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Is Return Migration a Solution? A Social Psychological Review of Reintegration, Belonging, and Psychological Well-Being

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Abstract

Return migration extends beyond physical relocation to the country of origin and requires the reconstruction of identity, belonging, social acceptance, and psychological well-being. This theoretical narrative review integrates research on voluntary and forced return through perceived decision-making power, social identity, liminality, reacculturation, reverse culture shock, and social capital. The literature indicates that voluntariness is best understood as a continuum shaped by pressure, viable alternatives, and participation in decision-making. Physical return does not automatically restore belonging or psychological adjustment; outcomes depend on preparedness, safety, livelihoods, social acceptance, support networks, and access to institutions. Distinct challenges faced by later-generation returnees, forcibly displaced people, children, and older adults further demonstrate the limits of standardised return policies. Sustainable reintegration therefore requires informed participation, long-term psychosocial support, access to essential services, and inclusive social relations rather than the administrative completion of return alone.

Keywords: return migration; reintegration; social identity; belonging; psychological well-being

Introduction

Return migration is a multidimensional process in which people resettle in their country of origin after living abroad, yet its consequences extend well beyond physical relocation. Return can alter social relationships, cultural orientations, economic positions, and psychological well-being because neither returnees nor their societies of origin remain unchanged during migration (Černigoj et al., 2024; Kunuroglu et al., 2016; Vathi & King, 2017). In 2024, approximately 1.6 million refugees returned to their countries of origin, often amid continuing insecurity and fragile housing and livelihood conditions (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025). These movements make it necessary to evaluate return as a long-term process of reintegration rather than as the administrative completion of a migration cycle.

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Traditional accounts frequently frame return as a natural ‘homecoming’ through which migrants rejoin a familiar society. This assumption overlooks reciprocal change. During migration, individuals acquire new values, routines, skills, expectations, and social identities, while countries of origin undergo economic, political, cultural, and institutional transformation. Return therefore involves the negotiation of a changed self within a changed social environment. Studies of Turkish returnees from Western Europe, for example, show that familiarity with language and culture does not prevent disappointment, estrangement, or conflict between remembered and contemporary versions of home (Kunuroglu et al., 2016, 2018).

The conditions under which return occurs are equally important. A planned return may allow time to save resources, organise family relationships, obtain information, and develop realistic expectations. By contrast, deportation, rejected asylum claims, loss of legal status, economic precarity, or the absence of a safe alternative can sharply restrict choice. Formal consent does not necessarily indicate meaningful voluntariness when the available options are unsafe or unviable. Accordingly, voluntariness is better conceptualised as a continuum defined by the degree of coercion, the quality of alternatives, and participation in decision-making (Aberman, 2022; Erdal & Oeppen, 2022; Vathi, 2022).

A social psychological perspective is essential because reintegration depends not only on the returnee's capacity to readjust but also on how the community of origin receives and positions that person. Returnees may be viewed as changed, insufficiently local, culturally alienated, or economically unsuccessful. Such categorisations can limit recognition, participation, and access to trust-based networks, thereby weakening belonging and psychological well-being (Kunuroglu et al., 2016; Vathi, 2022). Conversely, recognition of migration-acquired knowledge, skills, and identities can transform return into a source of agency and social contribution (Vathi et al., 2023).

Türkiye offers an analytically important context because markedly different return processes coexist within the same regional and political setting. Turkish citizens returning from European countries may be influenced by family ties, retirement, belonging, economic expectations, and discrimination abroad. Syrians who leave temporary protection in Türkiye for Syria face a different legal and geopolitical context in which safety, housing, documentation, livelihoods, education, and access to services are central. Treating both groups simply as ‘returnees’ risks obscuring differences in rights, constraints, and exposure to harm (Şahin-Mencütek, 2023). Comparison is nevertheless useful when it preserves these distinctions and focuses on the mechanisms through which decision-making power, social acceptance, and institutional conditions shape reintegration.

Existing scholarship has developed substantial knowledge about return policies, labour-market participation, livelihoods, and economic reintegration (King & Kuschminder, 2022; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). However, decision-making power, identity, belonging, social acceptance, social capital, and psychological well-being are often discussed in separate literatures. This review brings these domains together within a common framework and addresses four questions: (1) How does the degree of voluntariness shape decision-making power and perceived control? (2) Through which mechanisms are social identity and belonging renegotiated after return? (3) How do social acceptance, social support, and social capital affect psychological well-being? and (4) Which psychosocial conditions support or constrain sustainable reintegration?



Method: Scope and Source Selection

This study is a theoretical narrative review. A narrative approach was selected because return migration research encompasses heterogeneous populations, legal statuses, destinations, disciplinary traditions, and conceptual vocabularies that cannot readily be reduced to a single effect estimate. The purpose was not to identify every publication or perform meta-analytic pooling, but to integrate theoretical approaches, empirical findings, and policy debates concerning voluntariness, decision-making power, social identity, belonging, reacculturation, social capital, and psychological well-being.

Turkish- and English-language publications were identified through Google Scholar, Web of Science, and Scopus. Searches combined terms including 'return migration', 'voluntary return', 'forced return', 'coerced return', 'reacculturation', 'reverse culture shock', 'social identity', 'belonging', 'social capital', 'psychological well-being', 'return migration Türkiye', and 'Syrian return'. Backward and forward citation tracking was used to identify foundational and recent sources. Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles, academic books and chapters, and reports issued by established international organisations. Studies directly examining return migration provided the central evidence. Research involving broader migrant, refugee, ethnic-minority, or bicultural samples was used only to clarify plausible psychosocial mechanisms, with explicit caution regarding generalisability.

Sources were evaluated according to the form of return examined, legal and generational position, degree of voluntariness, psychosocial variables, and relevance to the Turkish context. The synthesis was organised around four themes: voluntariness and control; social identity, belonging, and reacculturation; social acceptance, social support, social capital, and psychological well-being; and the implications of return policy for sustainable reintegration. The experiences of Turkish citizens returning from Europe and Syrians returning from Türkiye were compared without equating their legal or political circumstances. Because this is not a systematic review, no preregistered protocol, formal risk-of-bias tool, or exhaustive study-selection procedure was used. The conclusions should therefore be interpreted as a critical conceptual synthesis rather than a comprehensive estimate of the literature.

During synthesis, greater interpretive weight was given to findings that were consistent across different return settings or that clearly specified the legal and social conditions of return. Evidence drawn from broader migrant populations was not treated as direct evidence about returnees; instead, it was used to identify mechanisms requiring confirmation in return-specific studies. Apparent contradictions were considered in relation to differences in voluntariness, destination conditions, generation, life stage, and time since return. This contextual reading was necessary because a factor such as family support, transnational attachment, or cultural familiarity can operate as either a resource or a constraint depending on the quality of relationships and the institutional environment.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The psychosocial consequences of return cannot be explained by a single theory or a linear adaptation model. They arise from interactions among the returnee's evolving self-concept, the response of the origin community, perceived control over the return decision, and access to social and institutional resources. Three connected processes are particularly important: the renegotiation of social identity and belonging; reacculturation and reverse culture shock; and

the conversion of social acceptance and social capital into psychological and practical resources.

Decision-Making Power and Perceived Control

Perceived control links the structural circumstances of return to individual psychological experience. Control does not imply that returnees can determine every outcome; rather, it concerns whether they can understand the available options, influence important decisions, anticipate consequences, and act on plans. A return that is formally voluntary may still be experienced as imposed when residence rights are withdrawn, income collapses, or family safety depends on departure. Conversely, even in constrained circumstances, transparent information, legal advice, adequate preparation time, and participation in decisions about timing and destination can preserve some agency (Aberman, 2022; Erdal & Oeppen, 2022).

The distinction between objective constraints and subjective control is analytically important. Two people facing similar legal conditions may interpret their options differently because of family responsibilities, economic resources, risk perception, or access to information. At the same time, an exclusive focus on perception can conceal structural coercion. A social psychological analysis should therefore examine both the actual range of alternatives and the person's appraisal of those alternatives. This dual approach avoids treating voluntariness either as a purely administrative label or as an entirely internal feeling.

Preparation can translate decision-making power into practical capacity. Reliable information about security, housing, documentation, employment, education, health care, property, and family reunification allows returnees to form realistic expectations and coordinate resources. Without such information, the discrepancy between anticipated and actual conditions may intensify uncertainty and reverse culture shock. Preparation is therefore not merely logistical. It supports continuity of self, reduces avoidable ambiguity, and enables individuals to imagine a viable post-return future. Its value is greatest when information is current, independent, understandable, and accompanied by genuine alternatives rather than presented as persuasion to return.

Control also has a temporal dimension. The return decision is rarely completed at the moment of departure; returnees continue to make decisions about residence, work, education, social relationships, and possible onward migration. Institutional arrangements that restrict mobility, delay documentation, or make assistance conditional can reproduce dependency after return. By contrast, programmes that allow returnees to revise plans, access services without stigma, and participate in local decision-making can strengthen agency. Sustainable reintegration thus requires not only voluntary departure but continuing capacity to shape life after arrival (OECD, 2020; Vathi, 2022).

Social Identity, Belonging, and Liminality

Migration can reshape how individuals understand themselves and evaluate the social norms of both the country of residence and the country of origin. The transfer of ideas, values, practices, and interpretive frameworks acquired abroad has been described as cognitive remittance or cognitive transfer (Vathi et al., 2023). These resources may broaden perspectives and increase agency, but they can also create tension when expectations concerning autonomy, work, gender roles, privacy, or interpersonal relationships conflict with prevailing



norms after return. The consequences depend not only on what returnees bring back but also on whether the origin community recognises these differences as legitimate and useful.

Belonging is more than emotional attachment to a territory. It also concerns whether an individual is socially recognised as a legitimate member of a community (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). A returnee may feel strong attachment to the country of origin while simultaneously encountering suspicion or exclusion because of accent, language use, lifestyle, values, or economic position. In this sense, belonging is relational: it depends on self-identification and on the boundaries of membership drawn by others. The idealised home remembered before return may therefore conflict with the social reality encountered afterwards, weakening the assumption that physical proximity automatically restores belonging (Gaw, 2000; Sussman, 2000).

Returnees may occupy a liminal position between established social categories. They may no longer fit the identity associated with life before migration, yet remain unable or unwilling to abandon attachments formed abroad. Liminality can produce uncertainty and double alienation, particularly when returnees are treated as outsiders in both settings (Lados & Hegedűs, 2019). However, multiple belonging is not necessarily pathological. When cultural identities are experienced as compatible rather than oppositional, bicultural identity integration can support flexible movement across social contexts and more coherent self-understanding (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013). Because much of this evidence comes from general bicultural populations, its role in return migration should be treated as a plausible, testable mechanism rather than a settled causal explanation.

Reacculturation and Reverse Culture Shock

Return is not a reversal of initial acculturation. Reacculturation refers to the process of establishing a new relationship between a changed person and a changed society of origin (Černigoj et al., 2024; Kunuroglu et al., 2016). Before return, home may be represented through nostalgia, family ties, cultural familiarity, and memories of an earlier life. After return, changes in institutions, employment practices, family roles, communication styles, or everyday routines can produce a discrepancy between expectation and experience. This discrepancy is central to reverse culture shock.

Reverse culture shock involves feelings of unfamiliarity, disorientation, or foreignness in an environment expected to be familiar (Gaw, 2000; Sussman, 2000). Because return is often imagined as natural and uncomplicated, difficulties may be less anticipated than those associated with migration to a new country. Disappointment can therefore be accompanied by loss of control or self-doubt. Language practices, workplace norms, privacy expectations, and gendered obligations acquired abroad may be criticised by relatives or neighbours, making the returnee's own transformation newly visible. Reacculturation succeeds not by erasing these changes, but by integrating them into sustainable daily practices and relationships.

Adjustment is neither uniform nor linear. Initial relief associated with family reunification and cultural familiarity can later give way to frustration as livelihood problems, bureaucracy, or altered relationships become apparent. Conversely, early alienation may diminish as new routines and supportive relationships are established. Time alone does not ensure recovery; the direction of adjustment depends on economic security, social acceptance, family relations, participation, and access to support (Vathi, 2022).

Social Acceptance, Social Capital, and Psychological Well-Being

Reintegration is shaped at individual, interpersonal, community, and structural levels. Social acceptance refers to recognition of the returnee as an equal and legitimate community member rather than merely as someone who is physically present. When returnees are labelled ‘foreign’, ‘changed’, or ‘unsuccessful’, their membership may be questioned and their willingness to participate may decline. Ostracism and exclusion can be subtle, taking the form of being ignored, omitted from group activities, or denied access to informal networks rather than explicit discrimination (Williams, 2007). Such experiences threaten belonging and can contribute to loneliness, withdrawal, and psychological distress.

Social capital comprises resources accessible through family, friendship, neighbourhood, professional, and institutional ties. These resources can facilitate housing, employment, bureaucratic navigation, childcare, information, and emotional support (Ager & Strang, 2008; OECD, 2020). Yet the presence of a network does not guarantee support. Family assistance may be conditional on financial reciprocity, conformity to gender roles, caregiving obligations, or evidence that migration was successful. Networks can therefore enable agency while also regulating behaviour. Their effect depends on trust, reciprocity, recognition, and the practical opportunities they provide (Erel & Ryan, 2019; Vathi, 2022).

Migration can also weaken origin-country ties. Long absences may reduce current knowledge of labour markets, institutions, and informal procedures, while friendships and kinship relations change. Skills and qualifications acquired abroad may not be recognised, and the structural problems that initially encouraged migration may persist. Under such conditions, returnees may be physically present in a familiar location but lack the resources needed to rebuild daily life, increasing the likelihood of renewed migration (OECD, 2020). Conversely, recognition of professional experience, multilingual competence, and transnational connections can convert migration-acquired resources into economic and social participation.

Psychological well-being after return includes life satisfaction, perceived stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, belonging, and social functioning. Social support can buffer the psychological effects of stress by providing emotional, informational, and instrumental resources (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Research with migrant populations also shows that perceived support may weaken the association between discrimination and poor well-being (Hashemi et al., 2021; Jasinskaja-Lahti et al., 2006), although these findings cannot be generalised automatically to every return group. Support does not remove structural insecurity or exclusion; effective psychosocial policy must therefore strengthen both individual coping resources and the social conditions that permit recognition and participation.

Return Experiences Across Contexts

Returnees differ in migration histories, legal status, reasons for leaving and returning, duration abroad, age, generation, trauma exposure, and available resources. These differences shape how return is incorporated into a life narrative and whether it is experienced as opportunity, interruption, failure, or renewed displacement (King & Kuschminder, 2022). A homogeneous category of ‘return migrant’ therefore conceals mechanisms that are crucial for understanding reintegration.



Voluntariness, Coercion, and Decision-Making Power

The common distinction between voluntary and forced return is analytically useful but insufficient. Unemployment, debt, family pressure, loss of residence rights, the threat of deportation, restricted access to services, or hostility in the country of residence can narrow realistic alternatives without overt physical force. A person may sign a voluntary-return form while perceiving no viable option to remain. Voluntariness should consequently be assessed through both formal procedure and substantive agency: access to reliable information, the safety and feasibility of alternatives, freedom from direct and indirect coercion, and meaningful participation in the decision (Aberman, 2022; Erdal & Oeppen, 2022).

Planned returns may provide greater opportunity to mobilise savings, arrange housing, reconnect with networks, and prepare psychologically. These resources can support a sense of continuity and control. Nevertheless, planned return does not guarantee successful reintegration. Unrealistic expectations, underrecognition of skills, family obligations, and social stigma can generate disappointment even when return was intended (Carr, 2014; Kunuroglu et al., 2016). In coerced returns, limited participation can make return feel like the loss of a life project, status, or future. For people exposed to conflict, displacement, or prolonged legal uncertainty, return may also reactivate trauma or introduce new insecurity (Jankovic-Rankovic et al., 2020; von Lersner et al., 2008).

Economic Return and the Stigma of Failure

Economic motives encompass both planned investment and constrained retreat. Some returnees seek to use savings, professional experience, or transnational connections to establish livelihoods in the country of origin. Others return after unemployment, debt, or an unsuccessful migration project. Community expectations can make this distinction psychologically consequential. Where migrants are expected to remit money, accumulate capital, or raise family status, return without visible success may be interpreted as personal failure. Shame and withdrawal can follow when returnees internalise these judgements or lose access to networks based on perceived success (OECD, 2020; Vathi, 2022). Economic reintegration therefore concerns not only employment, but also recognition of acquired skills, manageable obligations, and the restoration of a socially valued position.

Return After Conflict and Forced Displacement

Returns after war, political violence, or forced displacement often occur amid damaged housing, insecure property rights, disrupted family networks, limited public services, and continuing threats. Physical presence in the country of origin does not constitute sustainable reintegration when safety and basic living conditions remain fragile (UNHCR, 2025). Premature or unprepared return can increase the risk of repeated displacement. Psychological distress may persist when earlier trauma is combined with new insecurity, poverty, or lack of services (von Lersner et al., 2008). Sustainable return in these settings requires safety, shelter, documentation, livelihoods, health care, education, and restoration of social relations rather than transport across a border alone.

Generation, Age, and Life Stage

For first-generation migrants, return may involve resettling in a country where early socialisation occurred. Language, cultural familiarity, family ties, nostalgia, retirement, or

health needs can facilitate return, but long absences may also produce loss of status and estrangement. In later life, the feasibility of return depends on pension income, housing, health and care services, and the availability of dependable social networks (Fathi & Ní Laoire, 2024; Hunter, 2023; Lulle, 2025). Emotional attachment to the country of origin should therefore not be mistaken for practical readiness or guaranteed social support.

For the second and subsequent generations, 'return' may refer to a parental or ancestral homeland rather than a place of previous long-term residence. Family narratives, holidays, and cultural heritage can create attachment, yet everyday settlement may resemble migration to a new society. Accent, fluency, behaviour, or transnational identity may lead local communities to categorise later-generation returnees as insufficiently native (Caron, 2020; Kılınç & King, 2017, 2025). Multiple affiliations can generate identity tension when the origin society expects singular loyalty, but multilingualism and transnational experience can also support flexible forms of belonging when differences are recognised.

Age and life stage intersect with generation. Children and young people face educational continuity, curriculum differences, language use, peer relations, and cultural socialisation (Grosa & King, 2023). Working-age adults may prioritise employment, qualification recognition, economic independence, and caregiving responsibilities. Older returnees may depend more heavily on accessible health care, social support, and continuity of care. Reintegration programmes based on a standard returnee profile are therefore unlikely to address the distinct resources and vulnerabilities of these groups.

Discussion

The reviewed literature challenges the idea that return is an automatic endpoint of migration. Physical relocation does not by itself restore economic security, social relations, cultural belonging, or psychological well-being. Outcomes are produced through the interaction of voluntariness, preparation, safety, livelihoods, social acceptance, support networks, and institutional access (OECD, 2020; Vathi, 2022). This interaction also explains why the same administrative category can encompass experiences of empowerment, disappointment, exclusion, or renewed displacement.

The first central conclusion concerns control. Formal voluntariness is an inadequate indicator when legal, economic, or security pressures remove viable alternatives. Decision-making power is itself a psychosocial resource: being able to obtain reliable information, compare options, plan, and participate in the timing and conditions of return can reduce the extent to which return is experienced as imposed. Participation cannot eliminate structural risks, but its absence may intensify helplessness and loss of continuity, especially among people exposed to war, deportation, or prolonged uncertainty.

The second conclusion is that belonging must be renegotiated. Returnees do not recover a pre-existing identity simply by crossing a border. Their migration-acquired values and practices encounter contemporary expectations in the origin community, while remembered versions of home are revised through everyday experience. Belonging depends on both attachment and recognition. Differences can become sources of exclusion, yet they can also become valued resources when communities and institutions recognise returnees' knowledge, identities, and transnational capacities (Vathi et al., 2023).



The third conclusion concerns the quality rather than the mere existence of social ties. Family and community networks can provide housing, work, information, and emotional support, but they may also impose conditionality and conformity. Social capital should therefore be evaluated through trust, reciprocity, accessibility, and agency. Psychological support that focuses only on individual resilience will be insufficient when distress is sustained by unemployment, discrimination, insecure housing, or exclusion from institutions. Sustainable reintegration requires coordinated economic, social, and psychosocial measures.

Finally, returnees cannot be treated as a homogeneous population. Voluntariness, legal status, generation, age, gender, life stage, trauma history, and access to resources alter both needs and possibilities. The relevance of bicultural identity integration, for example, may differ between first-generation labour migrants, second-generation descendants, rejected asylum seekers, and people returning after conflict. Policy and research must preserve these distinctions while examining common mechanisms such as control, recognition, and social support.

These mechanisms are mutually reinforcing rather than sequential. Limited control can reduce preparation, which increases the gap between expectations and post-return realities. Economic insecurity can restrict participation in social life, while exclusion can weaken access to employment information and institutional support. In contrast, recognition and trust can improve access to resources, strengthen self-efficacy, and make multiple identities easier to integrate. A multilevel perspective is therefore preferable to explanations that attribute adjustment either to individual resilience or to structural conditions alone. Psychological outcomes emerge through repeated interactions between personal appraisals, interpersonal relationships, community boundaries, and institutional opportunities.

This perspective also clarifies why the same condition can function differently across groups. Family networks may provide security to an older returnee but intensify control over a younger adult's behaviour; cultural familiarity may assist a first-generation migrant but offer little practical advantage to a child raised abroad. Similarly, transnational ties may facilitate employment and emotional continuity while also sustaining comparisons that make local conditions appear disappointing. Research and policy should therefore examine not only whether a resource exists, but who can use it, under what conditions, and with what consequences for autonomy, belonging, and well-being.

Policy Implications for Sustainable Reintegration

The integrated framework developed here suggests that return policy should be evaluated across four connected dimensions: decision-making conditions, material security, relational inclusion, and psychological continuity. A programme may provide transport or a short-term grant yet remain inadequate if people lack reliable information, safe housing, documentation, health care, education, or opportunities to participate in community life. Conversely, economic support may have limited effect when returnees encounter stigma or cannot convert migration-acquired skills into recognised social roles. Reintegration policy should therefore coordinate material and psychosocial support rather than treating them as separate phases.

Pre-return counselling should make the voluntariness continuum visible. Individuals need independent information about legal options, conditions in the country of origin, available assistance, and the consequences of declining return. Consent should be revisited when

circumstances change, particularly for families with children, people with health or care needs, and those returning to insecure settings. Monitoring formal signatures alone is insufficient because it does not capture indirect coercion or the absence of viable alternatives. Procedural safeguards should document how information was provided, whether interpretation was available, and whether the person had adequate time to decide.

Post-return support should extend beyond the initial arrival period. Early assistance may conceal difficulties that emerge later, including debt, unemployment, family conflict, educational disruption, social isolation, and renewed mobility intentions. Longitudinal follow-up can identify whether returnees gain stability or whether vulnerabilities become chronic. Indicators should include perceived safety, housing continuity, livelihood adequacy, service access, social support, discrimination, belonging, and psychological well-being, together with returnees' own assessment of whether the return remains sustainable (OECD, 2020; UNHCR, 2025).

Community-level interventions are also necessary because social acceptance cannot be produced by individual counselling alone. Local institutions, employers, schools, health services, and community organisations shape whether returnees are recognised and able to participate. Measures may include recognition of qualifications, language and educational support, anti-discrimination practices, mediation of family or community conflict, and opportunities for returnees to contribute skills acquired abroad. Such measures can turn cognitive and social remittances into collective resources instead of markers of difference (Vathi et al., 2023).

Finally, policy evaluation should distinguish return, reintegration, and sustainable reintegration. Return records movement to the country of origin; reintegration concerns renewed participation in economic, social, and cultural life; sustainability requires that this participation can continue without renewed displacement or migration being the only viable response to insecurity. These concepts should not be treated as interchangeable. Clear terminology prevents high return numbers from being interpreted automatically as successful outcomes and aligns evaluation with safety, dignity, agency, and long-term well-being.

The Turkish Context

In Türkiye, Turkish citizens returning from Europe and Syrians returning to Syria from temporary protection are situated within fundamentally different legal and geopolitical arrangements. Citizenship may facilitate formal rights for Turkish returnees but does not ensure social acceptance. Long-term residence abroad may be marked through labels such as ‘Almançı’ or ‘gurbetçi’, and differences in language, lifestyle, and expectations may complicate belonging. For Syrians, the central questions include safety, legal documentation, housing, education, health care, livelihoods, and the conditions under which return decisions are made (Şahin-Mencütek, 2023). Children born or largely raised in Türkiye may experience settlement in Syria as entry into a new social and educational environment rather than a familiar homecoming.

A security- or population-management approach can obscure these longer-term psychosocial consequences. To be meaningfully voluntary, return requires access to accurate information, protection from direct and indirect coercion, and the ability to evaluate realistic alternatives. Policy success should be assessed not only through the number of departures but also through



safety, dignity, social inclusion, livelihood stability, access to essential services, and psychological well-being after return. Comparative research in the Turkish context should therefore distinguish citizenship and protection status while examining how decision-making power, community reception, and institutional support shape outcomes.

Is Return a Solution?

Return cannot be considered a solution in itself. It may enable family reunification, cultural proximity, economic opportunity, or greater control for some people. For others, it may reproduce insecurity, loss of status, exclusion, or displacement in a different setting. The variation lies less in the fact of return than in the conditions under which it occurs and the environment encountered afterwards. Return is better understood as the beginning of a long-term reintegration process whose sustainability depends on safety, livelihoods, services, trust-based relationships, participation, and recognition of differentiated identities.

People-centred return policies should begin before departure and continue after arrival. They should combine reliable counselling and decision support with housing, employment, health, education, documentation, community participation, and accessible psychosocial services. Monitoring should include returnees' own assessments of safety, agency, belonging, and future plans, including intentions to migrate again. Such an approach shifts the criterion of success from administrative completion to the capacity to build a safe, meaningful, and socially recognised life.

Limitations and Future Research

This narrative review integrates diverse theoretical and empirical traditions but does not use the preregistered protocol, exhaustive searching, formal quality assessment, or transparent study-flow procedures required for a systematic review. Its conclusions are therefore interpretive and should not be generalised to all return populations. The underlying literature is also heterogeneous: labour migrants, deportees, rejected asylum seekers, refugees returning after conflict, and later-generation returnees differ substantially in legal status, exposure, and available resources. Definitions of voluntariness likewise range from participation in formal programmes to subjective coercion and the objective availability of alternatives.

Many studies are cross-sectional or retrospective, limiting conclusions about how identity, belonging, support, and well-being change over time. Longitudinal research beginning before return is needed to identify when initial difficulties diminish, persist, or re-emerge. Voluntariness should be measured multidimensionally through legal status, economic pressure, perceived safety, available alternatives, information quality, and participation in the decision. Because evidence on bicultural identity integration and social recognition often derives from broader migrant samples, future studies should test these mechanisms directly among distinct return groups.

Research in Türkiye should follow Turkish citizens returning from Europe and Syrians returning from Türkiye without conflating their legal positions. Studies should assess decision-making power, discrimination, support, community participation, access to services, psychological well-being, and intentions to re-migrate. Participatory designs that include returnees in defining outcomes and evaluating programmes would also make visible the difference between physical return and sustainable reintegration.

Conclusion

Return migration is not a seamless homecoming that automatically completes migration or produces positive outcomes. It is a long-term process in which changed identities, relationships, and expectations must be repositioned within the contemporary conditions of the country of origin. The social psychological consequences of return are shaped by voluntariness, viable alternatives, preparedness, security, livelihoods, social acceptance, support, and institutional access.

Belonging is not restored by relocation alone. Recognition and trust support reintegration; discrimination and exclusion undermine well-being. Needs vary by legal status, generation, age, and trauma history. Return succeeds only when people can build safe, dignified, sustainable, socially recognised lives.

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