

INTENTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES OF SYRIAN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS IN EUROPE

May 2025



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Acknowledgements

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Cover photograph:

Wafa Murad, a refugee from Syria, now living in Rothesay on the Isle of Bute in the United Kingdom.
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Executive summary

Key findings



81%

of respondents plan to stay in their host country over the next 12 months. Their decisions are influenced by various factors, primarily better safety and security, and the need to maintain legal status in host countries, particularly to ensure protection if conditions in Syria worsen.



3%

of respondents plan to permanently return to Syria within the next 12 months, with more than half having made preparations. The main reasons for returning include accessing property and reuniting with relatives.



Enabling factors for future return

to Syria were highlighted during focus group discussions. The main considerations were **safety and security, improved infrastructure, and access to livelihood opportunities.**



44%

of respondents expressed interest in go-and-see visits to Syria. However, refugees cited several factors preventing them from conducting these visits, primarily fear of losing legal status in host countries and security concerns inside Syria. Focus group discussions revealed that the fear of losing legal status is often exacerbated by the lack of access to official and reliable information regarding the impact of go-and-see visits on their legal status in host countries.



Gaps in access to official and reliable information

uncovered during focus group discussions. Participants often reported being uninformed about decisions affecting their lives, including potential changes to their legal status and the status of their asylum applications, which creates anxiety and fear.



Protection concerns for women

identified during focus group discussions. Some participants indicated that women are rarely consulted about decisions to return within their households and are sometimes forced to return by male relatives.

Key recommendations



UNHCR urges host countries* to permit Syrian refugees to conduct go-and-see visits without affecting their legal status. Among others, these visits would allow refugees to assess the situation in Syria and determine the feasibility of permanent return.

* A few European countries, including France, allow go-and-see visits to Syria.



UNHCR recommends providing official and reliable information on issues affecting refugees, including potential changes to their legal status in host countries, the status of their asylum applications, and the impact of go-and-see visits on their legal status and access to rights.



UNHCR recommends implementing appropriate support systems and safeguards that ensure all family members, particularly women, can meaningfully participate in decisions to return or stay. This can be partly ensured by assessing the voluntariness of return when providing return assistance.

Background

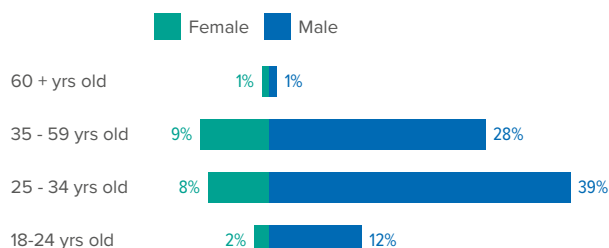
The fourteen years conflict in Syria has led to the mass displacement of Syrians, both within the country and abroad. Europe has become a major destination for those displaced, with an estimated 4.2 million Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers recorded by the end of 2024. Türkiye hosts the majority of refugees (approximately 2.8 million) while the remaining 1.3 million are spread across other European countries, including over 140,000 asylum-seekers still awaiting decisions on their applications. Outside of Türkiye, three-quarters of Syrians reside in Germany (788,000), Austria (118,000), and the Netherlands (86,000). Additionally, eleven other European countries collectively host nearly a quarter of the Syrian refugee and asylum-seeker population, each accommodating between 20,000 and 50,000 people.

In December 2024, the collapse of the Assad regime marked a significant turning point in the conflict in Syria. Millions of Syrian refugees have been trying to assess what the new reality means for them and their families. Many are considering how safe Syria will be before they can make an informed decision to return home. In this context, UNHCR conducted a survey to gain insights into the intentions of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe, with the goal of informing policy decisions and ensuring that refugee voices are central to discussions about their future. Between 14 March and 14 April 2025, an anonymous, self-administered online survey was carried out in the United Kingdom and in 13 European countries¹ that host at least 10,000 Syrian refugees and/or asylum-seekers. The survey asked Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers whether they intend to stay in their host country or return to Syria, what factors influence their decisions, what information they need to make fully informed decisions, and whether they are interested in go-and-see visits to Syria, among other topics. **A total of 3,736 individuals completed the survey, representing 17,378 household members.**

Additionally, **23 focus group discussions (FGDs) with Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers were held in the following eight countries:** Austria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Sweden, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. This report presents the main findings from the survey and focus group discussions.

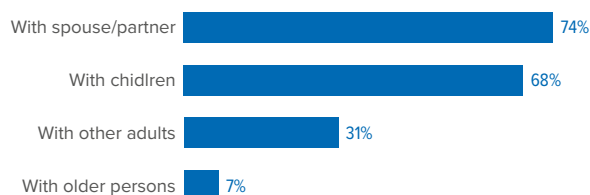
Demographic profiles

RESPONDENTS' AGE AND GENDER



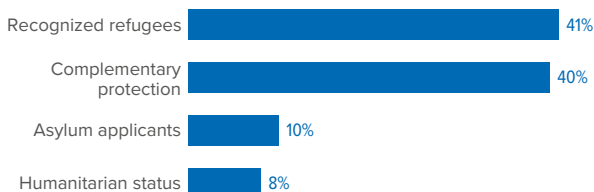
The majority of the respondents are male (80 per cent) and most are between 25 and 59 years of age, with a small share of younger adults (18-24 years) and only a minority of older persons (60 years or more).

HOUSEHOLDS' COMPOSITION



Their households are composed of 3.4 members on average, though around a third is composed of only one person. More than two-thirds are living with their spouse / partner and with at least one child.

RESPONDENTS' CURRENT LEGAL STATUS*

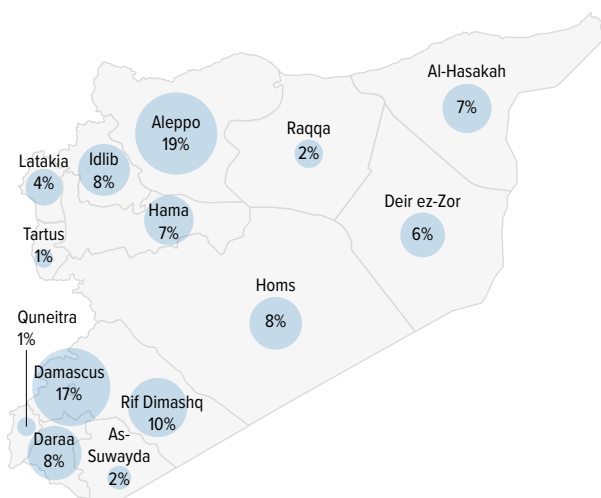


* due to rounding the percentage may not add up to 100

Among refugees covered in the survey, there is an even split among those holding refugee status and those granted complementary forms of protection, with a smaller proportion having residence permit for humanitarian reasons. Among respondents with refugee or complementary protection status, 75 per cent reported having a temporary residence permit.

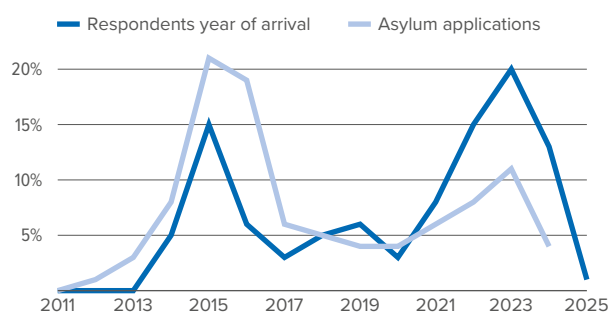
1. Participating European countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom

DISTRIBUTION BY PLACE OF ORIGIN



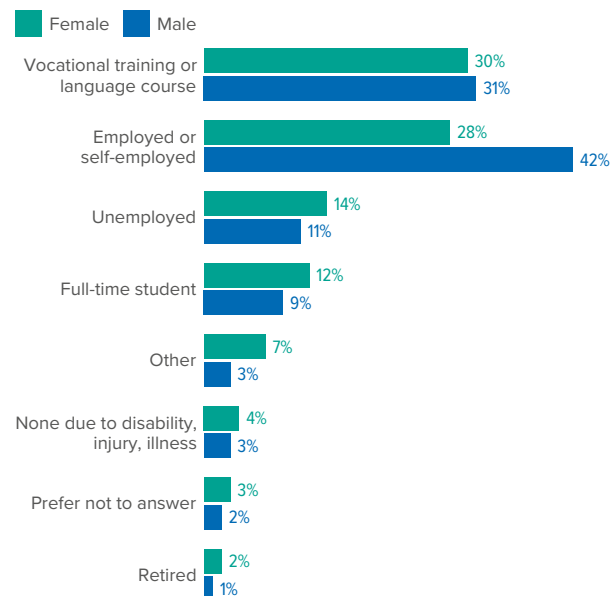
More than a third of respondents are originally from Aleppo Governorate and Damascus, though respondents from all other Governorates of Syria are represented in the survey.

DISTRIBUTION BY YEAR OF ARRIVAL TO HOST COUNTRY VS. EVOLUTION OF ASYLUM APPLICATIONS IN EUROPE



The distribution of survey respondents by year of arrival to current host country shows two main peaks, coinciding with the evolution of asylum applications in the region: the first from 2014 to 2016 (26 per cent of all respondents) and the second from 2021 to 2024 (55 per cent). The higher share of respondents who arrived in this later period —compared to the share observed in asylum applications— can be explained by the fact that many Syrians who came in earlier years have since then naturalized and are therefore outside of the target population of the survey.

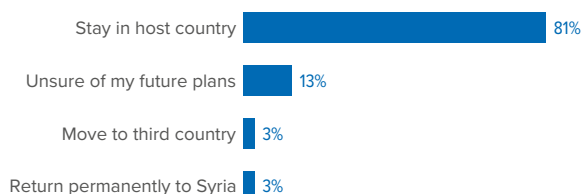
RESPONDENTS' MAIN ACTIVITY IN HOST COUNTRY



A sizable share of respondents are participating in the labor market, with 40 per cent employed or self-employed. In addition, 31 per cent are enrolled in vocational training or language courses and 10 per cent in higher education. Men are significantly more likely to be employed than women (42 vs. 28 per cent).

Intentions for the next 12 months

INTENTIONS WITHIN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS



Remaining in the host country

Among those intending to stay in current host country, the vast majority indicate safety and security as well as access to services and the desire to maintain their legal status as primary reasons, followed by socio-economic integration, better housing conditions and job opportunities in their host country.

Of those surveyed, 81% of Syrian refugees plan to stay in their current host country over the next 12 months, with the majority (93%) citing safety and security as a very important reason for planning to stay. During focus group discussions, many participants reported concerns about violence in Syria, including kidnappings, killings, and arbitrary arrests, often rooted in ethnic or political tensions. Even areas perceived as relatively stable, such as Damascus, were reported to experience serious security issues, while border regions near Lebanon and Türkiye were considered particularly volatile.

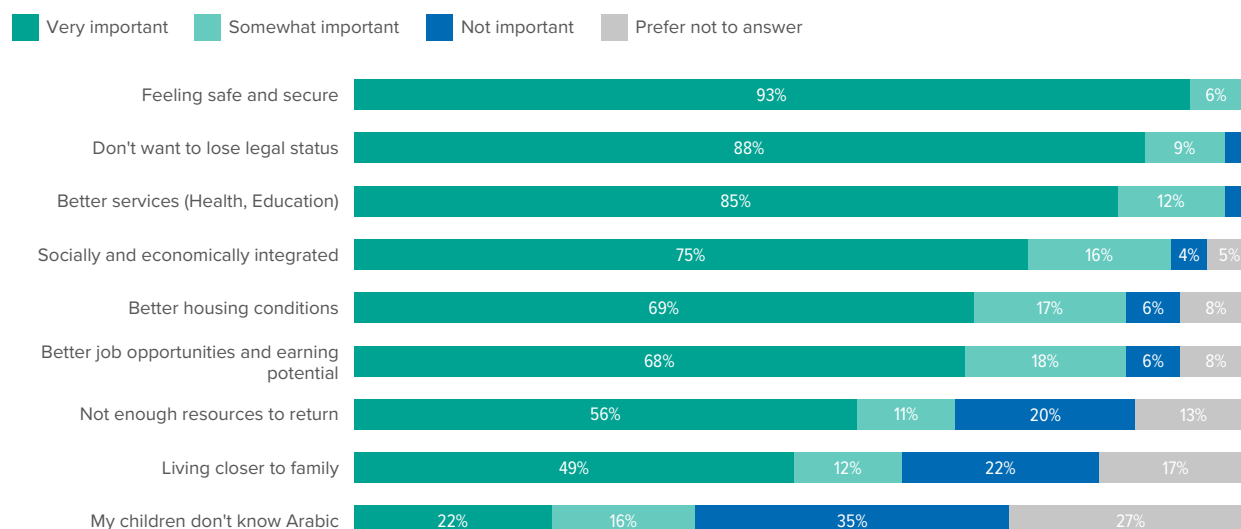
Several participants noted the presence of weapons left behind by members of the former regime, contributing to the prevalence of instability.

Threats against ethnic minorities – including Kurds and Alawites – were frequently highlighted. Many focus group discussion participants feared targeted violence, including from within their own communities for rejecting ethnic divisions or violence. One Kurdish family, for instance, shared that their relatives had been arbitrarily detained and tortured, and their property seized, making them feel unsafe to return.

Of those who plan to stay in their host country, 88 per cent cited maintaining legal status as a very important reason, making it the second most reported decision-making factor. Insights from focus group discussions reveal that refugees often feel a strong need to maintain their legal status in host countries, as it provides a sense of security and long-term stability. They fear that without it, they would lose the option to return should conditions in Syria deteriorate again. For refugees who have built livelihoods and acquired properties in their host country, the desire to maintain legal status is also tied to protecting the lives they have established.

Better access to services was also cited as a very important reason by 85 per cent of those planning to remain in their host countries over the next 12 months – making it the third most commonly reported factor.

MOTIVATIONS TO STAY IN CURRENT HOST COUNTRY



During focus group discussions, participants consistently pointed to the widespread destruction of infrastructure in Syria as a major barrier to return. Basic services such as electricity, water, and education were reported to be severely disrupted. Limited access to healthcare, in particular, emerged as a critical concern, especially for individuals with chronic conditions and older persons. In several countries, participants shared that their families' decisions to stay were strongly influenced by the need to secure adequate medical care for relatives with specific needs. Many emphasized that Syria's healthcare infrastructure has been severely damaged, making it extremely challenging to access medical care, including due to long waiting times, shortages of essential medications, and a lack of medical equipment.

Additionally, 75 per cent of refugees who plan to stay cited social and economic integration in their host countries as a key motivating factor, making it the fourth most frequently reported reason. Focus group discussions further underscored the role of successful integration in shaping decisions to remain. In France, for instance, participants noted that those who have built stable lives and are well integrated are more likely to stay, whereas individuals who have not managed to do so may be more open to returning. Parents also voiced concerns about uprooting their children, emphasizing that many were born in the host country or arrived at a young age, speak the local language, and lack the necessary Arabic language skills for education in Syria. Given that the education system in Syria is primarily in Arabic, participants noted that return would pose significant challenges. One participant highlighted that their children would lose everything they have accomplished so far, including studies in medicine and engineering, if they were to return to Syria.

Better housing conditions (69 per cent) and livelihood opportunities (68 per cent) were also cited as important factors influencing the decision to remain in host countries. During focus group discussions, participants mentioned that many have no homes to return to, as their properties were either destroyed or sold to finance their flight. In Cyprus, for example, some participants mentioned that they do not have housing in Syria and prefer to stay until they can afford to rebuild. Others echoed this sentiment, stating that they lost everything in the war and have no place to return to. Women in particular face distinct

vulnerabilities. Many do not have property in their names, as ownership traditionally lies with male relatives. As one participant put it, "90% of women will not have a house in their name".

Participants also highlighted the acute lack of job opportunities and the inability to meet basic needs in Syria. In Germany and the UK, for instance, some participants mentioned that most Syrians living there financially support their families back home, making the decision to return not just an individual one but one that could financially impact their relatives.

“We can't make a final decision after 3 months of coming out from 14 years of war. We should remain cautious”. — *A focus group discussion participant*

Refugees' Fear of Losing their Legal Status

Focus group discussions revealed that there is widespread concern among refugees about losing their legal status in host countries, which is causing anxiety. In Austria, many participants expressed fear over the initiation of cessation procedures and the freezing of family reunification processes. This uncertainty affects their ability to integrate and impacts their children, who struggle with instability. One mother shared that her son, who had to learn Turkish when they were in Türkiye, now refuses to go to school because he doesn't see the point in learning a new language if they might not be able to stay in Austria. Similar concerns have been raised about losing legal status in Cyprus, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Legal uncertainty resulting from the suspension of asylum application processing has also emerged as a primary concern for asylum seekers across multiple countries, including Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Many individuals have been waiting for a decision on their claim for years, which limits their access to rights such as employment. Focus group discussion participants stressed the importance of being kept informed about the

status of their applications for international protection in order to be able to make future plans.

In addition to legal uncertainty, asylum seekers reported facing challenges related to reception conditions. Challenging reception conditions were reported in Cyprus, Germany, and Greece, with issues such as inadequate living spaces, poor hygiene, and limited access to essential services like healthcare.

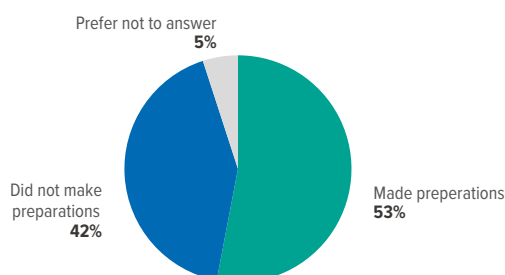
Returning to Syria

Among the small share of respondents who intend to return permanently, the main motivations are reuniting with family and friends, accessing their property, securing work or livelihood opportunities and feeling that security has improved.

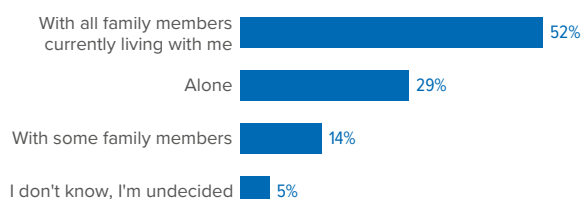
Among those who report intentions to return permanently to Syria, more than half have made concrete preparations for their return.

Moreover, 52 per cent intend to do so with their entire family members, while 29 per cent plan to return alone.

HAVE YOU MADE PREPARATIONS FOR YOUR RETURN TO SYRIA



WITH WHOM ARE YOU PLANNING TO RETURN?

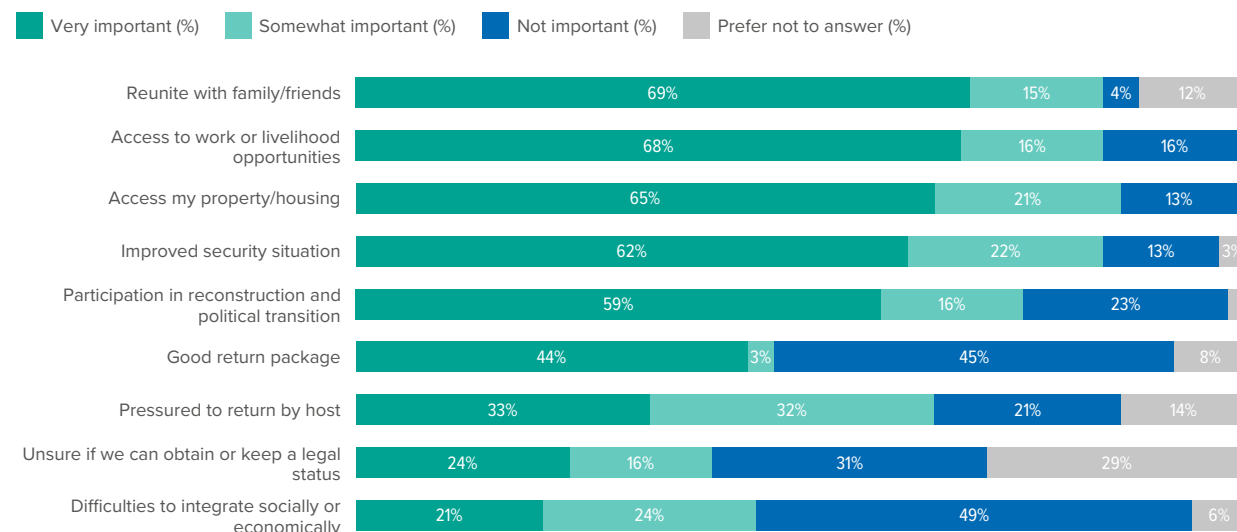


In most contexts participants reported that decisions about returning to Syria are made collectively within the family. However, discussions with Syrian women in Cyprus revealed notable differences in decision-making dynamics. In a number of cases, men were described as taking the lead and sometimes making arrangements for return unilaterally. One woman shared that her husband had already made arrangements for her and their children to return to Syria, despite her opposition. She feared that if she did not comply, she would be left without financial support in Cyprus. These fears were echoed by other participants who felt their ability to influence household decisions was constrained by both economic dependency and social expectations.

Many women also referenced broader community patterns, stating that they knew others who had been pressured to return. One participant recounted seeing a woman at the Immigration Services with eight children, crying and asking her husband not to send them back to Syria, to no avail. Another described a friend who was forced to return and had since expressed a strong desire to come back to Cyprus.

In some cases, these decisions were influenced by economic factors which seem to have led to premature returns. Participants described situations where financial hardship, such as the loss of social welfare support or low wages, led families to consider return. For example, one woman explained that her husband planned to send her and their children back to Syria after their social benefits were cut in the host country, stating they could not afford to stay. Another noted that in Syria, a small amount of money could sustain a family for a month, making return seem financially practical despite ongoing concerns about safety and access to services.

These findings underscore the importance of appropriate support systems and safeguards that ensure all family members, including women, can participate meaningfully in decisions to return or stay.

MOTIVATIONS TO RETURN PERMANENTLY TO SYRIA*

* Findings should be considered indicative due to small sample size of those intending to return (less than 100).

Enablers of return in the future

During focus group discussions, safety emerged as a central consideration for participants when reflecting on the possibility of returning to Syria in the future.

Many acknowledged that the path toward a safe and democratic Syria remains long and uncertain. Concerns were raised about both targeted and indiscriminate violence, with many emphasizing that the ongoing instability makes it impossible to foresee how the situation will evolve. Additionally, participants from minority groups highlighted the specific vulnerabilities they face and stressed the need for targeted support and protection should they ever consider returning.

Access to basic services such as housing, healthcare, electricity and education was frequently highlighted by participants as an important requirement for any potential return to Syria. Economic considerations were equally crucial. Employment opportunities, in particular, were seen as a key factor in deciding whether to return, with many participants stating they

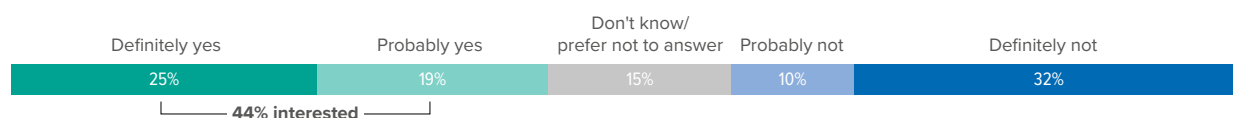
would only consider going back if they had a job.

Some emphasized the importance of securing work in their field of expertise, not only for income but to contribute to rebuilding their communities. Others pointed to the need for broader economic support, including the removal of sanctions and increased development and humanitarian assistance to the Syrian government. Access to official documentation, including passports, was also cited as crucial to enable return in the future.

Focus group discussion participants were also asked about the types of assistance they would need in the event of a future return to Syria. Financial support emerged as a key priority, particularly to cover travel costs such as plane tickets and to support their reintegration. Housing and livelihood support were repeatedly mentioned, with participants emphasizing the need for stable housing and sustainable income to rebuild their lives. Some expressed interest in starting businesses, including in light of the demand for construction work in Syria.

Go-and-see visits to Syria

INTEREST IN CONDUCTING GO-AND-SEE VISITS

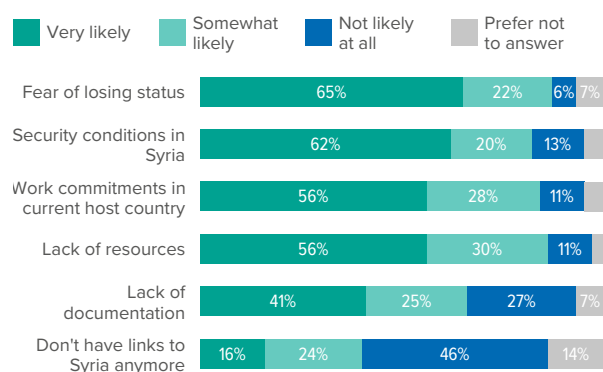


Out of the refugees surveyed, 44% expressed interest in go-and-see visits to Syria to assess the feasibility of a permanent return. Focus group discussions further highlighted the prevalent interest in such visits. For instance, participants in Austria reported conducting a WhatsApp survey among their community, which showed strong interest in go-and-see visits. Similarly, a participant from a focus group in the UK shared that during a recent meeting with 150 other Syrians, 87% of families expressed a desire to travel to Syria and assess the situation.

For many, these visits are seen as essential for reconnecting with their homeland, understanding the current conditions on the ground, and deciding whether a return would be feasible. Some participants noted that, even with family members already living in Syria, it was still important to go in person and assess the situation firsthand. Such visits would allow them to check on the condition of their homes, assess whether properties had been damaged or destroyed, check the availability of job opportunities, and carry out administrative procedures that cannot be completed from abroad. It is important to note, as experiences in other countries hosting Syrian refugees show, those who conduct go-and-see visits are more likely to consider permanent return.

For those who expressed an interest in go-and-see visits to Syria, the primary deterrents are the fear of losing their legal status and security concerns.

FACTORS THAT COULD PREVENT GO-AND-SEE VISITS TO SYRIA



Despite the high interest in conducting go-and-see visits to Syria, refugees cited various factors that prevent them from carrying out such visits. The primary deterrent, cited by 65 per cent of those interested in go-and-see visits, is the fear of losing legal status in host countries. In comparison, a higher proportion of refugees in Austria (78%) cited this concern, likely linked to the initiation of cessation proceedings. Since the fall of the former regime in Syria in December 2024, a considerable number of beneficiaries of international protection in Austria have been notified that their legal status is being re-assessed in view of the changes of circumstances in their home country.

In relation to this, focus group discussions showed a common fear that a short visit could be perceived as a signal that Syria is safe, potentially leading to the cessation of legal status. One woman explained that her request to travel to Syria to visit her 97-year-old father was denied, and she was warned that doing so would jeopardize her legal status. Another participant referred to her family, who were eligible to visit Syria legally but refrained out of fear it might be a 'trap'. Similar concerns were voiced by focus group discussion participants in Cyprus, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The fear of losing legal status is further compounded by the lack of official, reliable information regarding the impact of go-and-see visits on legal status.

Another significant barrier, reported by 62 per cent of those interested in temporary visits, is the security situation in Syria. This concern was also echoed by focus group discussion participants, particularly by members of Kurdish and other minority groups who reported that even a short return to Syria would pose a serious threat to their lives. Others feared the threat of extremist groups, kidnappings, and acts of retaliation, which they believed could happen at any moment. One participant mentioned reports of a family being taken at a checkpoint during a recent visit, reinforcing their decision not to take the risk.

The lack of financial resources and documentation were also identified as obstacles to conducting go-and-see visits. During focus group discussions, some participants mentioned the high cost of travel and the poor infrastructure in Syria, which make visits both financially and logistically challenging. Additionally, the absence of official Syrian documents and delays in obtaining necessary travel documents, such as Convention Travel Documents (CTDs), were reported. In some cases, individuals mentioned waiting for over a year to receive their CTDs, making it impossible to plan any travel.

“If I had the chance to go I would. I would love to see the streets, the people and would love to discover what returning to Syria would be like”.

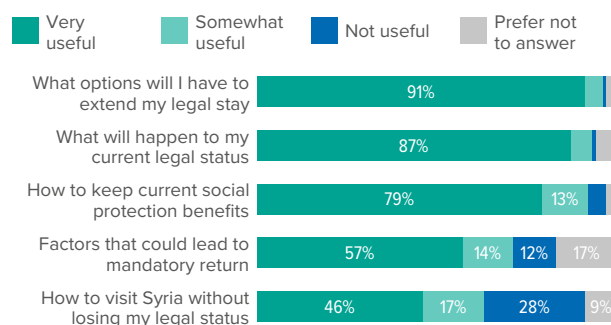
— A focus group discussion participant

Information needs

Information needs for those planning to stay in host countries

For the 81% of refugees surveyed who reported plans to stay in their host country for the next 12 months, the primary information needs is related to the sustainability or potential loss of their legal status.

USEFULNESS OF INFORMATION AMONG REFUGEES INTENDING TO STAY IN CURRENT HOST COUNTRY

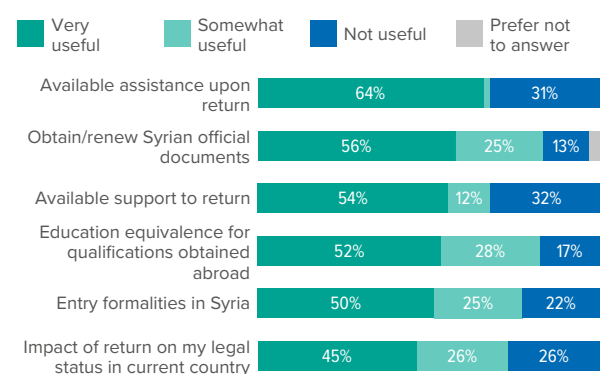


During focus group discussions, participants repeatedly mentioned the lack of clear, official communication from host governments regarding their legal status, asylum procedures, and potential changes to their residence rights. As a result, they often have to rely on informal communication channels, such as family, friends, and social media. However, these sources tend to be unreliable, incomplete and sometimes misleading. Refugees expressed a strong preference for receiving information through official government channels. In addition, many indicated they trust information from organizations like the Red Cross, UNHCR, and refugee law clinics, which provide legal advice and counselling on asylum procedures.

Information needs for those planning to permanently return to Syria

Among the three percent of respondents who plan to permanently return to Syria, the main information needs relate to assistance available for their transportation to Syria, how to secure or renew Syrian identity documents, entry formalities as well as reintegration support available upon arrival. Interest then shifts to knowing whether their foreign qualifications acquired abroad will be recognized. Given the limited number of respondents who indicated plans to permanently return, however, these findings should be treated as indicative rather than representative of everyone considering return.

USEFULNESS OF INFORMATION AMONG REFUGEES INTENDING TO RETURN TO SYRIA



Annex: Methodology

Between 14 March and 14 April 2025, UNHCR conducted an anonymous, self-administered online survey to capture the intentions of Syrian refugees residing in 13 European countries² that host at least 10,000 Syrian refugees or asylum-seekers. The questionnaire (Arabic, English and Kurmanji-Kurdish versions) required 5–10 minutes to complete and automatically screened out a) respondents who did not self-identify exclusively as Syrian nationals and b) Syrian respondents who are not refugees or asylum seekers. Country offices disseminated a survey link via UNHCR Help webpages, social-media channels, refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and community networks, with a request for participants to share it further within their diaspora (“snowball” sampling).

In total, 3,736 valid responses were recorded. Most answers came from the Netherlands (1,331 responses, 36%). Austria (807 responses, 22%), Germany (372 responses, 10%), Cyprus (297 responses, 8%) and the United Kingdom (267 responses, 7%).

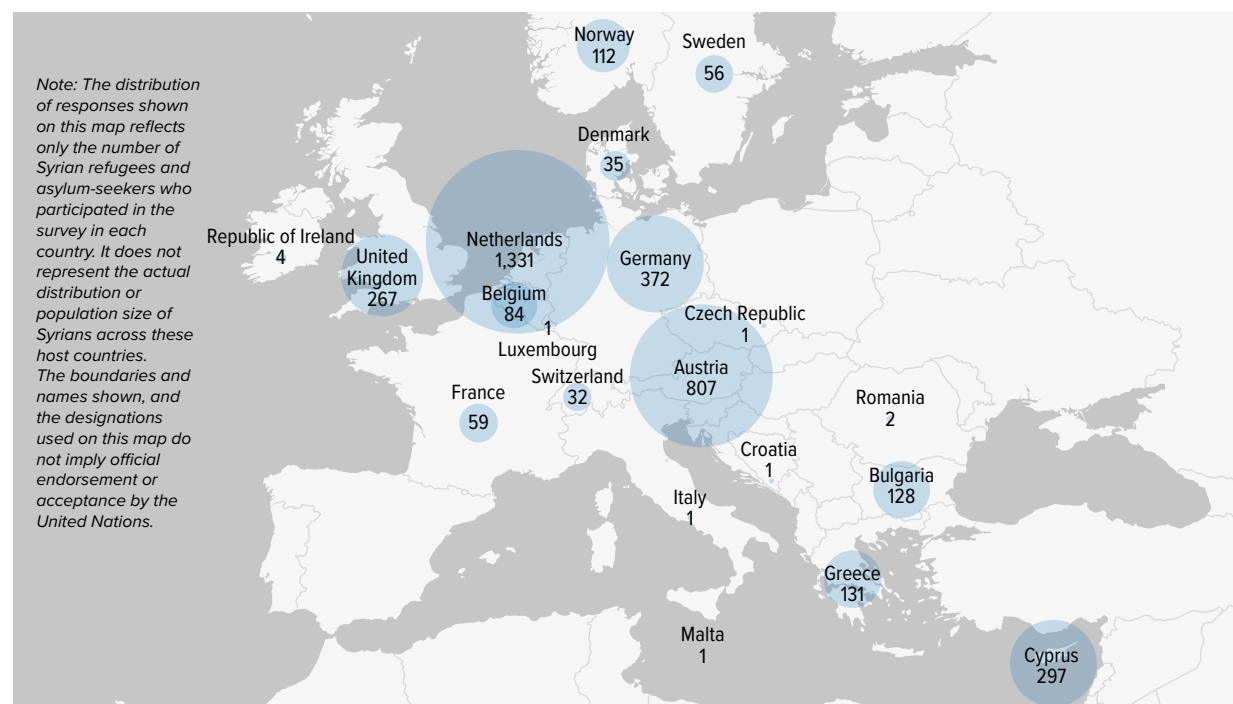
For the regional analysis, each interview was weighted to reflect the proportionate size of the

registered Syrian refugee and asylum-seeker population in the respondent’s country of residence (UNHCR population statistics, end-2024), so that countries hosting more Syrians weighed more in the overall analysis of the results.

Due to the non-probabilistic nature of the survey, results cannot be necessarily considered representative of all Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe and should be considered as indicative findings only.

To contextualize these findings, eight UNHCR country operations (in Austria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom) ran 23 structured focus-group discussions using a common guidance note and list of guiding questions. Most sessions followed the recommended format of 8-12 participants (separate women-only groups, where feasible) and lasted about 45 minutes in safe, confidential settings. Facilitators obtained verbal informed consent and applied do-no-harm principles throughout. Notes were anonymized for the thematic analysis.

DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONSES PER HOST COUNTRY



2. Participating EU countries: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Denmark, France, Germany, Greece, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands and the United Kingdom

INTENTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES OF SYRIAN REFUGEES AND ASYLUM- SEEKERS IN EUROPE

May 2025



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For further information visit the UNHCR Operational Data Portal for Ukraine:

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