

The urban threshold of return: Urban rootedness, legal uncertainty, and translocal mobility among Syrians in Gaziantep

Geri dönüşün kentsel eřiđi: Gaziantep'teki Suriyeliler arasında kentsel köklölük, hukuki belirsizlik ve translokal hareketlilik

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Abstract

This study examines how Syrians living in Gaziantep assess return in relation to urban rootedness, legal status, experiences in public spaces, and translocal mobility. Utilizing an instrumental case study design, this research is based on semi-structured interviews conducted with 32 Syrians living in Gaziantep. The findings indicate that return is viewed not as a definitive and one-way decision, but as an uncertain and conditional process shaped by back-and-forth mobility, family obligations, economic opportunities, and changing political conditions. Legal uncertainty regarding temporary protection complicates return for some participants, while experiences of othering weaken their sense of urban belonging. By employing the concept of the “urban threshold,” this study reveals how return in a border city is shaped by the combined effects of urban rootedness, legal uncertainty, public recognition, and translocal mobility, thereby contributing to research on refugees and forced migration.

Keywords: Syrians, return migration, urban rootedness, legal uncertainty, urban exclusion, translocal mobility

Öz

Bu çalışma, Gaziantep'te yaşayan Suriyelilerin geri dönüş kararlarını kentsel köklölük, hukuki statü, kamusal alan deneyimleri ve translokal hareketlilik bağlamında nasıl değerlendirdiklerini incelemektedir. Araçsal vaka çalışması olarak tasarlanan araştırma, Gaziantep'te yaşayan 32 Suriyeliyle yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelere dayanmaktadır. Bulgular, geri dönüşün kesin ve tek yönlü bir karar olmaktan çok, ileri-geri hareketlilik, aile yükümlölükleri, ekonomik imkânlar ve deđişen siyasi koşullara bađlı, belirsiz ve koşullu bir süreç olarak görüldüğünü göstermektedir. Geçici korumaya ilişkin hukuki belirsizlik bazı katılımcılar için geri dönüşü karmaşılaştırırken, ötekileştirilme deneyimleri kentsel aidiyet duygusunu zayıflatmaktadır. Geri dönüşü “kentsel eřik” kavramıyla ele alan çalışma, sınır kenti bağlamında geri dönüş düşüncesinin kentsel köklölük, hukuki belirsizlik, kamusal tanınma ve translokal hareketliliğin ortak etkisiyle nasıl şekillendiđini göstererek mülteci ve zorunlu göç literatürüne katkı sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriyeliler, geri dönüş göçü, kentsel köklölük, hukuki belirsizlik, kentsel dışlanma, translokal hareketlilik

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Introduction

The civil war that began in Syria in 2011 has led to one of the largest forced displacement crises in modern history. By 2024, more than 13 million Syrians had been displaced; approximately 6.5 million of them had sought refuge in neighboring countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2024). During this process, Türkiye has become the primary host country for Syrians, and their long-term presence has led to significant demographic, economic, and urban changes (Presidency of Migration Management [GİB], 2026).

Syrians in Türkiye were initially treated as “guests” within a framework designed for a temporary humanitarian crisis. Their legal status was later formalized through the Temporary Protection Regulation, which entered into force in 2014 pursuant to Article 91 of Law No. 6458 on Foreigners and International Protection (Official Gazette, 2014). Although temporary protection grants the right to reside in Türkiye, access to health and education services, and the right to obtain a work permit under certain conditions, it does not offer a path to permanent residency or citizenship (İçduygu & Nimer, 2020). This legal uncertainty has placed Syrians in a long-term in-between condition, shaping their relationships with urban spaces, neighborhood life, and future plans.

The displacement process, which has lasted for over a decade, has brought the issue of return to the center of humanitarian and political debates. Since 2019, growing public pressure and political rhetoric have made “voluntary and safe return” an increasingly prominent issue in Türkiye (Kirişçi & Karaca, 2021). The regime change in Syria in December 2024 has given new momentum to these discussions and made return a more concrete possibility. However, developments on the ground have not followed a rapid and linear return model. According to official data from June 2026, 2,259,034 Syrians remained under temporary protection in Türkiye (GİB, 2026).

Many Syrians living in cities remain hesitant or cautious about returning home (Institute for Migration, 2025). In addition to security and economic

concerns, the urban living conditions they have established over the years also shape this attitude (Erdoğan, 2020; Sağiroğlu & Yılmaz, 2021). Given the widespread damage to infrastructure and housing in Syria and the ongoing instability in labor markets (World Bank, 2022), return is not merely a matter of intent but a spatial process that requires a joint assessment of conditions in both Türkiye and Syria. This situation demonstrates that, particularly for Syrians who have lived in cities for many years, return cannot be explained solely by political change. Return is also shaped by urban conditions that have accumulated over time. This study conceptualizes this process as an “urban threshold” where return is evaluated, postponed, negotiated, or reshaped.

Gaziantep offers a particularly relevant setting for examining this process due to its large Syrian population (GİB, 2026), its proximity to the Syrian border, and its long-standing commercial and cultural ties with Aleppo. Its border location also enables Syrians to maintain cross-border connections and simultaneously assess conditions in both Türkiye and Syria.

The literature on Syrians in Türkiye has expanded significantly, particularly since 2015. Major areas of research include urban integration and social cohesion (Kaya, 2018; Sağiroğlu & Yılmaz, 2021; Şimşek, 2018; Yıldız & Uzgören, 2016), exclusion from the labor market (Del Carpio & Wagner, 2015), access to education (Karadaş, 2022; Taştan & Çelik, 2017; UNICEF, 2022; Yılmaz, 2021), and spatial segregation (Biehl, 2014). On the other hand, studies on return intentions highlight perceived security, economic expectations, educational continuity, future aspirations, and property loss as key factors (Emin & Çelik, 2026; Erdoğan, 2020; Institute for Migration, 2025; Teke Lloyd et al., 2025). However, less attention has been paid to how return is assessed within the context of the interplay between urban rootedness resulting from long-term residence in a city, legal status, public recognition, and cross-border mobility. Consequently, existing studies offer a limited perspective on how the city itself shapes assessments regarding the feasibility, timing, and reversibility of return.

In this context, this study examines how Syrians in Gaziantep assess return through four interconnected dimensions: urban rootedness, legal status, experiences in public spaces, and translocal mobility. The concept of the “urban threshold” serves as an analytical lens for examining these dimensions. Consequently, the city is understood not merely as a place of residence but as a spatial and social filter through which the feasibility, timing, and reversibility of return are assessed. Accordingly, the study addresses the following central research question: How do Syrians living in Gaziantep assess return in the context of long-term urban and spatial conditions?

The following sub-questions guide the analysis:

1. How do urban rootedness and spatial settlement shape Syrians’ reasoning regarding return?
2. How do legal status, freedom of movement, and housing options shape Syrians’ views on return?
3. How do experiences of othering in urban public spaces affect Syrians’ sense of belonging and their reasoning regarding return?
4. How do Syrians understand return, and what role do daily practices in Türkiye and Syria play in this process?

2. Conceptual Framework

In studies of forced migration, displacement has generally been addressed in the context of the concepts of disconnection, loss, and transience. Malkki (1995) argues that this approach carries the risk of reducing refugees to a generalized “refugee experience,” detached from their historical and social contexts. Displacement does not necessarily imply a loss of culture, identity, or belonging; this assumption reflects the bias of sedentary life, which views rootedness as the norm and mobility as a deviation. Brun (2015), on the other hand, approaches the phenomenon of long-term displacement from a temporal perspective, demonstrating how people maintain their daily lives and create spaces for action through “active waiting” while

facing an uncertain future and holding onto hopes of return.

The literature on place attachment provides a useful framework for understanding these processes. Low and Altman (1992) and Lewicka (2011) demonstrate that people form emotional, cognitive, and functional bonds with places through accumulated experiences, everyday practices, and social relationships. Over time, these connections can become part of their identity and sense of belonging. In urban settings, Blokland (2017) views community not as a fixed characteristic of a neighborhood, but as an urban practice shaped through everyday relationships and repeated encounters. From this perspective, rootedness depends not only on physical residence but also on relational and habit-based practices that shape how people interact with the urban space; this pattern is also observed among other migrant populations in Türkiye (Pusch, 2018).

However, urban rootedness is shaped not only by social relationships and everyday practices but also by legal status, which affects people’s ability to move within urban space and exercise their rights. Legal geography expands the traditional view that legal status is merely an administrative category by demonstrating how law shapes space and, in turn, how space shapes law (Blomley, 2004). Similarly, Darling (2017) argues that the urban experiences of forcibly displaced people must be understood not only through the lens of irregularity, informality, or administrative status, but also through the lens of “politics of presence.” According to this perspective, while being present and visible in the city, moving within it, and accessing services are shaped by legal status, they are also negotiated through everyday urban practices. This perspective helps explain how temporary protection and citizenship shape Syrians’ mobility, access to housing and services, settlement opportunities, and views on return.

Menjívar’s (2006) concept of “liminal legality” describes temporary and precarious legal positions between full legal status and undocumentedness. This type of legal uncertainty can restrict employment, housing, family life, a sense of belonging,

and long-term planning. Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) concept of "differentiated inclusion," on the other hand, demonstrates that migrants are not necessarily excluded from social and economic systems but can be included in these systems through unequal rights, restricted freedom of movement, and hierarchical legal statuses. Similarly, the "temporary presence" status in Türkiye hinders the social, economic, and political participation of Syrians under temporary protection (Güloğlu & Çiçek, 2021, p. 162). However, the effects of this status extend beyond formal rights and institutional access; an unstable legal status also shapes how migrants are perceived, valued, and treated in everyday urban life.

Everyday social judgments constitute another dimension of migrants' relationship with the city. Skeggs's (2004) discussion of value and respect helps explain how certain groups are socially devalued or treated as legitimate targets of judgment. Similarly, Tyler (2013) demonstrates that exclusion and stigmatization are not merely symbolic but can construct certain groups as problematic, unwanted, or threatening. In Türkiye, temporary protection may therefore become a source of persistent stigmatization that positions Syrians as devalued subjects in public life (Güloğlu, 2022). Wacquant's (2008) concepts of "advanced marginality" and "spatial stigmatization" expand this analysis by showing that exclusion can target not only individuals but also neighborhoods, residential areas, and forms of urban concentration. Such experiences can shape not only migrants' attachment to the city but also their relationships and future orientations, which extend across multiple spaces.

This polycentric dimension of migrant life has often been overlooked by classical models of assimilation and unidirectional integration, which assume that ties to the country of origin gradually weaken as migrants settle and treat cross-border relationships as secondary or temporary. Faist's (2000) concept of "transnational social spaces" challenges this assumption by demonstrating that migrants remain integrated into social, economic,

and symbolic networks spread across multiple locations. Similarly, Levitt and Glick Schiller's (2004) concept of "simultaneity" reveals how migrants' sense of belonging, participation, and everyday practices can be shaped in both their societies of origin and destination. Recent research among Syrian youth in Gaziantep similarly shows that belonging can be sustained across Türkiye, Syria, and third-country contexts (Yılmaz et al., 2026).

Translocality shifts the focus from abstract cross-border flows to the everyday practices through which migrants maintain familial, economic, emotional, and mobility ties between specific places. While Smith's (2001) concept of transnational urbanism situates these relationships within cities, Brah's (1996) concept of "homing desire" highlights how home is continually reconstructed through memory, belonging, and future aspirations.

When these four axes come together, they frame return as a relational and spatial process. Urban rootedness encourages settlement, while legal uncertainty and social exclusion can weaken the sense of belonging. Translocal practices mediate these pressures by transforming return from a binary choice between "staying" and "leaving" into a potentially reversible and polycentric process. These dimensions constitute what this study defines as the urban threshold: a relational and dynamic structure in which urban ties, legal status, public recognition, and translocal opportunities collectively shape the feasibility, timing, and reversibility of return. The urban threshold thus refers to a process in which return is continuously reassessed as urban and political conditions change, rather than to a fixed boundary.

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

This study employs an instrumental case study design. According to Stake (1995), an instrumental case study uses a specific case as an analytical window to understand a broader conceptual issue, ra-

ther than focusing solely on the case itself. This design also allows for the examination of “how” and “why” questions in relation to contextual conditions (Yin, 2014). Accordingly, the assessments of Syrians in Gaziantep regarding return are treated as an instrumental case study to examine the relationship between urban rootedness, legal status, experiences of othering in urban public spaces, and translocal mobility.

3.2. Study Group

Participants were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling, supported by maximum-variation and snowball sampling. Eligibility requirements included being 18 years of age or older, residing in Gaziantep, and being able to complete an interview in Turkish or Arabic.

Table 1. Anonymized Demographic and Legal Profiles of Participants

Participant code	Gender	Age	Legal status	Length of residence in Türkiye (years)	Interview language
K1	M	57	TP	16	Turkish
K2	F	29	DC	12	Turkish
K3	M	43	DC	10	Turkish
K4	M	46	TP	12	Arabic
K5	F	18	TP	12	Arabic
K6	M	52	DC	16	Turkish
K7	F	58	DC	12	Arabic
K8	M	20	DC	16	Arabic
K9	M	27	TP	13	Turkish
K10	M	48	TP	13	Turkish
K11	M	44	TP	15	Arabic
K12	F	27	DC	15	Turkish
K13	M	25	DC	11	Turkish
K14	F	30	DC	10	Turkish
K15	F	36	TP	10	Turkish
K16	F	48	DC	10	Turkish
K17	F	22	DC	12	Turkish
K18	M	35	TP	12	Arabic
K19	F	28	TP	12	Turkish
K20	M	54	DC	13	Turkish
K21	F	26	TP	10	Arabic
K22	M	32	TP	12	Arabic
K23	M	25	DC	11	Turkish
K24	M	23	DC	7	Turkish
K25	M	25	DC	13	Turkish
K26	M	25	DC	12	Turkish
K27	M	48	DC	11	Turkish
K28	M	27	DC	12	Arabic
K29	M	24	TP	12	Arabic
K30	F	30	DC	14	Turkish
K31	M	32	DC	11	Turkish
K32	M	28	TP	8	Turkish

Note. M = Male; F = Female; DC = Dual citizen; TP = Temporary protection.

Efforts were made to ensure diversity in terms of legal status, age, gender, educational level, and length of residence. The final sample consisted of a total of 32 participants, including 20 dual citizens and 12 individuals with temporary protection status. Table 1 presents each participant’s gender, age, legal status, length of residence in Türkiye, and interview language.

Table 1 provides a participant-level context for interpreting the findings by linking each narrative to legal status, length of residence, demographic characteristics, and the language of the interview. The relatively high number of dual citizens partly reflects the structure of the field and the snowball networks through which participants were reached, as legally more secure and socially established individuals were generally more accessible and more willing to discuss return, mobility, and legal status. At the same time, the inclusion of temporary protection holders enables the analysis to capture how different legal statuses shape urban settlement patterns, mobility restrictions, and return reasoning.

3.3. Data Collection Tool

The interview form was reviewed by two academics specializing in migration studies and qualitative research for scope, clarity, and comprehensibility. The questions were revised based on feedback from these academics. The final form covers six themes: urban settlement, legal status, experiences in public spaces, perceptions of safety, economic issues, and future mobility plans. The questions encouraged participants to reflect on their daily routines, past experiences, urban connections, family-related matters, and future plans.

3.4. Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted with participants at times and locations convenient for them. The interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were conducted in Turkish or Arabic, depending on the participants’ preference. While the Turkish interviews were transcribed directly into Turkish, the

transcription and translation of the Arabic interviews into Turkish were carried out with the assistance of an Arabic expert. Selected quotations were independently checked against the original Arabic by a second Arabic-speaking expert to verify semantic accuracy. Coding was performed on the Turkish transcripts, while culturally or contextually nuanced Arabic expressions were checked against the original text during interpretation. After analysis, the excerpts were translated into English with a focus on contextual meaning rather than a word-for-word translation.

Data collection ended when both code and meaning saturation were reached (Hennink et al., 2017). While very few new codes emerged in the final interviews, existing themes were repeatedly supported.

The data were analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis method (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The author conducted repeated reading, iterative coding, cross-case comparison, and analytic memoing. Coding integrated deductive insights derived from the conceptual framework with inductive patterns emerging from the participants' narratives. Codes were grouped into subthemes based on semantic similarities and then organized under broader themes consistent with the research questions.

Consistent with the study's interpretive orientation, the analysis prioritized contextual meaning and thematic coherence rather than a quantified measure of coding agreement. Analytical credibility was strengthened through peer debriefing with an independent scholar experienced in migration studies and qualitative research. This scholar reviewed the coding structure, emerging themes, and the fit between participant quotations and thematic interpretations.

3.5. Ethical Approval of the Research

Ethical approval was obtained from the Gaziantep University Research and Publication Ethics Committee for the Social and Humanities Sciences (Decision No. 690677, August 4, 2025). Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the scope of the interview, voluntary participation, the use of data, and anonymity.

All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent, and their identifying information was protected using participant codes. Given the sensitivity of experiences related to forced migration, the interviews were conducted in accordance with the principles of sensitive and ethically responsible interviewing.

4. Findings

The themes, subthemes, and codes identified in the analysis are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis Structure: Themes, Subthemes, and Codes

Theme	Subtheme	Codes
Urban Settlement and Spatial Rootedness	Network-Based Settlement	Kinship/hometown networks; settlement near relatives; neighborhood preference based on Syrian population density
	Neighborhood Relations and Social Bonds	Supportive neighborly relations; neighborhood-level social support; rejection and distancing by neighbors
	Intergenerational Differences in Belonging	Turkish becoming the dominant language among younger family members; distancing from Syrian identity; intergenerational tension regarding return
	Temporal Shift from Temporari-ness to Settlement	"This has become home" narrative; sense of Gaziantep as home; renewed temporari-ness after December 2024
Legal Status and Urban Spatial Experience	Urban and Intercity Mobility Restrictions	Travel permits; denied permission to leave the city; restrictions on cross-border movement
	Legal Exclusion in the Housing Market	"Syrian label" in rental housing; citizenship not eliminating housing exclusion
	The Role of Citizenship in Settlement	Citizenship and long-term planning; citizenship and sense of permanence
	Concerns about the Reversibility of Return	Fear of not being able to return to Türkiye; anxiety about irreversible return; dual citizenship as mobility security
Othering in Urban Public Spaces and the Changing Social Climate	Everyday Experiences of Urban Discrimination	Discrimination in education; healthcare; public transportation; neighborhood-level rejection
	Stigmatization and Public Visibility	"Yellow ID" as a visible status marker; visibility of Syrian identity; foreign identity "following like a shadow"
	Changes in the Social Climate	Initial welcoming attitudes; increasing tension associated with economic pressures and political rhetoric; easing of tensions after December 2024

Translo- cal Spatial Strategies: Living Be- tween Two Geographies	Cyclical and Back-and- Forth Mobil- ity	Weekly/cyclical cross-border travel; economic activity across Türkiye and Syria; re- turn plans linked to student residence status
	Dual Belong- ing and Spati- ality	“Stuck in the middle”; “heart/mind” dilemma; Tü- rkiye as a second homeland; dual identity
	Conditional and Phased Return Plan- ning	Pioneer return; phased re- turn; monitoring conditions through information net- works; multiple future op- tions; “go where the oppor- tunity is” strategy

4.1. Urban Settlement and Spatial Rootedness

Settlement in Gaziantep was shaped largely by pre-existing kinship and hometown networks rather than individual preferences. Most participants described their arrival in the city as a relational process rather than a random one. The statement, “The Didan clan chose Antep, so we came to Antep too” (K1), summarizes this pattern. Similarly, the statement, “After crossing the border, we stayed in Hatay for a few days, then went directly to Gaziantep. My brother and brother-in-law had already settled in Gaziantep” (K26), demonstrates how existing networks guided settlement decisions.

The same pattern is evident in neighborhood preferences. “We chose Karşıyaka because there is a large Syrian population there. We feel safer in this neighborhood” (K32) shows that spatial clustering is shaped not only by economic factors but also by a sense of security and belonging.

Neighborhood relationships can be a source of both support and vulnerability. Positive neighborly bonds were particularly important during the early stages of forced migration. “Seven months later, we lost our father. No one was left. Those neighbors protected and looked after us” (K30). Such bonds can provide support that goes beyond everyday neighborly interactions. However, the same participant described an experience of rejection in another neighborhood: “When we bought our first home, some people openly said, ‘We don’t want Syrians in this complex.’ We greeted them for about a year, but they never returned our greetings” (K30). These contrasting experiences reveal that urban settlement varies from neighborhood to neighborhood and over time.

An important aspect of settlement is the inter-generational difference regarding a sense of belonging. Participants’ accounts show that older family members are generally more inclined to return, while younger generations tend to prefer staying in Türkiye, which leads to tensions within families. “My two grandchildren grew up here. Their Turkish is better than their Arabic. They say we should go back, but we think very differently” (K1) is a statement that highlights this intergenerational difference.

Language and identity also shape the views of younger family members regarding returning. “My child doesn’t want to go back at all. My child says: ‘I envision my dreams and goals in Turkish. If I return to Syria, the school environment might not accept me because I can’t express myself in Arabic’” (K30). Another participant noted: “When I say, ‘We are Syrian, we are Arab,’ they reply, ‘You are Syrian. I’m not Syrian. I’m Turkish’” (K8). These accounts suggest that, for some younger family members described by the participants, identity is increasingly grounded in Türkiye’s social and linguistic environment rather than solely in their country of origin. Consequently, returning home could mean moving to an unfamiliar place.

Participants initially viewed their displacement as temporary, but this perception changed as their stay grew longer. “At first, we thought it would be over in a few months” (K4), while another participant noted, “It was supposed to last only a few months, but 13 years have passed” (K9). Over time, this prolonged stay reshaped the participants’ relationship with the city: “Actually, the roles have reversed. That place has now become the destination of migration, while this has become our home” (K1).

However, the political upheaval on December 8, 2024, has shaken this sense of permanence. “Before Syria was liberated, we saw this place as a permanent home. Now we see it as half-permanent, half-temporary” (K27); “Lately, I’ve been feeling that this place is more temporary. After the revolution, I started to feel as if I would have to leave here. Yet two years ago, the situation was exactly the op-

posite; we were saying, ‘Let’s buy a house in Türkiye’” (K32). These accounts suggest that even long-established settlement can be reassessed following major political change.

4.2. Legal Status and Urban Spatial Experience

Temporary protection functions not only as a legal status but also as a form of spatial regulation that determines where participants can move, where they can settle, and how they can plan their futures. Consequently, freedom of movement is conditional. “If I want to go to Maraş, I need to get permission” (K1); “I went to the immigration office to leave the city. My departure was blocked, and they turned me back. Now, even if I wanted to go to Maraş, I’d have to get a travel permit” (K4). Such accounts demonstrate how everyday mobility is restricted through bureaucratic oversight.

Restrictions on leaving Türkiye also shape the process of return, particularly in cases where family members have different legal statuses. Although K30 is a citizen, other family members remain under temporary protection: “No one else in my family has citizenship; they can’t leave Türkiye because my family is under temporary protection” (K30). In such cases, temporary protection can restrict family unity and cross-border mobility.

Legal status also shapes housing opportunities. “Citizenship doesn’t matter; we want to rent a house, but they won’t let us. You’re Syrian, and you’ll stay Syrian. Unfortunately, that’s just how it is” (K14). This account reveals that exclusion regarding housing is exacerbated by the stigma attached to Syrian identity, in addition to legal status. Citizenship may provide greater legal security, but it does not necessarily remove the social boundaries associated with Syrian identity in everyday urban life.

Participants also described citizenship as important in terms of settlement and future planning. “Do you have an identity or not? When you have Turkish citizenship, you make an extra effort to integrate. We think, ‘We’re going to live here; we’re not leaving; we’re now part of this place’” (K6). This statement shows that citizenship can provide a

more solid foundation for both legal security and long-term settlement. In contrast, participants without citizenship spoke of greater uncertainty: “It’s hard to make long-term plans without citizenship. When I plan my future, especially in Türkiye, I don’t see any stability” (K9).

Citizenship also carries symbolic significance in narratives about return: “First and foremost, there’s Turkish citizenship. That’s non-negotiable. It’s been eight years; I’ve worked hard and studied. Now it feels like a right” (K32). Defining citizenship as a “right” indicates a shift away from viewing residence in Türkiye as merely a temporary situation.

Legal status takes on particular importance when participants assess whether return is reversible. “The possibility that I may not be able to return once I leave is frightening” (K1); “The real problem is that it feels like a permanent return. The possibility of not being able to rebuild my life in Türkiye after leaving is very frightening” (K2). For this reason, for some participants, returning involves not only the conditions in Syria but also the risk of losing the life they have built in Türkiye and their freedom of movement. Their hesitations relate not so much to return itself as to the possibility that it might be irreversible. Those with dual citizenship face fewer such restrictions: “Legally, there’s no obstacle to my return. I’m already a citizen” (K27); “Having dual citizenship is an advantage. We come and go as we please” (K20).

4.3. Othering in Urban Public Spaces and the Changing Social Climate

“Othering” was noted as a phenomenon that participants frequently encountered in settings such as schools, public transportation, healthcare facilities, and neighborhoods. Rather than being isolated incidents, these encounters shape how participants perceive their place in the city. Educational settings provide a critical context in which such experiences occur: “I won the school-wide Umrah contest, but they didn’t send me because I’m Syrian” (K5). Similar experiences were reported in healthcare settings: “As a healthcare worker, it really upsets me when someone at the hospital

says to me, 'That's a Syrian.' I can see the exclusionary look in their eyes" (K2). Comparable experiences also occurred on public transportation: "After getting on the bus, some people who found out we were Syrian started saying, 'We won't ride on the same bus as them.' When they realized I spoke Turkish, they felt embarrassed and backed away. But incidents like this stick with you. I experienced this despite speaking Turkish, being educated, and being a citizen" (K31). This account reveals that indicators of social integration do not always protect individuals from ethnically based discrimination. Proficiency in Turkish, education, and citizenship can make daily life easier, but they do not always erase the stigma attached to being Syrian. Therefore, even if individuals exhibit strong indicators of social integration, "othering" can persist.

Syrian identity can also become visible through physical markers. "Going through the airport in Türkiye with that yellow ID... That ID really hurts me. It's as big as an A4 sheet of paper. It could have been a small card. You feel very visible and vulnerable" (K1). Here, the temporary protection document functions not only as an administrative document but also as a marker that makes legal status visible in public spaces.

For some participants, this visibility remains a source of tension: "Even though I'm a citizen, I feel like a foreigner. In daily life, my foreign identity follows me like a shadow" (K2). The "shadow" metaphor illustrates how a Syrian identity can remain a stigmatized public marker even after gaining citizenship.

Experiences of othering also vary depending on political and economic conditions. Participants described the early period as more hospitable: "When we first arrived, people were warmer" (K1). Some attribute the subsequent deterioration to economic tensions, political rhetoric, and shifting public attitudes: "In every incident, Syrians are singled out. Even after the earthquake, people say, 'It's because of the Syrians.' There's constant othering" (K4). Another participant linked recent changes to perceptions about Syrians' future in Türkiye: "The perception that we're forced to stay in Türkiye has

disappeared. This has also changed the tone of our relationships" (K3).

The political shift on December 8, 2024, appears to have alleviated some of these tensions. "Attitudes changed instantly with the revolution. For example, a teacher who had previously treated me badly called to congratulate me" (K14); "Life in Türkiye is getting increasingly difficult for us. But it was harder before Syria was liberated. After the revolution, the situation eased somewhat" (K26). These comments suggest that attitudes toward Syrians may be associated with expectations regarding their possible return. Rather than indicating that stigmatization has disappeared, this easing suggests that urban acceptance may depend, at least in part, on whether Syrians' presence is perceived as temporary or permanent.

4.4. Translocal Spatial Strategies: Living Between Two Geographies

Returning has generally been described by participants as an effort to strike a balance between Türkiye and Syria. K31 explained this situation as follows: "I handed over my house and sent my belongings to Syria. My wife and child are currently in Syria. As for me, I've rented a one-bedroom apartment here. I travel back and forth to Syria on weekends. Right now, I'm trying to strike a balance by going back and forth between the two countries: one week here, one week there." While family life has shifted to Syria, work and income remain in Türkiye. Similarly, K32 explained: "My brother is a Turkish citizen; he commutes from Türkiye to Syria every day. The company is registered in Türkiye." These accounts demonstrate how family and economic activities can be spread across both countries.

Participants considering a return also described cross-border mobility to keep their options open: "If I can enter and leave the country on my student visa, I'll return too. I plan to go back and forth without putting my enrollment on hold" (K32). This spatial mobility is accompanied by a sense of belonging to both places. Statements such as "We're caught in the middle. We're tied to both sides" (K1)

and “Our hearts are there, but our minds are here” (K20) reflect this duality. K6 similarly stated, “I am two people. One is Syrian, the other is Turkish,” suggesting that belonging can be constructed across both geographies.

This dual sense of belonging can also lead to tension. “One is my homeland, the other is Türkiye. I now have an emotional bond with Türkiye as well” (K27); “Türkiye is like a second homeland for us. We have so many beautiful memories here... But now that door has opened. I want to take advantage of this opportunity. I don’t want my ties to be severed. We’ll return to Syria and come back to visit Türkiye. But I don’t want to live here permanently” (K30). These statements show that considering a return does not mean giving up ties to Türkiye.

Return was also linked by the participants to conditions such as economic stability, security, education, and employment: “In my opinion, I’ll return if three things are met in Syria. In order of priority: first the economy, then education, and finally security” (K3). Such conditions make the timing of return uncertain and subject to constant reassessment.

Social media also provides information about conditions in Syria. “Facebook is very important. There are groups where returnees share their experiences. It offers the opportunity to experience return almost like a simulation” (K30). Digital networks thus enable participants to monitor conditions before moving and to incorporate others’ experiences into their own assessments of return.

Participants also described return as a phased process: “My brother went first; he left permanently. Then we’ll go one by one” (K26); “We’ll return the way we came. We didn’t all arrive at the same time—we came in waves. This won’t happen in a single day. It has to be step by step” (K1). These narratives frame return not as a one-time move, but as a gradual family process. Others, however, have kept several potential destinations open as options: “We’ll look wherever opportunities arise. Opportunities could be in Türkiye, Syria, or Arab countries” (K31). Thus, return becomes an option as part of a broader, multi-locational strategy. Taken together, these narratives suggest that

translocal mobility helps participants manage uncertainty while maintaining family, economic, and practical ties across Türkiye and Syria.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The findings suggest that return is better understood not simply as a migration outcome but as an urban reasoning process shaped by an urban threshold where urban ties, legal status, public encounters, and cross-border opportunities intersect. In this sense, Gaziantep is not merely a place of residence but also a spatial threshold where return is evaluated, postponed, tested, or reorganized.

Long-term residence and network-based settlement have produced a multilayered form of urban rootedness in Gaziantep. This challenges assumptions that equate displacement with rootlessness (Malkki, 1995) and supports Brun’s (2015) concept of “active waiting,” which posits that desires for return coexist with everyday forms of settlement. While network-based neighborhood clustering can strengthen collective support, it can also reinforce spatial segregation (Biehl, 2014). Thus, the city becomes both a space of attachment and a point where return is evaluated through accumulated urban ties.

These findings also complicate the notion that attachment to a place simply strengthens over time. Research on place attachment emphasizes the cumulative development of bonds formed with a place (Lewicka, 2011; Low & Altman, 1992). However, in this study, rootedness was renegotiated following the political change on December 8, 2024; for some participants, a place previously experienced as “permanent” became “semi-temporary.” Consequently, rootedness emerges not as a linear outcome but as a condition that can be reshaped by political change. This finding expands on Brun’s (2015) temporal perspective on long-term displacement by demonstrating how established urban ties can be reassessed when conditions in the country of origin change.

Findings across generations highlight a relatively under-researched aspect of return migration. Participants' accounts suggest that older family members are generally more inclined to return, while younger family members tend to feel a stronger sense of belonging to Türkiye, indicating that rootedness develops not only over time but also across generations (Emin & Çelik, 2026). For some second-generation family members described by the participants, Turkish has become the primary language for education, aspirations, and everyday self-expression. Therefore, from their perspective, "return" may mean moving to an unfamiliar environment rather than returning to a homeland they personally recognize.

When evaluated in conjunction with Darling's (2017) politics of presence and Menjivar's (2006) concept of liminal legality, the findings indicate that temporary protection in the Türkiye-Syria context is more than just an administrative status. While this status provides certain rights and a legal basis for residence, it creates uncertainty regarding mobility, housing, and future planning. Participants' accounts indicate that this status restricts inter-city mobility, complicates access to housing, and limits long-term planning. Nevertheless, Syrians are not defined solely by their legal status; they shape their urban presence through daily interactions, access to services, and continuous participation in city life. Thus, legal status shapes not only access to rights but also mobility, settlement, visibility, and future plans.

Existing research typically examines legal status and integration in the context of employment (Del Carpio & Wagner, 2015; Şimşek, 2018) or education (Taştan & Çelik, 2017; Yılmaz, 2021). This study expands the discussion to include two new dimensions. The first concerns anxieties regarding the irreversibility of return. Participants' concerns about being unable to re-enter Türkiye show how legal status shapes return reasoning. Leaving the country may mean losing the opportunity to regain the life they have built in Türkiye. When evaluated in conjunction with Faist's (2000) concept of transnational social spaces and Menjivar's (2006) concept of liminal legality, these narratives reveal why

some participants, while not rejecting the idea of return, postpone it due to uncertainty about whether this step is reversible.

The second dimension concerns legal status and the urban housing market. The findings extend Mezzadra and Neilson's (2013) concept of differentiated inclusion to the housing sphere. Even citizenship does not always prevent exclusion from the rental housing market; this demonstrates that legal status alone cannot explain urban inequality. Differentiated inclusion can also operate through the stigmatization of Syrian identity and market-based exclusion. Thus, legal status shapes not only formal rights but also opportunities for urban settlement and translocal mobility.

The findings also show that language proficiency, educational level, and citizenship do not always protect participants from discrimination in public spaces. Consequently, Syrian identity is shaped not only by legal status or integration but also by symbolic classifications in everyday urban life. Skeggs's (2004) work on value and respect helps explain how groups can be socially devalued regardless of their individual characteristics. Wacquant's (2008) examination of stigmatization and spatial exclusion, in turn, illustrates even more clearly how this kind of devaluation can spread to groups and the urban spaces associated with them. From this perspective, the reason for the persistence of discrimination may not be individuals' failure to adapt, but rather the fact that Syrian identity itself remains a devalued category in the public sphere.

Changes in participants' narratives regarding public attitudes also indicate that social acceptance shifts according to political and economic expectations. The relative easing reported after December 2024 appears to be linked not to the disappearance of stigmatization, but to renewed expectations regarding return. Consequently, urban acceptance may vary depending on whether the presence of Syrians is perceived as temporary or permanent.

Findings related to translocality indicate that participants tend to maintain their urban ties in Gaziantep while establishing practical connections

with Syria. Gaziantep's border location facilitates these strategies by enabling mobility and allowing for the maintenance of economic and family ties between Türkiye and Syria. This finding illustrates how return can be organized between interconnected places, thereby showing how Faist's (2000) concept of transnational social spaces operates at the urban scale in the context of a border city and aligns with recent evidence that Syrians in Gaziantep sustain transnational continuities of belonging across Türkiye, Syria, and third-country contexts (Yilmaz et al., 2026).

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that urban rootedness has made return a negotiable possibility shaped by accumulated ties; that legal status affects mobility, long-term planning, and the reversibility of return; that experiences of othering weaken urban belonging; and that translocal practices enable return to be envisioned as a conditional, phased, and potentially reversible process—thereby answering the study's research questions. Thus, in Gaziantep, return involves more than just security or economic considerations. It is a spatial process shaped by the interplay of urban rootedness, legal status, social climate, and translocal mobility.

The urban threshold brings these dimensions together by explaining how city-based ties and constraints shape the feasibility, timing, and reversibility of return. While social, economic, and educational ties can strengthen settlement, legal constraints and social pressures create uncertainty. Translocal strategies can alleviate this tension by offering alternatives rather than a simple choice between staying and returning. Thus, return emerges not only as an individual decision but also as a spatial and relational process shaped by generation, legal status, neighborhood, and political context.

These findings highlight the importance of policy approaches that go beyond the rigid distinction between staying and returning. Status regulations that take long-term residence, employment, and education into account, when combined with regulations that facilitate safe and legal cross-border mobility, can better reflect the realities of long-

term displacement. The findings also reveal that the issue of "othering" cannot be resolved by focusing solely on the integration of migrants; integration policies must also address exclusionary practices in public life.

This study also highlights the importance of viewing border cities not merely as places of residence, but as spaces of connection where trade, health services, education, and family ties extend across borders. From a broader perspective, the concept of the "urban threshold" can offer an analytical framework for contexts of protracted displacement, where return is not simply anticipated but is continuously negotiated through the city.

5.1. Limitations and Future Research

These findings should be interpreted within the scope of this study. As a case study focusing on a single city, this analysis reflects Gaziantep's specific borderland, historical, and urban context; these dynamics may take different forms in cities such as Istanbul, Mersin, Hatay, or Şanlıurfa. The relatively high proportion of participants with dual citizenship may have given greater visibility to the experiences of participants with stronger legal resources. Finally, although care was taken to preserve contextual meaning in both Turkish and Arabic interviews, some linguistic and cultural nuances may have been affected by the translation process. Future comparative, gender-sensitive, and longitudinal studies could examine how urban rootedness, legal status, belonging, and translocal mobility have changed across cities and over time.

Declarations

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Data Availability: The qualitative data generated and analyzed during this study are not publicly available due to ethical and privacy restrictions concerning participant confidentiality.

Informed Consent: All participants were informed about the purpose and scope of the study, voluntary participation, the use of the data, and the protection of anonymity. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the interviews. Consent for audio recording was also obtained from the participants.

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