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Syrian Migrants in the Dilemma of Return and Permanence: Return Perceptions in Sultanbeyli



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Abstract

As of December 8, 2024, discussions on the voluntary return of Syrian migrants from Türkiye have accelerated in Syria. In this study, Sultanbeyli Municipality—one of the districts in Istanbul hosting the largest migrant populations and implementing local policies for migrants—was selected as a case study. This study presents the services and policies implemented by Sultanbeyli Municipality for migrants since the 2011 crisis, the ongoing policies, and how these efforts might influence return migrations following the recent change in governance in Syria. The study was conducted on January 23-24, 2025, through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with 9 individuals from Sultanbeyli Municipality and the Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association. Because of the interviews, there will not be an intensive return from the district in the discussions on permanence that came to the agenda with the new process. Therefore, in the next phase, policies should be developed that recognize permanence not as a failure of return but as a legitimate outcome of displacement, while also strengthening the services of local governments for migrants.

Keywords

Sultanbeyli Municipality • Migration Policies • Syrian Migrants • Voluntary Return.



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Economic, social, political, and environmental factors shape migration decisions. Aspirations for improved livelihood opportunities, safety, and better living conditions often motivate the decision to migrate. Structural forces majeure in the international political economy, such as warfare, colonialism, occupation, and labor recruitment, as well as factors, such as shared culture, language, and geographical proximity, often play a crucial role in the initiation of migration processes (de Haas, 2010:1589). Economic and sociocultural integration in destination countries and strong social and economic ties with the destination country have a negative effect on the likelihood of return decision (de Haas & Fokkema, 2011:757). Understanding the motivations behind both migration and return is essential for analyzing the broader dynamics of mobility, particularly the ways in which individual agency interacts with structural constraints and migration policies (Bakewell, 2010:1703).

Although the literature on return migration has expanded in recent years, a significant gap remains regarding the role of local government policies in shaping return and reintegration outcomes. As mentioned above (de Haas, 2010:1589; de Haas & Fokkema, 2011:757; Bakewell, 2010:1703), existing studies primarily focus on individual motivations, transnational ties, and reintegration challenges at the national or household level. The role of local governments—directly responsible for delivering public services and facilitating economic reintegration and social cohesion—has been largely overlooked (OECD, 2017). Although some international projects or reports address this issue, they remain limited in the literature. For instance, an EU-funded project designed to develop and implement local integration strategies for migrant women, along with staff from municipalities, was carried out in 7 countries (European Commission, 2022), and a report was prepared to illustrate a "local turn" in migration and development, portraying LRAs not just as implementers but as innovators—designing, coordinating, and mainstreaming migration policies into local development (UNDP, 2017).

Displaced communities settle in urban areas where they migrate, expecting their basic humanitarian needs to be met in these areas, such as adequate nutrition, shelter in healthy conditions, and safe living. In addition, municipalities are primarily responsible for ensuring their adaptation and integration into society and meeting their many needs, such as education, vocational training, and social security within the city. Therefore, municipalities play a leading role in the implementation of migration policies.

The first points of contact for migrants in cities were local governments, mainly municipalities. Municipalities have played a leading role in migrants' services during this process. The fact that '*guests*' prefer to continue living in cities across the country rather than in temporary accommodation centers has brought social integration to the fore. This new situation has increased the need for local migration policies.

Local governments provide a wide scope for action in setting goals, establishing new partnerships or joining existing ones, and taking action (de Oliveira, 2009: 253-254). Local governments can develop strategies and policies within the national laws and areas of responsibility in their respective countries. These policies can cover a wide range of issues, from combating climate change to social assistance or migrant work.

The phenomenon of migration into the strategic planning and management of cities, aiming to develop the role and capacities of local governments and the rights of all migrants, regardless of their reasons for migration, length of stay, or legal status, has been guaranteed by the United Nations (UN, 2017:11). Thus, the New Urban Agenda recognizes the importance of local governments' role in migration management. Efforts have increased since the 2000s within the framework of discussions on the "local integration model." By adopting a pragmatic accommodationism approach, local governments can take a leading role in developing solution-oriented policies based on cooperation with local actors.

Political discourse and orientations, institutional structures, and local political preferences determine the policies of local governments.

Pisarevskaya, Scholten, and Kaşlı (2022) examined the migration dynamics of cities in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy and mapped migration-related diversity in urban environments. Eliçin (2019) conducted in-depth interviews with municipal employees in units working with migrants in 21 district municipalities in Istanbul, researching the services for migrants, the institutions they collaborate with, and the budgeting of these activities. Additionally, a report on how local governments can develop inclusive policies for migrants and the challenges encountered in this regard has been published (Yükseker & Erköse, 2021).

The prolonged return of mass migration forced upon them has also made it necessary for municipalities to develop new policies for migrants since the 2011 Syrian crisis. These policies have been implemented to ensure the safety and well-being of citizens in cities while also facilitating the integration of new residents.

This paper was designed to reveal the services and policies implemented by the Sultanbeyli Municipality for migrants over 13 years, how these policies have changed over time, the ongoing policies, and how these efforts might influence return migrations following the recent change in governance in Syria. This study examined the impact of the municipality's services and policies on the decision-making of Syrian migrants in the dilemma of returning or staying.

The paper proceeds as follows: The next section provides a historical and legal overview of migration policies in Türkiye before and after the Syrian crisis. The following section explains the methodology employed in this study. The next section presents the socio-economic structure of the Sultanbeyli district, which forms the study's context. This section is followed by a section that examines the dynamics of the persistence and coexistence of Syrian migrants in the area. "The Return Debate" section explores the ongoing debates surrounding the return of Syrian migrants. Finally, the Conclusion section includes a summary and evaluation of the findings and policy implications for policymakers and future research.

Historical and Legal Approaches

Owing to its geographical location and the internal unrest, wars, and other crises developing in its vicinity, Türkiye was previously a transit country, but in recent years, it has become both a transit and destination country. Since the 1990s, Türkiye has faced mass and irregular migration due to its changing position. In particular, with the Syrian crisis that began in 2011, Türkiye's position as a destination country has been reinforced, and it has faced intense mass migration. For Syrians, Türkiye has become a 'safe haven in a dangerous region' (Smyrl, M., & Ark Yıldırım, 2023). Foreign Minister Davutoğlu, in his speech to the Turkish Grand National Assembly on the events in Syria, stated, '*Türkiye is a central country in the region and has fulfilled its responsibilities. Dealing with Syria is not a matter of choice for us, but a necessity*' (Davutoğlu, 2012), thereby redefining Türkiye's foreign policy strategy, which has evolved from a 'bridge country' to a 'central country'.

During the Syrian crisis, Türkiye pursued an 'open door' policy at its borders, based on the principle that a country's foreign policy should not be solely focused on its own interests but should also be guided by humanitarian and ethical principles. Under this policy, unplanned migration into the country occurred, and migrants who initially stayed in temporary accommodation centers moved from these centers to cities. During this period, temporary protection status was granted on the grounds that legal regulations for Syrians needed to be urgently implemented. Fundamental policy changes were implemented with the Foreigners and International Protection Law No. 6458 (FIPL), which was adopted in 2012 (Republic of Türkiye, 2013) As is well known, Türkiye acceded to the 1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol with a geographical reservation (limitation). Within this framework, Türkiye does not grant refugee status to asylum seekers from outside European countries (European Council member countries),

and persons who have refugee status under the provisions of the Convention are defined as ‘asylum seekers’ and are provided with temporary protection until they are resettled in a third country (cenevreofisi-dt.mfa.gov.tr). Individuals from various regions (Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and other countries) who apply for asylum in Türkiye on an individual basis will be accepted as ‘conditional refugees’; however, Syrians will be placed under Temporary Protection Status (Republic of Türkiye, 2013). The new law ensures that migrants are registered and introduces key definitions such as asylum seeker, refugee, conditional refugee, temporary protection, stateless person, and foreigner. In addition, the FIPL regulates the provision of education, employment, social assistance, and healthcare opportunities to persons who have obtained international protection status. The law also includes provisions on integration, which is a component of migration management. A flexible structure has been envisaged to enable and facilitate the conscious and orderly coexistence of foreigners and society. Thus, the integration issue has been included in legislation for the first time.

The Presidency of Migration Management (PMM) stated that the number of registered Syrians in Türkiye as of February 13, 2025, was 2,838,292 (goc.gov.tr., 2025). The Presidency announced that the number of Syrians staying in temporary accommodation centers as of 2024 is 57,774. Of the Syrian migrants, 98.15% live in cities or city outskirts (Presidency of Migration Management, 2021).

After a process that began in 2011, exactly 11 years later, a serious turning point was reached in April 2022, and migration policies entered a new era. From this point onwards, the slogans ‘*Voluntary, Safe, Dignified, and Orderly Return*’ were loudly voiced. President Erdoğan’s statement, ‘*We are striving for the dignified return of Syrians*,’ marked the beginning of a new era in migration policies (www.hurriyet.com.tr).

Chimni (1999) divided migrants’ post-World War II return process into two periods. The first period was between 1945 and 1985. Although the voluntary return of migrants to their home countries existed in principle during this period, resettlement was encouraged in practice. The second period, spanning 1985–1993, is described as a time when voluntariness was emphasized and voluntary return was presented as a permanent solution (Chimni, 1999: 55–56). As stated in the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) report ‘Return Migration: Policies and Practices in Europe,’ in 1994, the return of migrants became an important element in the fight against irregular migration (IOM, 2004). Article 33/1 of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees ‘*No Contracting State shall expel or return (‘refouler’) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.*’ This article emphasizes the principle of non-refoulement and does not accept involuntary return. Buz and Korç (2021) stated that in 1996, the UNHCR defended the voluntary return approach for migrants and indicated that the opposite situation could lead to adverse consequences (Buz & Korç, 2021: 216). By 2000, international organizations were working to establish the infrastructure for the mass return of migrants to their countries. Additionally, the 2001 World Report highlighted that the return of migrants to Bosnia and Herzegovina represented a critical threshold (Heimerl, 2005: 383).

Following examples from the international historical process of migrant returns, Türkiye’s experience in this area after 2011 will be discussed in the context of Syrian migration. Following the mass migration from Syria in 2011, Türkiye enacted the Foreigners and International Protection Law (FIPL) in 2013 to manage and regulate migration-related issues. In 2016, the Regulation on the Implementation of the Foreigners and International Protection Law was published in 2016. Article 121 of the Regulation discusses how and under what conditions voluntary return support will be provided¹. İçduygu & Ayaşlı (2019) note that, as of 2017, there have been occasional instances of anti-migrant rhetoric in Türkiye. Furthermore, Türkiye has taken steps to facilitate the voluntary return of migrants in the context of creating a safe zone in northern Syria (İçduygu & Ayaşlı, 2019: 12). The periods and characteristics of Türkiye’s migration policies from the 1930s to the return period in December 2024 are shown in Table 1, which illustrates the stages of Türkiye’s migration

¹<https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/File/GeneratePdf?mevzuatNo=21460&mevzuatTur=KurumVeKurulusYonetmeligi&mevzuatTertip=5>.

policy. Migration processes that have been similarly presented in previous studies along with recent developments and period definitions, have been incorporated into the table by the authors (ORSAM, 2012: 15), (Goularas & Sunata, 2015:16) and (Güder, 2016:131).

Table 1

The Periods of Türkiye's Migration Policies

Period	Migration Policies
1923 -1930	The Early Republic Period
Source of Immigration and Transit Country (1950-1980)	Country Characteristics (Previous Period)
Transit and destination country (1980 onwards immigration source-immigration destination-transit)	Country Characteristics (Recent Period)
Laws	The Basic Starting Point of the Policies
Open Door (2011)	Policy Approach
Foreigners and the International Protection Law (2013)	The main migration law
General Directorate of Security, Foreigners Branch	Main Institutions Implementing Policy
General Directorate of Migration Management (GDM) (2013)	
Presidency of Migration Management (2021)	
1930 Nation State Construction	Key Turning Points in the Migration Policy
1951 Geneva Convention	
2005 European Union Acquis Compatibility and	
The Open Door Policy	
The 2011 Syrian Crisis	
2013 Foreigners and International Protection Law	
2018 Year of Integration	
2018- (March 2022)	Social Inclusion-Integration – Harmonisation
March 2022	After the Voluntary/Dignified/Safe/Orderly Return Period
December 8, 2024	Return Period

The table was developed by the authors based on ORSAM (2012: 15), (İçduygu, Erder, and Gençkaya (2014), (Goularas & Sunata, 2015:16) and (Güder, 2016:131).

The 13-year dilemma between return and permanence has evolved into a discourse of ‘honorable, safe, voluntary and orderly return’ that began at the highest level in 2022. As of December 8, 2024, the trend toward return has gained momentum with the new situation that has developed with the collapse of the current regime in Syria. The Presidency of Migration Management defines voluntary return as ‘the return of a foreigner under international protection or temporary protection to the country of which they are a citizen, where they previously resided, under whose protection they are, or where they are legally present, either of their own free will or through organised programmes when the need for protection has ceased’ (Presidency of Migration Management, 2025).

The basic principles of voluntary return are as follows:

- a) No forced return,
- b) No pressure to return to one’s home country,
- c) Ensuring that returnees have a standard of living that is consistent with human dignity,
- d) Ensuring the continuity and sustainability of returns by prioritizing the reintegration of returnees (Presidency of Migration Management, 2025).

This new period has brought many debates. Will the former guests, who are now believed to be permanent residents, who have settled down, started families, and even had children who are now citizens, really return? Similar debates are taking place in other countries. The phenomenon of migration is said to be as old as human history. Therefore, many situations surrounding migration have been addressed in various studies. Gmelch (1980) emphasized that return migration is an integral part of the migration process. The reasons for the decision to return, based on various factors ranging from individual preferences to compelling reasons, are explained as failure in the destination country, the desire to preserve the values and relationships of migrants in their homeland, the desire to spend their retirement years in their homeland, and the tendency to transfer the knowledge and experience they have acquired to their homeland.

The fields that examine return migration include economics, sociology, anthropology, geography, and psychology (Kunuroglu *et al.*, 2016: 4). Studies have focused on the experiences of different countries regarding return migration. For example, the report titled 'Understanding Voluntary Migration' prepared by the Sussex Migration Research Center in 2004 examines the factors influencing refugees and asylum seekers' voluntary return decisions and the sustainability of these returns. The report includes in-depth interviews and focus group studies with people who have migrated from Afghanistan, China, Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo and Türkiye. The results show that peace, political change, security, family support, democracy, and human rights are the factors influencing return migration. The following factors contributed to the sustainability of return: wanting to return, planning to return, agreeing with family members, feeling safe, finding work, accessing economic resources, receiving humanitarian aid, and accessing education (Sussex Center for Migration Research, 2004).

Social and emotional factors often shape return migration decisions (Kunuroglu *et al.*, 2016). The key factors influencing migrants' decisions to return include employment and legal status in the destination country, personal well-being, psychological fatigue, family ties, social networks, and the perceived benefits of return programmes (IOM, 2015).

Return migration is seen as a process with not only individual but also social and cultural impacts (Gmelch, 1980: 156). The development and sustainability of VRPs are important. Within the framework of all these factors, many factors such as the urban space (quality of life) in which migrants live, the urban services they have access to, their social belonging (social networks, access to education, vocational courses), economic conditions (finding a job or opening a shop), and the education of children involve not only central governments but also local governments and local migration policies.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how local policies influence Syrian migrants' return intentions, with a specific focus on Istanbul's Sultanbeyli Municipality. Sultanbeyli was selected as a field site because of its visibility in municipal-level migration initiatives and its proactive engagement in refugee support mechanisms. Rather than aiming for generalizable representativeness, the case was chosen based on the notable role of the municipality in shaping return-oriented policies, an area still underexamined in the existing empirical literature.

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals directly involved in migration-related services to gather data. Nine face-to-face interviews were conducted on January 23–24, 2025, targeting staff from both Sultanbeyli Municipality and the Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association (MSYDD). Purposive sampling was used to identify participants, with preference given to individuals with extensive experience and direct involvement in migration governance. Municipal administrators also recommended including representatives of NGO to capture a broader institutional perspective.

An open-ended questionnaire, developed considering the gaps identified during the preliminary literature review, guided the interviews. The key areas of inquiry included institutional approaches to voluntary return, perceptions of return and permanence among Syrian migrants, and individual roles of municipal actors in shaping these dynamics. The

interviews were conducted in Turkish, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Members of the research team thematically coded the resulting transcripts and compared the codes for consistency. Three central themes emerged during the analysis: the socio-economic structure of Sultanbeyli, the experiences of coexistence and permanence of migrants, and the evolving debate on return. Table 2 shows the participant profiles.

Table 2
Information on the interviewees

Code	Gender	Education	Department
Interviewer 1	Male	Bachelor's degree	The Refugee Association Social Welfare Unit
Interviewer 2	Male	Associate License	Social Support Services
Interviewer 3	Female	Bachelor's degree	Department of Strategy Development
Interviewer 4	Female	Bachelor's degree	Department of Strategy Development
Interviewer 5	Male	Bachelor's degree	Department of Strategy Development
Interviewer 6	Female	Bachelor's degree	Department of Strategy Development
Interviewer 7	Female	Bachelor's degree	Legal Consulting
Interviewer 8	Female	Bachelor's degree	Social counseling unit
Interviewer 9	Female	Bachelor's degree	Social cohesion unit

Table was constructed by the authors.

Participants were aged between 27 and 57 years, with an average age of 37.3 years. In terms of educational level, one participant had an associate degree and the others had bachelor's degrees. The least experienced participant had been in their current position for two years, whereas the most experienced had been working for 30 years. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. The purpose of the study was explained to the participants in a clear and understandable manner before the interviews, thereby obtaining their informed consent.. Researchers who had planned the interviews in advance and made appointments with the participants conducted them. This planning was done to ensure the systematic progress of the study and the efficiency of the interviews by allowing the participants to prepare in advance. The principle of "data saturation" was observed during the data collection. That is, when similar statements and recurring themes began to emerge, no new information would emerge, and the interviews were concluded. The researchers were aware that the context in which the study was conducted was politically and socially sensitive. Therefore, they constantly kept in mind that they were external observers and that this could affect their interpretation of the data. To enhance the reliability of the research, 'data triangulation' was employed. This involved analyzing different data sources (e.g., interviews with different individuals, documents, and literature reviews). In line with these approaches, the ethical conditions of the research and the validity and reliability of the findings were given significant attention.

Socio-Economic Structure of the Sultanbeyli District

In the aftermath of the Syrian civil war, Türkiye emerged as the primary host country for displaced Syrians, currently accommodating the world's largest refugee population. Although the initial policy response emphasized temporary protection and humanitarian aid, the Turkish state shifted toward a more structured migration governance framework over time. The Temporary Protection Regulation (2014), the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP, 2013), and the establishment of the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM) formalized the management of

the Syrian presence in the country. However, as the Syrian displacement became increasingly protracted, the national discourse gradually began to emphasize return as a durable solution, especially after 2018.

Since 2019, state-led initiatives such as the “Voluntary Return Support Program” and the promotion of “safe zones” in northern Syria have marked a new phase in the migration policy of Türkiye, which is often characterized by a securitized and state-centric approach. Nonetheless, the implementation of return-related policies varies significantly across local contexts. Municipalities have become central actors in this process, either facilitating integration and social cohesion or increasingly contributing to the governance of return—whether through direct engagement or indirect influence on migrants’ living conditions and expectations.

Sultanbeyli, a peripheral district on Istanbul’s Asian side, provides a particularly revealing case for examining the intersection between local governance and return dynamics. Sultanbeyli is home to 21,747² registered Syrians as of 2023 and is among the top 10 districts hosting Syrians in Istanbul, and the most prominent on the Anatolian side. The district’s appeal to migrants stems from a combination of structural and social factors: lower housing costs, conservative community values, and dense migrant networks—particularly among Syrians from Aleppo—have facilitated initial settlement.

Informal employment in sectors such as construction and textiles further incentivizes migration to the area, especially for those without work permits. However, structural challenges persist. Located largely within the environmental protection zone of the Ömerli Dam, the district faces strict commercial development limits, which constrains local employment growth. Residents often seek work in other parts of Istanbul, and urban transformation projects have displaced low-income households from deteriorating housing stock, contributing to involuntary intra-district mobility.

Sultanbeyli Municipality has gained recognition for its distinct approach to migration governance. Through collaboration with NGOs—particularly the Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association (MSYDD)—and the development of targeted support services, the municipality has adopted what Daniş & Sert (2019) call a “human-centered local governance” model. Yet, this study shows that the sustainability of such a model is not merely institutional; it also hinges on the individual initiatives and discretionary practices of municipal personnel. As one municipal employee emphasized:

“Sultanbeyli is a relatively disadvantaged district where people with low socioeconomic status live. It is also a district with a high rate of conservatism. Therefore, the fact that rent prices are lower in Sultanbeyli than in other districts and that conservative people live here has been a factor that attracts refugees here in general. Also, the policies of Sultanbeyli Municipality are very distinctive for refugees. Therefore, for them to come and stay and settle here is actually a positive incentive.” (Interviewee 9)

However, precarious housing remains a major issue. Migrants are often confined to low-quality, substandard housing units and experience displacement due to ongoing redevelopment within the district. One staff member noted:

“In terms of renting a house, these migrants had a very difficult time keeping quality houses, except for economic reasons, and they always stayed in bad houses. Now, as those bad houses are transformed, these people are left out in the open.” (Interviewee 2)

Such conditions reflect what Işık and Pınarcıoğlu (2011) describe as the reproduction of urban poverty, transferred across waves of migrants who replace each other in increasingly marginalized spaces. Syrian refugees in Sultanbeyli

²Data were obtained from the Refugees Association through interviews conducted on January 23-24, 2025. Since the mobility of migrants is intense, not all Syrians are fully reflected in the statistics; however, they make up a large part of those living within the district’s borders.

often find themselves navigating chronic precarity—exposed to both persistent poverty and cyclical displacement within the urban periphery.

In this context, the Sultanbeyli case offers a critical lens for understanding how local migration governance intersects with broader return strategies. It demonstrates that national-level discourses and geopolitical developments shape return intentions and the socio-spatial conditions and institutional environments that migrants encounter at the local level.

While central policies shaped the legal framework for temporary protection and integration, local governments have played an increasingly crucial role in practice. Municipalities—legally bound by the somewhat ambiguous provisions of Municipal Law No. 5393—have interpreted their responsibilities toward migrants in different ways, ranging from indifference to proactive social assistance models (Danış & Sert, 2019). The absence of explicit legal duties combined with budgetary limitations has resulted in an uneven local migration governance landscape (Erdoğan, 2017; Yüksel, 2023: 174).

Despite these constraints, Sultanbeyli Municipality has emerged as a case of innovative, rights-based local engagement. As one of Istanbul's most prominent migrant-hosting districts on the Anatolian side, Sultanbeyli's approach emphasizes social cohesion and coexistence over exclusion or temporary aid. This includes integrating refugee-focused NGOs into municipal structures, establishing dedicated coordination systems (such as SUKOM), and participating in multi-level support networks. Although the municipality faces legal and financial limitations—such as the lack of designated budget shares for non-citizens and institutional vagueness—its practices are widely recognized as among the most comprehensive and human-centered at the local level.

These initiatives have directly impacted this study's return-versus-permanence dilemma. Sultanbeyli's policies have encouraged long-term settlement among Syrian migrants by fostering a sense of belonging through language courses, vocational programs, and social services. However, the sustainability of such efforts remains contingent upon both political will and clearer national legal mandates.

Persistence and Co-existence

For more than 10 years, Syrians have been living in Türkiye. Although the debate on the transience vs. permanence of Syrians is still ongoing, a significant number of migrants have settled in Türkiye. Especially considering the Syrian children and young people who were born in Türkiye or who came here at an early age, and those who carry out their commercial activities here, it can be stated that permanence stands at a stronger point. This situation is considered a natural consequence of the migration process evolving from temporary to permanent, as demonstrated by studies conducted on Syrians in Türkiye (İçduygu & Osseiran, 2024; Erdoğan *et al.*, 2024). The intention to return has decreased, while urbanization and social belonging processes have strengthened. In such a situation, developing a culture of coexistence for those who are more likely to remain in the country is important. This is closely related to the dimensions of social ties and acceptance in the model of migrant integration proposed by Ager and Strang (2008).

In the case of Syrians in Sultanbeyli district, there has been a transformation in terms of activities from the past to the present on the issue of permanence and coexistence. First of all, basic humanitarian needs such as shelter, food, and health were met due to the conditions of the first arrivals. This approach corresponds to the initial reception phase defined by the UNHCR (2012), which focuses on emergency humanitarian aid and access to basic services. As the intensity of the conflict in Syria increased, the number of refugees seeking shelter in Türkiye also increased in subsequent years, and it became clear that those who had arrived earlier would not be able to return to their homeland in the short term. This situation brought with it discussions about integration.

The initiatives undertaken primarily consisted of in-kind and cash assistance for disadvantaged groups, Turkish language courses, socio-cultural activities, vocational training courses, and psycho-social support services. Such prac-

tices align with Phillimore's (2012) proposed 'multi-level support' approach to local government integration policies. These activities, which are carried out by civil society organizations and public institutions, have largely focused on helping migrants adapt to the new environment. However, Daniş and Sert (2019) emphasized that such 'migrant-centered rather than community-centered' policies adopted by municipalities may limit integration in the long term.

Considering the information provided by interviewees 3, 5, 6, and 7, it was determined that although an integration plan was developed that allowed both sides to come together in different educational programmes and activities, the results were not achieved in a healthy manner. This situation supports Strang and Ager's (2010) finding that the local community's participation is critical to the success of social integration. Through the Syrians Coordination Center Software (SUKOM)³, migrants and citizens were brought together. Meetings were organized with the support of a facilitator and an interpreter because it was anticipated that they would not be able to get along due to the language barrier; however, the project was not sustainable as it did not receive much support from the locals. Similarly, the objectives for ensuring mutual cohesion could not be achieved at the desired level in activities in public spaces where migrants and the public can come together as everyone grouped together. These results support the 'limited interaction-high distance' phenomenon highlighted in Çelik & İçduygu's (2019) study on local integration processes in Istanbul. Factors such as insufficient public participation, language barriers, and negative public perception are among the reasons for the failure of social integration projects, yet these issues are not sufficiently evaluated. This situation creates a dilemma for municipalities that are caught between technical achievements and social transformation goals.

While Syrian migrants were initially eager to participate in social cohesion activities, they started to withdraw because of the negative perception of the public of migrants and the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment.

"The Syrians have been here for a long time. Instead of talking about being guests, they have learned the language here and settled in. They have somehow reached the level of sustaining their own lives. It is not like the first time. People have somehow established their families, people married here, and their children grew up and learned the language more." (Interviewee 4)

In the last few years, there has been a lack of interest in developing a coexistence culture. This has a negative impact on reducing the existing tension between citizens and migrants. Despite this, Sultanbeyli Municipality staff have taken individual initiatives to develop a culture of coexistence with Syrian migrants, particularly targeting women and children. The street games project supported by the municipality aimed to revive traditional games in neighborhoods. Since most of the participants in the event were local children, the Refugee Association invited migrant children as well so that they could mingle in a common area. Migrant children were less likely to leave the house and participate in activities due to the fear of being ostracized by the community and being exposed to any attacks. The municipality tries to keep the quota of locals and migrants close when planning coexistence and social cohesion activities. In addition, the municipality supports the schooling and educational adaptation processes of Syrian children through various national and international collaborations, considering the importance of the education process for migrant children in a country (Ozer, Komsuoglu & Atesok, 2017). Such multi-actor approaches are consistent with Penninx & Garcés-Masareñas (2016)'s emphasis on the increasing role of local governments in integration.

Within the scope of children's and women's workshops, Sultanbeyli Municipality allocates its focus to specific groups and plans its activities with the idea of accepting permanence and developing a culture of co-existence. However, the central government's failure to systematically determine such policies within local dynamics limits the municipality's ability to achieve its targeted impact.

³It is a software developed by the Refugees Association to solve the registration problem of refugees coming to Türkiye, to facilitate their follow-up, to identify their needs and to ensure that these needs are met from a single center.

Return Debate

The prolongation of returns due to forced mass migration and the settlement of “unannounced guests” in cities across the country by leaving temporary accommodation centers have led to an increase in the intensity of urban services, the discussion of their efficiency and effectiveness, and social cohesion and integration. Municipal governments have reviewed their local migration policies and made the necessary adjustments. In addition to meeting the primary humanitarian needs of migrants, the necessity to fulfill basic urban services on the axis of efficiency and effectiveness with the increasing population and the constant budget shares have emerged as new constraints for municipalities to overcome. This new situation in cities has also raised various security concerns.

As of April 2022, Türkiye has faced a serious breaking point in the discourse on migration policy. Migration policies have evolved into a new era with the discourse of “voluntary/honorable return”. The concept of voluntary repatriation refers to the free decision of individuals forced to leave their country of origin to return to their home country. The legal framework for the voluntary repatriation of individuals under International Protection and Temporary Protection Status in Türkiye is outlined in Articles 60 and 87 of the FIPL. In one of his statements, President Erdoğan signaled that a new era would be entered, especially regarding recent migration, with the statement “We are striving for the dignified return of Syrians” (Hürriyet, 2022). Immediately afterward, a video titled “our main strategy is voluntary safe and dignified return” was published on the website of the Ministry of Interior. Since then, policies to support and encourage Türkiye’s guests to return to their countries on a safe route have continued. On December 8, 2024, the new situation in Syria accelerated these efforts. The website of the Presidency of Migration Management includes the basic principles and procedures for “Voluntary, Safe, Dignified and Orderly Return”. The page states that returns are carried out in accordance with the principles of voluntary, safe, dignified, and orderly return in accordance with international law, and that people are not forcibly returned or subjected to pressure (Presidency of Migration Management, 2025). From 2022 onwards, the discourse on “dignified return,” “safe and dignified return,” and finally “voluntary, safe, dignified, and orderly return” has been expanded both in terms of terminology and scope.

Ambiguity and Anxieties Regarding Return

On December 8, 2024, because of the new situation that developed with the overthrow of the Assad regime in Syria, the question of whether Syrians in Türkiye will return to their country has become an important issue on the national agenda. Although there was no intense movement at the border gates, some people left Türkiye with their families. The new situation that has emerged as a result of the changing political balance in Syria is extremely fragile and uncertain, and more than one actor must be involved in the process. Municipalities, as an important part of local governments, also put the issue of return on the agenda. (T24, 2024; Independent Türkçe, 2024). Interviewees remain cautious about encouraging returns, believing that Türkiye’s return policies should be awaited.

Interviews with employees of the Municipality and Refugees Association revealed that Syrians living in the district made plans to return by showing emotional reactions immediately after the regime’s overthrow. Anti-immigrant attitudes in Türkiye since 2020 have emerged as a serious incentive for people to leave. Most Syrian shopkeepers in Sultanbeyli want to leave. Tradesmen, who rely heavily on the Syrian population for their commercial activities, are planning to return to Syria, as they are worried that most Syrians will leave.

In addition, the events in the nearby geography play a decisive role in the plans for return. In the event of returns, how shopkeepers will get their products through customs and how they will deal with issues such as Social Security Institution (SSI) tax debts remain unclear.

The experiences of other communities with a history of migration are as important as individual circumstances in decisions regarding the return of Syrians. The experiences of millions of Iraqi refugees who were displaced and returned

after the start of the Gulf War in 1990 have influenced Syrians. As stated by Interviewer 2, who plays an active role in studies on migrants, the idea conveyed by Iraqis that *‘those who returned early found good jobs and earned good incomes, while those who returned late lost out’* is causing Syrians to make quick decisions about their return. Motivations such as preserving their private property, contributing to the formation of the new state, and taking advantage of opportunities that may arise are factors they consider in their return plans. Older Syrians in Sultanbeyli also appear to be eager to return. Their experiences and longing for the country are among the most important reasons for these expectations. Additionally, the language barriers and socio-cultural differences they face within Turkish society may also influence their requests to return.

On the other hand, there are worried posts on various social media tools such as Telegram, WhatsApp, and Facebook that their temporary protection status will be revoked after December 8, 2024, and non-citizens will be sent to Syria. Such information also creates a perception that makes Syrians living in the Sultanbeyli district uneasy and obliges them to leave.

“Over Telegram and WhatsApp groups, clients are being given very wrong information. Your IDs will be canceled; the citizenship of people who have been granted exceptional citizenship will be canceled, and you will be sent to Syria very soon. These discourses began on December 8. We had a meeting with our friends in Syria to evaluate the situation. For example, our friends directly expressed this. First, to prevent the deformation of this misinformation, we tried to convey the correct information to our clients. We are now focused on providing accurate information to our clients through social media, social counselors, and the questions we receive in our work.” (Interviewee 9)

Interviewees’ statements revealed that the new situation in Syria has created uncertainty for Sultanbeyli residents. Furthermore, this uncertainty has caused the municipalities and associations providing services to Syrians to be apprehensive about their next steps, prompting them to proceed with caution.

Mixed Emotions in Life Rebuilding

Interviews were conducted with the staff of Sultanbeyli Municipality and the Refugees and Asylum Seekers Assistance and Solidarity Association. At times, the participants also provided information about different groups in response to the questions posed. For example, I shared thoughts of Syrian women and students regarding their return.

In the case of Syrian youth studying at universities in Türkiye, the concept of homeland and the feeling that they have a homeland to return to have become dominant for the first time since the fall of the regime. As expressed in the interviews, the issue of Syrians’ return to Syria remains uncertain because of their security concerns, traumatic experiences, and the fact that they have rebuilt their lives in Türkiye. In the case of Syrian women, they are not eager to return to their homes. Compared with Syria, Türkiye has a freer environment, where the children of married women continue their education, and their husbands are active in their working lives.

“After December 8, 2024, everyone was directly saying that we would go to Syria.” They were extremely emotional and jubilant.” (Interviewee 1)

The current political situation and living conditions in Syria are also factors that influence voluntary returns. However, only a few weeks after December 8, it became evident that even those who were willing to return had started to change their minds considering the information received that the conditions in Syria were not suitable for return. The lack of basic infrastructure services, such as electricity and water, the inability of education and health institutions to function, and the lack of security and public order in some areas are deterrents to return plans. Considering that

some of those who came from Syria left the country due to terrorist attacks, the fact that terrorist organizations still exist in various regions in the country makes people who are thinking of returning uneasy. Although there are no official refugee camps in Lebanon, the return of Syrians living in informal settlements or on the urban periphery, as well as those residing in camps in Jordan and Iraq, has begun to place additional strain on the city centers' already inadequate infrastructure and other services.

The experiences of Syrians living in Türkiye over the 14 years since 2011 are important factors in shaping their thoughts about returning to Syria. Furthermore, the decision to abandon their established lives and current circumstances in Türkiye and step into a still-uncertain future in Syria influenced their decision to return. It is understood that the attitude of Syrians toward the decision to return depends on their own conditions. In this sense, Sultanbeyli Municipality does not follow a clear return policy. No institutional efforts are made to encourage return. In the dimension of return, the personal attitude of the personnel who work in the field of migration and are active in this field comes to the fore rather than the institutional attitude of the municipality. In this respect, the idea that discussions on return should be made using the right language, that Syrians should never be asked the question "when will you leave?" and that people should return voluntarily comes to the fore. People who adopt a human rights-based approach also have low expectations that returns will be very serious. Considering that approximately 50% of Syrians in Türkiye are under the age of 18, it is believed that they have been acclimatized to Türkiye for more than 10 years and that their ties with Syria are gradually weakening. Since December 8, 2024, only 9 families from the Sultanbeyli district have requested to return, which is considered a sign that an intensive mass return movement will not occur.

"Let's talk about the return process." Those who are already here now usually want to wait. I mean because they want to see what lies ahead. There is also some feedback from people who went there with the first excitement. We hear that the process there is not really very good, and there are serious problems, especially in terms of infrastructure, electricity, telephone, and internet. I honestly did not expect such a low feedback rate. There is an expected process after June, when schools close. some say, "Let's wait and see what the process will be." I estimate that the situation will become clearer within a year toward the end of the year." (Interviewee 8)

Syrians' decisions to return to Syria are not based on a single reason. As the interviews reveal, the established lives, economic circumstances, family ties, uncertainty in Syria, and security concerns of the Syrians all play a significant role in their decision to return. However, the actual situation regarding returns is expected to become clearer from June 2025 onwards. Given the presence of approximately 875,000 Syrian children born and living in Türkiye (General Directorate for Migration Management, 2024), it is estimated that Syrian families will make decisions based on the conditions in the country, especially with the closure of schools and the warming of the weather as a factor that will facilitate mobility.

Conclusion

This study explored how local migration governance—in this case, the policies and practices of Sultanbeyli Municipality—shapes the dynamic tension between permanence and return among Syrian migrants in Türkiye. Departing from the national discourse of "voluntary, safe, dignified, and orderly return" that gained momentum after 2022, the research investigated how municipal responses influence migrants' lived experiences, long-term settlement patterns, and perceptions of return. Using qualitative data drawn from interviews with local officials and NGO staff and document analysis, Sultanbeyli is presented as a compelling example of localized migration governance operating in the absence of a clear national legal mandate.

The findings indicate that the Sultanbeyli Municipality has adopted a relatively inclusive and human-centered migration model. The municipality has fostered a sense of belonging among many Syrian migrants through the institu-

tionalization of refugee-focused services, collaboration with NGOs such as MSYDD, and the development of targeted programs for education, social cohesion, and vocational support. These initiatives—despite being implemented under legal ambiguity and financial constraints—have contributed to a prevailing orientation toward permanence, especially for families with children and those who have achieved a degree of socioeconomic stabilization.

While political rhetoric has increasingly emphasized return, particularly following regime changes in Syria, the actual return figures in Sultanbeyli remain very limited. Interviews revealed that although some Syrians initially expressed emotional enthusiasm for returning—triggered by political shifts or misinformation circulating in social media groups—many later reconsidered due to concerns over security, infrastructure collapse, and lack of basic services in Syria. Moreover, the attachment to urban life in Türkiye, the integration of children into the education system, and the development of informal employment channels all act as anchors of permanence.

This study also highlights the institutional and structural limitations faced by local authorities. Ambiguities in Municipal Law No. 5393 and Law No. 6458 prevent municipalities from clearly defining their responsibilities toward non-citizens. These legal gray zones result in varied responses across municipalities—ranging from service denial to proactive social programming—often depending on the political orientation and personal initiative of mayors or municipal staff. For example, the dual policy observed in Sultanbeyli regarding business licenses for Syrian shopkeepers—neither approving nor officially intervening—illustrates the uncertainty and inconsistency migrants must navigate.

This study contributes to a growing body of literature that examines migration through the lens of urban governance and spatial agency by focusing on the local level. This demonstrates that return is not merely a matter of national policy or international law but a deeply situated, socially embedded process shaped by local institutional practices and everyday interactions. In doing so, it challenges the binary logic of “integration versus return” and instead positions cities as critical arenas in which migration futures are negotiated.

Future research could benefit from comparative analyses across districts with varying sociopolitical contexts, particularly those less engaged in integration efforts. Examining how second-generation Syrians—who have spent their formative years in Türkiye—navigate questions of identity, belonging, and return would also be fruitful. On the policy side, there is an urgent need for clearer legislation defining the roles and capacities of municipalities in migration governance, alongside equitable financial frameworks that account for non-citizen populations in budget allocations.

In conclusion, Sultanbeyli’s case reveals that despite the national rhetoric of return, the reality on the ground is one of gradual, though uneven, settlement. The sustainability of this trajectory will depend on whether local efforts are supported, formalized, and scaled within a national framework that recognizes permanence as a legitimate and enduring outcome of displacement and not as a failure of return.



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