

Honorable Return or Diplomatic Expediency?

Opportunities and Challenges for a Dignified Return of Syrians from Türkiye

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Abstract

This article explores whether “honorable return” can serve as a rights-based governance framework for Syrians under Temporary Protection (TP) in Türkiye, or whether it risks becoming a diplomatically expedient policy instrument shaped by domestic political cycles and geopolitical bargaining. Honorable return is defined as voluntary, safe, dignified, and sustainable repatriation grounded in international protection standards and supported by verifiable institutional safeguards. Based on repatriation ethics, human security theory, the capabilities approach, and conflict-sensitive mobility scholarship, the article argues that return cannot be evaluated by aggregate departures alone but rather should be focused on measurable conditions at each of three post-return stages as well as mechanisms of accountability. Using recent official data from the Presidency of Migration Management and UNHCR Türkiye, the study analyzes how institutionalized temporariness, municipal capacity, and segmented labor markets shape the real opportunity structure within which return decisions emerge. The article concludes by identifying governance benchmarks aligned with SDG 10 and SDG 16.

Keywords: *Voluntary repatriation; migration governance; dignified return; capabilities; Türkiye–Syria migration.*

Introduction

The Syrian conflict has created one of the largest displacement crises of the twenty-first century. Türkiye is at the center of this situation—serving as a place where long-term governance occurs, with issues of legality, livelihoods, and belonging being negotiated under pressure. According to the International Organization for Migration’s Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), as of January 2025, approximately 2.86 million Syrian nationals were registered under Temporary Protection in Türkiye, making up the majority of displaced populations in the country; other foreign nationals under different protection statuses constitute smaller parts of the overall figure. These numbers reflect cumulative registrations and status changes over time rather than an estimate of total population presence (International Organization for Migration (IOM), 2025).

The lack of formal recognition as a Convention refugee for Syrians stems from Türkiye’s geographical limitation to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Instead, they are protected under the Temporary Protection (TP) scheme defined by Law No. 6458 and related legislation. This not only introduces a new label but also signifies a different approach to membership. Individual international protection procedures are conducted on a case-by-case basis, with decisions made individually, unlike Temporary Protection, which is a group-based administrative system. While it grants access to healthcare, education, and limited participation

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in the labor market, long-term legal security depends more on executive discretion than on a clear pathway to permanent status.

That's not just a technical issue; it influences the circumstances under which "choice" is exercised: A household may be socially stable — children in school, adults working, routines established — but still be legally unstable when it comes to time horizons. In other words, the country can support daily life and still lack long-term predictability. This is precisely where debates on return intersect with an institutional design of temporality.

Broader data on the presence of different groups within Türkiye also highlight that governance is increasingly oriented toward various status regimes and modes of routing labor participation. In Türkiye, both a valid work permit and the work permit exemption document (for the mentioned categories) are considered residence permits; in 2023, there were at least 239,835 foreign nationals holding work permits along with separate exemption categories (e.g., from seasonal agriculture) (UNHCR, 2025). These details are important for analyzing return because access to the labor market—whether formal or informal—is not just an economic outcome; it also forms part of the opportunity structure that enables or strategically encourages returning home. Recent administrative data indicate a continuous year-on-year decline in the number of Syrians registered under Temporary Protection in Türkiye, with reductions reported across successive annual statistical releases and independent monitoring reports throughout 2024 and 2025 (Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), 2025; Asylum Information Database (AIDA), 2025).

The reasons for these shifts include mobility, re-registration dynamics, onward movement, return, mortality, and administrative revisions. The main point is that discussions about return are increasing, especially when numbers, costs, and political narratives become intertwined. A second structural pressure concerns living costs and household vulnerability—particularly in high-concentration provinces, where rent is a key constraint. This is not "return data" in a narrow sense, but it serves as evidence relevant to return governance: when rent-driven vulnerability and negative coping strategies become widespread, the line between a voluntary decision and one driven by structural pressures blurs—and it becomes easier to politicize.

Return operates simultaneously within two opposing frameworks: as a rights-based, durable solution that must adhere to the conditions of voluntariness, safety, and dignity imposed by international protection norms in one framework. In the other, it is tied to the domestic political agenda, specific narratives of securitization, demographic issues, and geopolitical bargaining. While these frameworks can coexist without conflict, a continuing tension exists regarding what constitutes "success": visibility (which includes numbers, speed, and symbolic closure) versus durability (which involves rights, the ability to reintegrate, and verified guarantees).

This central research question is governance-focused rather than rhetorical: Does "honorable return" in the Turkish–Syrian context manifest as a rights-based governance framework grounded in verifiable safeguards and post-return accountability, or does it risk transforming into a diplomatic expedient where departure metrics and political timing are prioritized over stable reintegration? In this context, diplomatic expedience refers to a type of governance transition where return is used more as a strategic tool—useful for bargaining or short-term domestic stabilization—rather than as an institutional commitment to establishing the conditions necessary for safety, dignity, and sustainability upon arrival.



The article explores this question through four analytical pillars: (1) ethics of repatriation and shared responsibility; (2) human security as a comprehensive view of safety and vulnerability; (3) the capabilities approach for assessing substantive freedom; and (4) conflict-sensitive mobility theory as a framework for understanding how insecurity—along with policy signals—influences decision-making over time. The goal is not to oppose return nor to romanticize staying: if “honorable return” is to have any meaning beyond a political statement, it must be achieved through governance designed to be justifiable—complete with systematic safeguards, ongoing monitoring, and accountability that persists across electoral cycles.

Theoretical Foundations

Sovereignty, Protection, and the Liberal Paradox

The honorable return is founded on principles of international protection that emerge from the convergence of humanitarian duty and state sovereignty. Displaced individuals are regarded as rights-holders under international refugee law instead of being seen as demographic variables or tools for political gain (Goodwin-Gill and McAdam, 2007). In UNHCR’s Handbook on Voluntary Repatriation, and in subsequent protection guidance, the core principles of voluntary repatriation—voluntariness, safety, and dignity—are presented as fundamental rights rather than mere optional practices (UNHCR 1996; UNHCR 2018). An informed consent process is essential, along with safeguards against coercion and the necessary conditions for sustainable reintegration.

However, these norms function within a territorially organized international system. As Hollifield points out, the concept of the “liberal paradox” highlights the structural tension at the core of migration governance. Liberal states commit to rights and international frameworks while maintaining sovereign control over entry, membership, and territorial authority (Hollifield, 2004). Refugee protection, and by extension return governance, takes place within this negotiated balance between inclusion and control.

This balance is not merely theoretical in the context of long-term displacement. In Türkiye, over 2.8 million Syrians are still under Temporary Protection (Presidency of Migration Management, 2025; UNHCR, 2026). The extent of protection becomes a permanent governance issue, not only for humanitarian efforts. It’s not a matter of sovereignty being suspended but of sovereignty being reframed. Vigilance remains, yet the temporality involved is irrevocably embedded. The conflict Hollifield describes is not abstract; it is experienced within and through institutions.

Critical scholarship further complicates this framework. Chimni (2004), for instance, argues that refugee regimes have historically operated alongside containment strategies, especially where large-scale displacement intersects with geopolitical imbalance. Betts (2013) demonstrates that protection outcomes are shaped not only by legal obligations but also by political motivations and regime interests. In these situations, return governance becomes a revealing area where liberal ideals of dignity meet the ongoing logic of nation-state control.

Diplomatic expedience occurs within this zone of mediation. It does not necessitate overt violations of international norms. It indicates a reevaluation of evaluative priorities. The language of voluntariness and dignity can remain intact, but its practical importance shifts when political timing, electoral cycles, or geopolitical bargaining take precedence in

performance measures. The main issue is institutional: through which mechanisms are voluntariness, safety, and dignity implemented and independently verified?

From State-Centrism to Shared Responsibility

Recent scholarly approaches increasingly go beyond ideas about return focused on the state, instead encompassing a three-part responsibility framework involving the host state, country of origin, and the international community (Arowolo, 2000; Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, 2024). Note that the alternative idea of durable solutions has not been understood this way—as essentially sovereign choices by states to be made unilaterally—but rather as parts of a coordinated governance process involving burden-sharing among institutions and long-term follow-up (Long 2013).

Data show that this shift is crucial. However, UNHCR’s global reporting indicates that return figures worldwide remain relatively low in the overall displacement context, and long-term monitoring of reintegration needs is structurally underdeveloped (UNHCR, 2025; Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, 2024). In the Turkish context, official statistics report a cumulative total of well over one million individuals registered for voluntary return at any time—substantially higher than previous estimates (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2023).

Nonetheless, systematic longitudinal data on reintegration outcomes are missing. This gap highlights the need for accountability and monitoring systems. This creates a governance challenge further complicated by Temporary Protection frameworks. Collective status regimes can improve immediate access to services but also centralize decision-making power. Without soft systems for shared responsibility and independent oversight, voluntariness may be acknowledged but functionally limited. Governance of return must therefore extend beyond departure management to include accountability for reintegration.

Dignity, Human Security, and Capabilities

Dignity gains analytical importance only when it is translated into measurable institutional conditions. The human security framework expands the concept of security beyond just territorial integrity to include economic resilience, access to services, and institutional trustworthiness (UNDP, 1994). Security is not merely the absence of armed violence; it also involves reducing ongoing vulnerability and establishing predictable governance structures. The capabilities approach improves this evaluative perspective. For Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2011), dignity is achieved through substantive freedom—the real ability to pursue meaningful life paths. When applied to return governance, this means that repatriation is dignified only if returnees have the economic, legal, and psychosocial resources necessary for sustained agency.

Reintegration research emphasizes this multidimensional threshold. A sustainable return relies on functioning labor markets, enforceable property rights, reliable documentation systems, and ongoing access to education and healthcare (World Bank, 2021; OECD, 2020a). When these elements are fragile, return may happen administratively but remain structurally unstable. Reintegration failure often occurs gradually, through income insecurity, housing instability, or renewed displacement. The implication is conceptually simple but institutionally challenging: return is not the end of displacement; it is a test of governance consistency across protection, development, and rule-of-law systems.



Voluntariness and the Architecture of Choice

Voluntariness plays a central normative role in the doctrine of international protection. UNHCR defines it as a decision made based on informed consent (UNHCR, 1996). However, formal consent does not necessarily mean genuine agency. In environments of long-term displacement, the ability to choose is largely shaped by institutional design rather than overt coercive pressure. In Türkiye, empirical studies on labor informality, income insecurity, and vulnerability related to documentation reveal high levels of these issues among Syrians under Temporary Protection (Rohwerder, 2018; Zuntz et al., 2021). These findings do not challenge the concept of voluntariness; instead, they shift its material foundation.

According to Sanyal (2018), this recalibration often manifests as “negative voluntariness,” where decisions result from accumulated structural pressure rather than true empowerment. Sirkeci (2009) proposes a conflict-sensitive mobility theory to explain how insecurity constrains opportunities at macro, mezzo, and micro levels. In such scenarios, voluntariness may still be legally recognized but become substantively diminished. Therefore, substantive voluntariness involves more than just a lack of force. It requires at minimum four institutional conditions:

1. Reliable and long-lasting legal presence in the host country
2. Access to formal economic participation instead of ongoing informality.
3. Independently verifiable information on security and livelihood conditions in return areas
4. Transparent procedural safeguards are protected from short-term political pressures

Without these components, a return may meet procedural requirements but still fail to reach the normative standard of agency.

Temporariness, Waiting, and Temporal Justice

Temporary Protection regimes establish a specific temporary connection. The idea of “temporary integration” has been discussed as an institutionalized stage that can influence long-term mobility decisions, suggesting that political framing and public perceptions of temporariness impact displaced populations’ access to rights and participation in host societies (Samuk, 2018). In Türkiye, Law No. 6458 has provided access to healthcare and education while maintaining executive discretion and formal temporariness (Kaya & Nagel, 2021). This setup creates what Sanyal (2018) describes as “liminal legality”: organized inclusion without permanent membership.

Temporality functions not just as a legal label but as a governance approach focused on managed uncertainty. Waiting becomes institutionalized. Over time, waiting affects investments in the labor market, educational decisions, family strategies, and expectations of belonging. UNHCR’s 2026 operational report emphasizes the extended nature of displacement and the ongoing use of temporary frameworks (UNHCR, 2026).

Temporal uncertainty shapes life planning horizons. Households might hesitate to fully commit to long-term integration if their stability depends on political factors. Conversely, prolonged periods of uncertainty can lead to fatigue, making the idea of return more appealing—not necessarily because conditions have significantly improved, but because

indefinite waiting becomes socially and economically burdensome. This raises a question of temporal justice: does institutional design reduce prolonged precarity or make it seem normal? When temporary conditions become structurally extended, voluntariness may fade not through outright coercion but through exhaustion. Return risks act as an escape from waiting rather than a fulfillment of rights.

Geopolitics and the Governance of Visibility

Return governance operates within asymmetrical geopolitical environments. Host nations, countries of origin, and international actors negotiate responsibilities amid unequal power dynamics (Vathi, King, & Kalir, 2023). In such settings, migration management intersects with security cooperation, financial arrangements, and domestic political competition.

Diplomatic expedience occurs when governance assessments shift from prioritizing reintegration stability to emphasizing numerical visibility. Official reports often highlight total voluntary return numbers (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2025; UNHCR, 2026). While these figures are administratively significant, total numbers alone cannot demonstrate safety, sustainability, or dignity. From a capabilities perspective, this evaluative shift has structural implications. Policy signals influence the environment in which individuals interpret their options. If labor market segmentation persists, if documentation remains unstable, or if municipal services are overwhelmed, increased political focus on return may indirectly restrict perceived alternatives—even without explicit coercion.

The legitimacy of honorable return depends on institutional safeguards against short-term political pressures. These safeguards must be practical, not just theoretical. Monitoring should be ongoing, not occasional. Protection guarantees need to be independently verifiable, not merely rhetorically asserted. The distinction between honorable return and diplomatic convenience relies on the governance structure, not just declared intentions.

Factors Influencing Syrians' Return Decisions

Return as a Layered Governance Decision

Return cannot be reduced to a single act of mobility but occurs as a layered governance decision shaped by risk assessment, opportunity evaluation, and institutional credibility. For Syrians under Temporary Protection (TP) in Türkiye, the decision to return is made within a dual evaluative framework: the actual institutional conditions of the host country and the expected situation in their areas of origin (UNHCR, 2018). What appears in public debate as a straightforward movement is actually an ongoing negotiation across two governance systems—each with its own legal framework, service environment, and informal rules.

Starting from early 2026, over 2.8 million Syrians are registered under Temporary Protection in Türkiye (Presidency of Migration Management, 2026; UNHCR, 2026). Their distribution varies by region, with Istanbul, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa, Adana, and Hatay continuing to host large populations. These numbers are not evenly spread demographically. Concentration creates different pressures on municipal level—affecting housing markets, education systems, social assistance programs, and informal labor sectors. As Rass-Turgut (2024) demonstrates, municipal welfare capacity differs greatly across provinces, leading to uneven integration experiences even within the same legal framework. This indicates that “staying” is not a uniform situation; it is a locally influenced experience with costs and predictability that vary by district.



In metropolitan areas like Istanbul, Syrians under Temporary Protection are unevenly spread across districts, creating localized pressures on housing, education, and the labor market. By mid-2025, the total number of Syrians registered under Temporary Protection in Türkiye is consistently reported to be above 2.6 million, with both international monitoring portals and official statistics matching around this number (Presidency of Migration Management (PMM), 2025; Asylum Information Database (AIDA), 2025). Such concentration patterns serve more as governance variables than simple demographic data. Rental fluctuations, school capacity issues, administrative delays, and informal labor are experienced locally. In these environments, decisions to return are rarely driven by a single factor; instead, they result from the collective influence of housing insecurity, bureaucratic problems, and perceived unpredictability about the future.

This territorial embeddedness challenges simple “push–pull” stories. For example, a household in Gaziantep working within saturated informal textile networks faces a different decision than one in a less crowded provincial economy, not just in wage opportunities but also in social connections and market intermediaries. The way staying is structured varies by location, as does the perceived feasibility of returning. Therefore, return becomes a governance outcome influenced by local opportunity structures and how effectively institutions stabilize—or fail to stabilize—everyday life.

A further implication is methodological: aggregate national indicators tend to hide the governance mechanisms that actually structure choice. When return is discussed at the level of “Türkiye versus Syria,” the analysis risks overlooking the neighborhood-level infrastructures that make mobility either feasible or costly. In practice, households compare specific ecologies: a district-level housing market, a local school system, a municipal assistance environment, and an employment niche, against a particular intended area of return with its own security and service profile (UNHCR, 2018).

Temporal Fluidity, Investment, and Path Dependency

Return intentions often change in situations of long-term displacement. Over time, households build up educational paths, workplace connections, housing situations, and social capital. Fransen and de Haas (2021) illustrate that return intentions shift as displacement continues and integration efforts grow stronger. These cumulative efforts create path dependencies, as described by Pierson (2000): earlier adaptive strategies limit future mobility options, not necessarily by permanently locking people in, but by raising the social and economic “sunk costs” associated with staying.

In Türkiye, Syrians have been present for over a decade. UNHCR’s 2025 Annual Overview highlights ongoing school enrollment and participation in the labor market across multiple provinces (UNHCR, 2025). Such institutional embedding changes cost–benefit assessments. Return is not judged only based on conditions in Syria but also on what has already been built in Türkiye—credentials gained, language skills acquired, apprenticeships completed, and local networks established. These investments create a temporal asymmetry: the benefits of staying tend to accumulate slowly over time, while the risks of returning can seem immediate and abrupt, especially when institutional guarantees in return areas are uncertain (World Bank, 2021).

Horst and Grabska (2015) highlight that displacement causes a constant adjustment of aspirations. Policy signals, shifts in the labor market, and security narratives reshape people's

expectation horizons. When municipal regulations become stricter, rental costs increase, or work authorization remains limited in practice even with formal access (OECD, 2020b), perceived options become more limited. Importantly, this reduction can happen without any explicit coercion. It is enough that future planning becomes difficult—because once uncertainty becomes institutionalized, it leads to risk aversion and short-term coping strategies (Horst & Grabska, 2015; Pierson, 2000).

Intergenerational dynamics complicate decision-making further. The new economics of labor migration literature has long argued that households distribute risk among members (Stark & Bloom, 1985). Under prolonged displacement, this risk distribution becomes layered and sometimes internally conflicting. Children educated in Turkish-language schools may prioritize continuity and institutional stability. Younger adults engaged in urban labor markets may evaluate mobility in terms of skill portability, wage prospects, and occupational niches. Older family members may focus on property restitution, symbolic return, or the social significance of belonging. Carling and Pettersen (2014) demonstrate that return intentions are influenced by transnational ties and perceived future pathways rather than static attachments; the same household can hold multiple futures simultaneously.

Return is negotiated within households. It is not declared through a single preference but emerges from internal bargaining influenced by factors such as age, gender, labor roles, and educational investment. Governance systems that view return as a uniform household decision risk misunderstanding this layered internal process—and, consequently, may create one-dimensional “return facilitation” policies that do not align with the complex social reality of decision-making (Carling & Pettersen, 2014; Stark & Bloom, 1985).

Information, Perception, and Reintegration Uncertainty

Voluntariness depends on informed choice. However, informational environments surrounding return are often fragmented. Households rely on informal networks, social media stories, and episodic reports to evaluate security conditions, documentation risks, housing prospects, and labor market performance in their places of origin. This creates a structural imbalance: decisions with high long-term implications are frequently made with partial information, where reliable verification is not always available.

The Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement (2024) highlights a persistent global gap in long-term reintegration data. While departure figures are often publicly available, systematic tracking of post-return outcomes—such as income stability, property restitution, civil documentation continuity, and psychosocial recovery—remains limited. In the Turkish case, official statements report cumulative voluntary return numbers (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Interior, 2025), yet publicly accessible long-term reintegration metrics are still relatively scarce. This means that return is often assessed based on visible departures rather than on what is truly decisive—its durability.

This asymmetry is important morally. Without trustworthy information about post-return conditions, consent may be procedurally valid but epistemically limited. As Sen (1999) argues, real freedom depends not only on formal permission but also on being informed. When reliable monitoring tools are missing, households assess return under uncertainty, and this uncertainty tends to increase the impact of anecdote, rumor, and politicized stories.



Reintegration research consistently shows that a sustainable return depends on institutional stability—such as rule-of-law guarantees, enforceable property rights, market access, and service provision (World Bank, 2021; OECD, 2020a). Without these foundations, the risk of secondary displacement increases. Reintegration failure rarely appears immediately; instead, it develops gradually through economic decline, administrative weakness, or social exclusion that becomes evident over time. Therefore, transparency and independent oversight are not just technical measures but essential safeguards. They ensure that voluntariness remains meaningful rather than just being recorded.

Discussion: Durable Return or Governed Visibility?

In the Turkish–Syrian context, return functions more as a governance diagnostic than a mobility event. The main analytical issue is not whether returns happen, but how success is measured—and, importantly, which indicators become politically and institutionally prominent. When policy evaluation focuses on total departure figures, governance tends to emphasize visibility. Numbers quickly circulate in political discussions. They indicate resolution, normalization, or regained control. However, visibility does not always mean durability (Lloyd et al., 2025). The governance challenge is that visible metrics are faster, easier to communicate, and better suited for short-term political goals, while durable reintegration takes time, involves multiple layers, and costs more (Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, 2024; World Bank, 2021).

Durability requires long-term investment in reintegration outcomes: income continuity, legal protection, housing stability, access to education and healthcare, and psychosocial recovery. These aspects are slower to develop, less immediately political, and require significant institutional effort. They need coordination among host-state, origin-state, and international actors—a triadic structure highlighted in durable solutions literature (Long, 2013; Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, 2024). Without this coordination, the governance system tends to focus on what it can measure rather than what it needs to guarantee.

Diplomatic expedience arises in the space between these two evaluative logics. It does not require overt norm violation. Instead, it reflects a shift in focus: from reintegration verification to departure quantification. Protection commitments may stay formally unchanged, but their operational focus shifts. As this shift solidifies, there is an increased risk that “dignity” remains an ethical concept while accountability stays insufficient.

From a capabilities perspective, this recalibration shifts the range of options. If legal uncertainty remains in the host context, if labor market access stays segmented (Zuntz et al., 2021), or if municipal capacity varies unevenly across districts (Rass-Turgut, 2024), perceived choices become limited even without explicit coercion. Structural constraints replace overt force. Return then may be seen as adaptive rationality rather than empowered agency. The decision remains voluntary in procedural terms but is constrained in substantive terms. The liberal commitment to dignity is not abandoned; it is limited within institutional bounds (Sen, 1999; UNHCR, 2018).

Local Governance as the Site of Decision

Official statistics show that Syrians under Temporary Protection are unevenly spread across provinces, with a large number concentrated in metropolitan and border areas (Presidency of Migration Management, 2026). These patterns result in varying municipal burdens and

capacities, meaning that the “return pressure” (in terms of living feasibility) is not evenly distributed. Rental inflation, administrative delays, school capacity constraints, and informal labor are issues at the district level.

In neighborhoods with widespread informal employment and tightening housing markets, economic vulnerability increases. However, this vulnerability does not necessarily make return sustainable. Instead, it highlights how the performance of host-country governance influences individuals’ willingness to stay: when staying becomes administratively and economically risky, returning may seem relatively sensible even if conditions back home are uncertain.

As local governance becomes more uneven, the feasibility of return also becomes more varied. Households weigh their everyday neighborhood experiences against their expectations for reintegration. Consequently, return choices stem from localized governance systems embedded within larger geopolitical contexts. This explains why macro-level narratives can be misleading: they hide the district-level processes that truly shape the range of perceived options.

Reintegration as Institutional Continuity

Return governance often focuses on departure procedures. However, lasting return relies on institutional continuity after return. The World Bank (2021) highlights that reintegration needs coordinated access to housing, livelihoods, documentation, and services. OECD (2020a) also emphasizes that sustainable reintegration is multidimensional and dependent on time. The key point is that a border crossing ends a journey administratively but starts reintegration institutionally.

Where rule-of-law guarantees are fragile or property restitution mechanisms are underdeveloped, reintegration risks becoming circular. Secondary displacement may occur after initial repatriation. Economic vulnerability might re-emerge. The lack of systematic monitoring, as highlighted by the Joint Data Center (2024), worsens this uncertainty. Without long-term verification, return is technically completed but socially unfinished. This timing is crucial: stability in reintegration cannot be assumed merely from the fact of return. It must be proven through long-term outcomes. Otherwise, governance assessment remains vulnerable to the “visibility bias” of counting departures.

According to official statements from Türkiye’s Presidency of Migration Management, voluntary, safe, and orderly returns have reportedly gained momentum in recent years, with administrative declarations noting several hundred thousand Syrians returning since 2016 and a renewed acceleration after late 2024 (Presidency of Migration Management, 2025). While these figures reflect formal registration of departures, systematic long-term monitoring of reintegration outcomes—such as income stability, housing security, or secondary displacement risks—remains limited in publicly available data. This gap between departure visibility and reintegration verification emphasizes the need for measurable governance benchmarks.

Sovereignty, Responsibility, and Institutional Design

The internal conflict between sovereignty and protection reemerges in return governance. States maintain control over their territory and membership, but international norms impose obligations on states toward displaced populations (Goodwin-Gill & McAdam, 2007; UNHCR, 2018). This conflict is not just theoretical; it influences the institutional design



choices that determine whether return becomes a rights-based governance practice or a strategically managed policy tool.

This framework assigns responsibility among the host country, the origin country, and international actors (Arowolo, 2000). However, in practice, burden-sharing often remains unequal. Financial commitments vary. Reconstruction efforts depend on geopolitical alignment. When international cooperation is unstable, domestic political incentives become more influential, and the governance system tends to prioritize short-term measurable outputs over long-term substantive results (Long, 2013; Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement, 2024).

Diplomatic expedience becomes more likely when responsibility-sharing is not institutionalized. A rights-based governance model needs protection from short-term political cycles, independent monitoring systems, and rebuilding strategies grounded in rule-of-law guarantees, not just in security stabilization. How institutions are designed influences the tension between sovereignty and protection. When safeguards are built into the system, an honorable return remains feasible; when they are only temporary, the focus shifts toward increasing transparency.

The Governance Threshold

The analytical threshold that separates honorable return from diplomatic expedience can be defined using five governance criteria.

1. *Legal Security* – safeguarding against arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, and property dispossession.
2. *Livelihood Sustainability* – measurable income stability during a specified reintegration period.
3. *Housing Continuity* – enforceable tenure and functional restitution mechanisms.
4. *Service Accessibility* – ongoing access to education, healthcare, and civil registration systems.
5. *Independent Monitoring* – clear, ongoing oversight of reintegration results.

When these criteria are publicly verifiable, the return aligns with a rights-based governance framework. When they are unmeasured or politically replaced by aggregate departure figures, the risk of diplomatic expedience rises—because visibility becomes a stand-in for durability.

Conclusion

The difference between an honorable return and diplomatic expedience is not just rhetorical but rooted in institutions. Return is truly honorable only when voluntariness, safety, and dignity are ensured through verifiable safeguards and monitored outcomes after the return. When governance focuses on counting departures instead of ensuring successful reintegration, dignity risks becoming symbolic rather than practical.

The Turkish–Syrian context makes this distinction especially important. Türkiye’s Temporary Protection regime grants widespread access to services while establishing a framework of temporary status. Over time, legal uncertainty, local government capacity differences, and segmented labor markets influence the actual decision-making environment for return.

Voluntariness might stay formally intact but become practically limited as options diminish due to ongoing structural pressures. Therefore, the key question for governance is not whether return happens, but under what institutional conditions it remains genuinely voluntary.

A measurable and honorable return depends on operational benchmarks rather than mere declarations. At minimum, five indicators should be publicly verifiable over a set reintegration period (e.g., 24 months):

- (1) Legal security — no arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, or property dispossession;
- (2) Livelihood stability — consistent income above subsistence levels;
- (3) Housing security — enforceable tenure or restitution processes;
- (4) Access to services — continuous access to education, healthcare, and civil documentation;
- (5) Independent oversight — transparent, ongoing monitoring of reintegration results.

These benchmarks directly support SDG 10 (reducing structural inequalities in displacement settings) and SDG 16 (enhancing rule of law and accountable institutions).

As a result, at least three policy implications emerge: First, strengthening rights-based governance within Türkiye—particularly by reducing legal uncertainty and increasing access to formal labor markets—improves voluntariness rather than undermining return. Second, reintegration monitoring should shift from emphasizing overall return numbers to assessing outcomes with independent oversight. Third, responsibility-sharing among host, origin, and international actors must be formalized through long-term financing and service-related reconstruction strategies. Without these structural guarantees, return might act more as a form of governance visibility than a sustainable solution.

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