects movements from Turkiye only, not from other host countries, but aligns with these patterns.

Karam’s data provides additional depth by comparing cities of origin with intended return destinations. Strikingly, the proportions align closely: respondents who named Aleppo as their place of origin nearly matched those who intend to return there. Despite years of displacement and widespread destruction, the consistency suggests that ties to place remain a powerful driver of return, even when immediate return is uncertain.

“Because we have not been there for a long time, and we would be starting from zero. So I am both excited and also afraid and hesitant.” (25-year-old woman in Hatay, originally from Aleppo)

Housing, however, remains the central barrier. Both UNHCR and Support to Life report high levels of concern over housing conditions. UNHCR's February 2025 survey found that among property owners, 81% reported their homes fully or partially damaged. Support to Life reported that 90.6% had no home to return to. Karam's May 2025 findings mirror these results: 85.6% of Scholars and Families respondents either did not own a home or reported their home as uninhabitable due to bombardment and damage. Among those undecided or unwilling to return, 88% lacked habitable housing. The IRC adds further weight: in its Turkiye sample, 72% said their homes were destroyed or uninhabitable, and another 18% reported having no home at all.

“As the mother responsible for my children, moving to Syria means a whole new life and a fresh start, finding housing and income, moving the children to schools and universities, and adapting to different circumstances.” (41-year-old woman in Reyhanli, originally from Homs)

Taken together, these findings show that while emotional and symbolic ties to home cities remain strong, housing destruction is one of the most decisive obstacles, transforming return from a matter of willingness into one of feasibility.

“I am uncertain, because I do not think of returning before finishing my undergraduate studies and developing myself. I need to finish my education in order to contribute to rebuilding Syria.” (20-year-old woman in Hatay, originally from Aleppo)

While UNHCR's July and August 2025 flash updates list motivations for return, they do not provide detailed quantification. This is a gap that Karam's July 2025 survey helps fill. Broadly, the motivations identified across all reports overlap:

- Change of political landscape
- Family reunification
- Financial circumstances
- Limited access to housing in Turkiye

“The happiness of the Syrian people in liberating their country will surely generate positive energy that will drive them to work hard to rebuild and develop it.” (18-year-old man in Reyhanli, originally from Idlib)

Obstacles to Return

Some of the most revealing survey results come from analyzing the challenges Syrians identify as preventing return.

UNHCR (February, July, and August 2025 reports) highlights five main barriers:

- Housing conditions
- Economic reintegration
- Lack of basic services
- Unstable income in Syria
- Access to documentation

Support to Life (January 2025) reports similar concerns, with:

- Housing (50%)
- Lack of livelihood opportunities (15%)
- Dependence on food aid (16%)

IRC (July 2025, Turkiye sample) provides more detailed quantification:

- Housing (68%)
- Lack of livelihood opportunities (47%)
- Insecurity and fear of detention (32%)
- Access to essential services such as healthcare and education (28%)

Karam's data adds a dynamic view by comparing January and June 2025 surveys. Results show that some barriers such as income generation and continuity of education increased in importance over time, while others, such as travel costs and documentation, declined.

Across all reports, housing consistently emerges as the most pressing obstacle, underscoring how material conditions, rather than willingness, determine whether return is feasible.

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings from UNHCR, Support to Life, Karam, and IRC present a converging picture of return dynamics. While figures vary by methodology, cohort, and geography, three themes consistently emerge:

- 1. Return is place-based.** Intentions are closely tied to cities of origin, most often Aleppo, Idlib, Damascus, and Hama, underscoring the enduring pull of home communities.
- 2. Housing is the greatest barrier.** Across all surveys, property destruction and housing insecurity stand out as the most decisive obstacles, with 81–90% of respondents reporting no habitable home to which they could return.
- 3. Motivations reflect both hope and necessity.** Aspirations such as contributing to reconstruction or reuniting with family coexist with push factors like poverty, rising costs of living, and policy uncertainty in host countries.

This consistency across diverse datasets highlights two key realities: the persistence of place-based identity among Syrians in exile, and the structural barriers that continue to delay large-scale voluntary return.



ANNEX

Scholar Active

56	73.70%	Family needs time to arrange housing in Syria, furnish the current home, etc.
28	36.80%	Need financial assistance to arrange housing in Syria
28	36.80%	Child in my family is in school/university
25	32.90%	Lack of basic services in Syria
6	7.90%	Need financial assistance to cover travel costs for return

Families Active

60	52.6%	Worried about how to generate income upon return
55	48.2%	The family needs time to arrange housing in Syria, furnish the current house, etc.
55	48.2%	Need financial assistance to cover travel costs to return
50	43.9%	A child in my family is in school/university
33	28.9%	Lack of basic services in Syria

Families Graduates

31	81.60%	Need financial assistance to arrange housing in Syria
17	44.70%	Child in my family is in school/university
16	42.10%	Need financial assistance to cover travel costs for return
15	39.50%	Family needs time to arrange housing in Syria, furnish the current home, etc.
12	31.60%	Lack of basic services in Syria

Studios Active

The family needs financial assistance for housing Syria	40%
The family needs time to arrange housing accommodations in Syria	33%
There are children in my family studying at school/university	24%
Worried about earning an income in Syria	17%
Lack of basic services in Syria	15%
Financial assistance needed to cover travel expenses to return	13%

Studios Graduates

The family needs financial assistance for housing Syria	56%
There are children in my family studying at school/university	55%
The family needs time to arrange housing accommodations in Syria	50%
Worried about earning an income in Syria	35%
Unfamiliar with Syrian university system	31%
Lack of basic services in Syria	27%
University department may not be suitable for transfer in Syria	24%
Work obligations in Turkiye (contractual)	23%

Obstacle	Studios Leaders	Studios Active	Change
Housing support	56%	40%	+15%
Family members in school	55%	24%	+31%
Time to access housing	50%	33%	+17%
Income generation	35%	17%	+18%
Lack of basic services	27%	15%	+12%
Syrian University System	31%	8%	+23%
Work obligations	23%	2%	+21%

Obstacle	January Survey	May Survey
Concerned about income source	42%	38%
Finances for return travel	31%	26%
Finances to arrange housing	63%	53%
Ill family member	10%	9%
Lack of support network	8%	16%
No obstacles	-	6%
Child/sibling enrolled in Turkish school/ university	49%	51%
Time to arrange housing	54%	64%

In the Support to Life report, the primary reasons cited by Syrians intending to return to Syria include:

- Family reunification (16%)
- Cost of living and poverty in Turkiye (15%)
- Issues with accommodation conditions (11%)
- Difficulties in accessing basic services (11%)

In Karam's January 2025 survey, the following was reported on Scholars' return:

- Wanting to support to reconstruction of Syria (58%)
- Job opportunities in Syria (53%)
- Continue education (48%)
- Family reunification (44%)

Karam's May 2025 survey found that respondents across all three programs reported the following reasons for returning to Syria:

- High cost of living in Turkiye (37%)
- Wanting to support to reconstruction of Syria (34%)
- Rent increases in Turkiye (22%)
- Concerned with changes to Turkish laws (20%)
- Family reunification (19%)

The IRC survey reinforces these findings with quantified data: among refugees in Turkiye who expressed an intention to return, 41% cited family reunification, 33% pointed to the high cost of living in Turkiye, and 24% emphasized lack of legal stability in the host country.

Quotes & Testimonials

Fear of Starting Over & Uncertainty About Adaptation

- ***“I don’t know what life in Syria will look like, and I don’t know if I will be able to adapt to living there or not... all these feelings make me uncertain about returning.”*** Woman, 21, Iskenderun, Originally from Idlib
- ***“Because I would be starting from zero in Syria, while here I am already settled with my friends and school in Turkiye.”*** 16-year-old teenage boy in Istanbul, Originally from Damascus
- ***“I have been in Turkiye since I was 4 years old, and I don’t know much about Syria.”*** 16-year-old teenage boy in Istanbul, Originally from Damascus

Structural & Practical Barriers (Housing, Jobs, Education, Services)

- ***“Starting from zero is extremely difficult and requires strength, determination, and capital. I do not want my family to take the risk without planning and careful consideration. Since we already experienced starting from nothing when we came to Turkiye, we are afraid of going through it again. Upon returning, we would have no regular income until we begin working there, and this change in our lives will not be easy unless we move forward with confidence in our decision.”*** 19 year old woman in Reyhanli, Originally from Idlib
- ***“The absence of essentials like a house or a job, and anxiety about my children’s education.”*** 51 year old woman in Reyhanli, Originally from Hama
- ***“Fear for my children from shortages in living conditions, internet, electricity, and water.”*** 41 year old woman in Istanbul, Originally from Damascus
- ***“Nothing is ready for us right now—no house, no job, no stability. When I think of returning, I am afraid of many things. Above all, of society there. I am really anxious; I don’t know if I will be able to adapt. I don’t***

know if I can work in the field I love, or do my own work. I got used to the system and the concepts in Turkiye. Right now, my teachers in the Hafiz course tell me I should open a place of my own and teach students. When I started volunteering, I felt like I found myself. I really love communicating with people, serving the community, working with social media. I feel that this field belongs to me. I don't know if I will be able to do these things in my own country, or from whom I would get support. I am very confused. 21 year old woman in Hatay, Originally from Rif Damascus

Education, Professional Development & Credentials

- ***“It takes a long time to recover in a country that has been at war for years. Also, we do not look in the same direction as the people living under the Assad regime. It is not their fault, but this will depress me and prevent me from developing. Also, the educational opportunities offered are almost non-existent, especially in terms of pharmacy education. Most of the pharmaceutical factories are inactive. Therefore, Syria does not need a professional pharmacist. I can consider the option of fully developing myself first and then returning to Syria.”*** 23 year old woman in Istanbul, Originally from Aleppo
- ***“The situation in Syria is still unstable. Fire may suddenly break out again, there are still weapons among civilians. The infrastructure is nonexistent, hospitals need to be rebuilt. We were saved, we won the victory, yes, but as a result of this victory only the border was opened. It is a good step for family reunification, for return visits. But the situation is still unclear, there are no essential services, or if there are, they are very few. As for my medical certificate, if I return from Turkiye to Syria I still need to take the equivalence exam. The quota for specialization is very small. I studied medicine in Turkish—then to go take the specialization exam in Arabic is difficult. There is also the state service obligation, which I will have to do, and a year has already passed. Considering all these conditions, it is difficult to return in the near future. Therefore, staying in Turkiye would be more productive both in terms of specialization and according to my personal situation.”*** 36 year old man in Hatay, Originally from Rif Damascus

Emotional Strain, Fear & Trauma

- ***“It is only natural to feel anxious after 14 years of stability in Turkiye, where my children and I have already adapted to life and schooling.”*** 32 year old man in Reyhanli, Originally from Idlib
- ***“Because we are a people whose whole lives have been filled with worry—we can never build on simple foundations without being forced to return to zero again. Life is uncertain, and its fate is unknown. Of course, God created us and will not forget us, but fear is human, especially when we have families with demands—children’s needs for schooling and universities.”*** 40 year old woman in Reyhanli, Originally from Aleppo
- ***“I have mixed feelings about this. I have bad memories of Syria, and I grew up in Turkiye for more than ten years. It is very hard for me to adapt again to a place like Syria, which has poor services, poor job opportunities, and low wages. I do not feel any excitement about going back there.”*** 19 year old woman in Gaziantep, Originally from Aleppo
- ***“I feel that I will face difficulties in Syria because I spent my childhood, adolescence, and now my youth in Turkiye, with Turkish people.”*** 20 year old woman in Gaziantep, Originally from Aleppo

Hope, Faith & National Pride

- ***“We have lived for a long time in Turkiye, and it has become like another homeland.”*** 16 year-old teenage girl in Istanbul, Originally from Damascus
- ***“I know that I am capable of helping the country with the things I have learned.”*** 20 year old man in Istanbul, Originally from Aleppo
- ***“Faith in the ability of this great nation’s people to breathe life back into it, to rehabilitate it, and in their capacity to give and sacrifice for it.”*** 50 year old man in Reyhanli, Originally from Homs
- ***“God willing, Syria will go from better to better, and reform will happen by God’s will.”*** 35 year old man in Reyhanli, Originally from Homs

- ***“The liberation of Syria happened overnight and no one expected that we would experience this joy. This sudden event affected all of our lives positively.”*** 20 year old man in Istanbul, Originally from Aleppo
- ***“I love my Syria very much and I am ready to sacrifice my life for it. But I do not recognize borders. I do not want to carry the burden of this world order imposed by tyrannical powers and the hardships that come with it. If I cannot be of real use to my country, I do not intend to return at this stage. My goal is to study in the best places, to truly become useful to Syria, equipped with the highest level of knowledge and experience. For this I am ready to bear the pain of another exile if necessary. But in the end, I will return to Syria. And it will be a great return.”*** 25 year old man in Istanbul, Originally from Aleppo
- ***“The fall of Assad’s regime and the end of Ba’ath Party rule would be enough to inspire hope for the future.”*** 55 year old man in Istanbul, Originally from Aleppo

With gratitude to Demetri Fadel, Nora Hinnawi, Alia Attar, Rama Majzoub, and Hadeel Saalok, whose analysis, edits, and design made this report possible. We also thank our colleagues, partners, and the Karam community for their steadfast support.

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Karam Foundation is a 501(C)3 Nonprofit Organization
Federal Tax ID: 37-1548241
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