

A study of Syrian students' migration motivations, destinations, and return intentions in a time of crisis

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SUMMARY

This research examines the motivations and preferences of Syrian students considering or deciding to migrate abroad. It analyzes their aspirations within the context of the Syrian conflict, which has disrupted education and the labor market and compelled many to seek opportunities elsewhere. We tested two hypotheses: 1) migration motivations and preferred destinations are related to academic stage, and 2) there is a relationship between return intention and academic stage. An online survey of 767 Syrian students revealed that a strong majority of both high school (74.86%) and university students (78.38%) expressed a desire to migrate, though their motivations differed significantly. High school students prioritized better educational opportunities (55.60%), while university students focused primarily on improved employment prospects and higher salaries (49.48%), with safety concerns and family reunification being important factors for both groups. The European Union emerged as the most preferred destination, followed by North America and the Gulf countries. However, most respondents (59.33% of high school students and 65.20% of university students) indicated that they had no immediate plans to return, citing concerns about safety, stability, and economic conditions. These findings highlight how educational, financial, and security considerations collectively influence migration decisions. The study provides policymakers and humanitarian organizations with valuable insights regarding the challenges facing this vulnerable population and the importance of Syria's eventual recovery for students.

INTRODUCTION

More than a decade of bloody war has turned Syria into the heart of one of the largest and most challenging displacement crises in modern history (1), creating a critical case study for understanding the intersection of displacement, education, and migration. Over the past decade, approximately 14 million Syrians have become refugees abroad or been displaced within their war-torn homeland (2). Among those most affected are Syrian students, whose educational trajectories have been severely disrupted by the destruction of schools, the collapse of academic institutions, and the lack of opportunities for personal and professional growth (3). The war has inflicted extensive damage on educational infrastructure, rendering nearly one-third of all schools either destroyed or critically damaged (4).

The conflict has crippled Syria's economy, plunging

approximately 90% of the population into poverty (5). Economic indicators reveal a catastrophic decline in the GDP by more than 50% compared to pre-war levels in 2011, while unemployment rates have skyrocketed by 300% (5). Currently, a staggering 25% of working-age Syrians lack employment opportunities. Basic services have also collapsed, including roads, hospitals, and electricity networks, making daily life even harder (5). This war did not just take lives; it took people's livelihoods, dreams, and ambitions. In this context, migration has emerged as a critical pathway for Syrian students seeking safety, stability, and opportunities for advancement. This phenomenon manifests concretely in Germany's healthcare sector, which—due to its large Syrian refugee population and active medical workforce integration programs—currently employs approximately 6,000 Syrian-trained physicians (6).

In our research, we focus on students across different academic levels because of their critical role in shaping Syria's future. However, there remains a lack of societal awareness regarding student migration, which is often perceived as a series of individual cases of opportunity-seeking rather than as a collective, systemic trend. This limited understanding contributes to a failure to recognize the broader risks the phenomenon poses to society, including the depletion of skilled human capital, weakened national capacity for reconstruction and development, and increasing dependence on foreign expertise. This study explores the desire to migrate among Syrian high school and university students, examining the factors driving their decision, such as safety, access to quality education, economic stability, and family reunification. Additionally, it investigates two hypotheses: 1) migration motivations and preferred destinations are related to academic stage, and 2) there is a relationship between return intention and academic stage.

Our results show that there is a strong desire among Syrian students—both at the high school and university levels—to relocate abroad. Their reasons for migration differ by educational stage: high school students primarily seek better academic opportunities, whereas university students are more motivated by career advancement and financial incentives. Destination preferences also vary, with high school students leaning toward North American countries, while university students show greater interest in Gulf countries. However, both high school and university students indicated Europe as the top choice for migration. Notably, most respondents reported no plans to return to Syria in the foreseeable future, a trend that may exacerbate the nation's challenges.

By examining these factors, we can gain a clearer understanding of the complex decision-making processes

of Syrian students and the barriers they face in pursuing opportunities abroad. This study seeks to give these students a voice to express their struggles while supporting the government in developing evidence-based responses—such as scholarships, strengthened universities, international partnerships, and labor-market support through job placements and apprenticeships to prevent serious consequences, including diminished innovation, weakened economic competitiveness, and reduced social cohesion. It also aims to provide host countries with guidance on addressing Syrian students' needs, including stability, access to education, recognition of qualifications, and opportunities for career development. By tackling these challenges, the research contributes to academic discourse on one of today's most pressing humanitarian issues.

RESULTS

A total of 765 Syrian students took part in an online survey of 6 multiple-choice questions designed to explore their gender, their desire to migrate, the reasons behind this desire, their preferred destinations, and their plans to return to Syria in the coming years. Among the respondents, 358 were high school students (201 males and 157 females), and 407 were university students (215 males and 192 females) (Figure 1).

When we examined the desire to migrate, we found that a strong majority of both high school and university students expressed a clear interest in leaving Syria. Among high school students, 74.86% (n = 268) said "yes," while 14.80% (n=53) said "no," and 10.34% (n = 37) said "maybe". Similarly, among university students, 78.38% (n = 319) said "yes," while 12.29% (n=50) said "no," and 9.34% (n = 38) said "maybe" (Figure 2). We used the chi-square test to determine whether there were significant differences in the desire to emigrate between high school and university students. The calculated chi-square value was $\chi^2(2) = 1.07$ ($p = 0.585$), indicating that the difference in emigration desire between the two groups

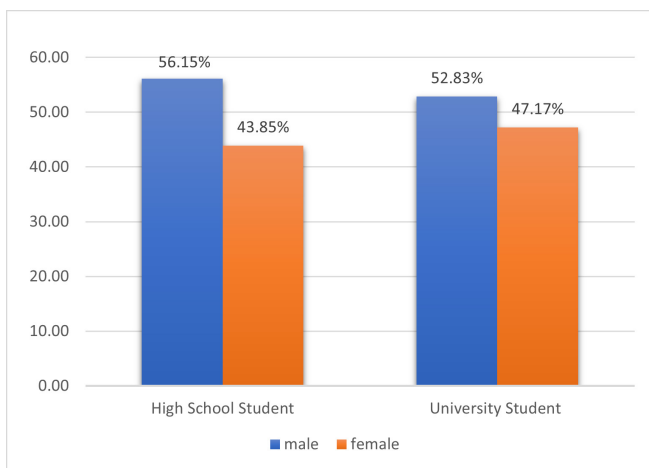


Figure 1: Gender of the respondents. The bar graph illustrates the gender distribution of Syrian high school and university students who took part in the study. Blue and orange bars denote the number of male and female respondents, respectively. Among high school students, 56.15% (n = 201) were male and 43.85% (n = 157) were female. Among university students, 52.83% (n = 215) were male and 47.17% (n = 192) were female.

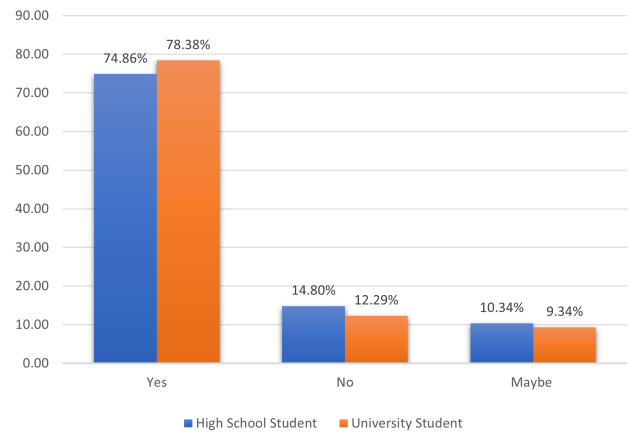


Figure 2: Desire to Immigrate Among Syrian High School Students and University Students. The bar graph shows the desire to immigrate among Syrian high school and university students, with blue and orange bars represent high school students and university students, respectively. The results show that 74.86% (n = 268) of high school students said yes to immigration, compared to 78.38% (n = 319) of university students, while 14.80% (n = 53) of high school students and 12.29% (n = 50) of university students said no, and 10.34% (n = 37) of high school students versus 9.34% (n = 38) of university students said maybe. The difference in emigration desire between the two groups was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(2) = 1.07$, $p = 0.585$).

was not statistically significant. This result suggested that the desire to emigrate is a general phenomenon shared by students at both educational levels.

Only students who responded "Yes" to the initial question regarding their desire to migrate continued with the remainder of the survey, while those who responded "No" or "Maybe" did not. Further examination of migration motivations revealed notable differences between high school and university students. Among high school students, the primary motivation was the search for better educational opportunities, cited by (55.60%, n = 149) of respondents. This was followed by safety and security concerns (23.88%, n = 64), family reunification (10.82%, n = 29), and the pursuit of better job opportunities and higher salaries (9.70%, n = 26). In contrast, university students were primarily driven by better job opportunities and higher salaries, with 49.48% (n = 159) identifying this as their main reason. Other motivations included better educational opportunities (26.33%, n = 84), safety and security concerns (18.50%, n = 59), and family reunification (5.33%, n = 17) (Figure 3). To assess the statistical significance of these differences between secondary and university students, we conducted a chi-square test. The result ($\chi^2(3) = 117.29$, $p < 0.001$) indicated a highly significant difference in migration motivations based on educational level.

Regarding preferred destinations, European Union (EU) countries ranked highest for both groups. Among high school students, 49.25% (n = 132) selected EU countries as their preferred destination, followed by North America (USA and Canada) at 32.84% (n = 88), Gulf countries (except Iran, Iraq, and Yemen) at 14.18% (n = 38), and other countries at 3.73% (n = 10). University students showed a similar preference for the EU (51.10%, n = 163), but differed in their secondary choices:

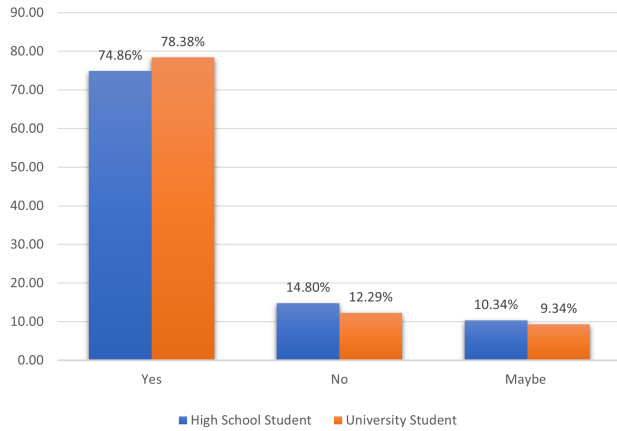


Figure 3: Reasons for Immigration Among Syrian Students. This bar graph highlights the main reasons for migration among Syrian high school and university students. The blue bars represent high school students, while orange bars represent university students. For high school students, the primary motivation was better educational opportunities (55.60%, n = 149), followed by safety and security concerns (23.88%, n = 64), family reunification (10.82%, n = 29), and better job opportunities/higher salaries (9.70%, n = 26). In contrast, university students were primarily motivated by better job opportunities/higher salaries (49.84%, n = 159), followed by better educational opportunities (26.33%, n = 84), safety and security concerns (18.50%, n = 64), and family reunification (5.33%, n = 17). A chi-squared test revealed a highly significant difference in motivations by educational level ($\chi^2(3) = 117.29, p < 0.001$).

Gulf countries (except Iran, Iraq, and Yemen) (29.15%, n = 93), North America (17.55%, n = 56), and other countries (2.19%, n = 7) (Figure 4). A chi-square test of independence was conducted to examine the relationship between educational level and preferred immigration destinations. The results revealed a statistically significant association ($\chi^2(3) = 29.87, p < 0.001$), indicating that educational level substantially influences Syrian students' destination preferences.

Finally, we examined whether students planned to return to Syria in the coming years. Among high school students, a majority of 59.33% (n=159) responded negatively, while 24.25% (n = 65) answered affirmatively, and 16.42% (n = 44) were uncertain. University students showed a similar but slightly more pronounced trend, with 65.20% (n = 208) indicating no plans to return, 18.50% (n = 59) planning to return, and 16.30% (n = 52) remaining undecided (Figure 5). A chi-square analysis revealed no statistically significant difference in return intentions between high school and university students ($\chi^2(2) = 2.84, p = 0.242$). The similar proportions in both groups indicated that educational level does not significantly influence students' intentions to return to Syria.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this research offer a clear picture of the migration intentions of Syrian students, showing that a strong majority—both high school and university students—want to leave Syria. University students are slightly more eager to migrate (78.38%) compared to high school students (74.86%). This highlights just how deeply the Syrian conflict

has disrupted education and economic opportunities, pushing many young people to look for better prospects elsewhere. The small percentage of students who said “maybe” (~9%) suggests that some are still on the fence, possibly waiting to see if conditions in Syria improve or if better opportunities arise abroad.

When it comes to motivations, the reasons for wanting to leave vary between the two groups. High school students are mostly driven by the desire for better education, which makes sense given their focus on academic growth and future opportunities. On the other hand, university students are more motivated by economic factors, like finding better jobs and earning higher salaries, since they are closer to entering the workforce.

Safety and security are major concerns for both high school and university students, reflecting Syria's ongoing instability, with 23.88% of high school students and 18.50% of university students citing it as a primary motivation for migration. Family reunification also plays a significant role, especially for high school students (10.82%) compared to university students (5.33%), likely reflecting younger students' greater reliance on family support.

When it comes to where they want to go, the choice of destination ties closely to their motivations. EU countries are the top choice for both groups. For high school students, this is likely due to their high-quality education systems and affordable—or even free—tuition (7). Meanwhile, university students are more likely driven by guaranteed equal work and wage conditions compared to EU nationals and relatively open immigration policies (8-9). High school students are particularly drawn to North America, and it may be because of its prestigious universities aligning with their educational

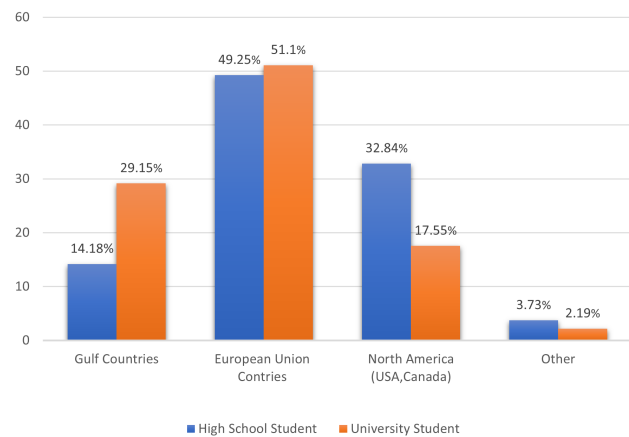


Figure 4: Top Preferred Destinations for Syrian Student Immigrants. The bar graph displays preferred immigration destinations for Syrian high school and university students. The blue bars represent high school students, while orange bars represent university students. High school students predominantly chose European Union (EU) countries (49.25%, n = 132), followed by North America (32.84%, n = 88), Gulf countries (14.18%, n = 38), and other destinations (3.73%, n = 10). University students showed similar EU preference (51.10%, n = 163) but differed in secondary choices: Gulf countries (29.15%, n = 93), North America (17.55%, n = 56), and other destinations (2.19%, n = 7). Statistical analysis revealed a significant association between educational level and destination preference ($\chi^2(3) = 29.87, p < 0.001$).

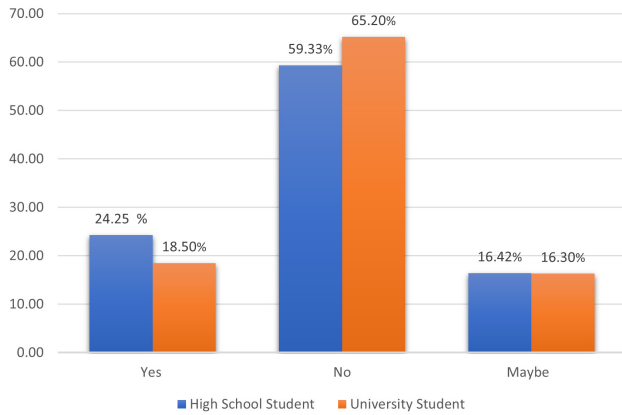


Figure 5: Desire to Return to Syria between High School Students and University Students. The bar graph illustrates Syrian students' desire to return to Syria, with blue bars correspond to high school students, whereas orange bars correspond to university students. Among high school students, 59.33% (n = 159) opposed returning, while 24.25% (n = 65) planned to return, and 16.42% (n = 44) were undecided. University students showed similar patterns: 65.20% (n = 208) declined returning, 18.50% (n = 59) intended to return, and 16.30% (n = 52) remained uncertain. Statistical analysis confirmed no significant difference between groups ($\chi^2(2) = 2.84, p = 0.242$).

goals (10). University students, however, are more inclined toward Gulf countries (except Iran, Iraq, and Yemen), possibly because of their proximity, cultural similarities, economic growth, and job opportunities in fields like engineering, healthcare, and business (11).

Finally, most students don't plan to return to Syria. University students are slightly more hesitant (65.20%) compared to high school students (59.33%), likely because of the ongoing instability and unsafe conditions back home. This trend will lead to a depletion of skilled professionals in Syria, such as doctors, engineers, scientists, and educators, which can hinder economic growth and innovation (12). However, high school students are a bit more open to returning (24.25% said yes) compared to university students (18.50% said yes), possibly because they feel stronger emotional ties to Syria or hold onto hope for its future. A portion of both groups, 16.40% of high school students and 16.30% of university students, are still undecided, suggesting that their decision to return is likely because they depend on improvements in safety, stability, and economic conditions in Syria.

Despite the valuable insights gained from our study, it is important to recognize its limitations. While 767 respondents provide a solid dataset, the sample size may still fall short of representing the entire population of Syrian students, particularly given the diversity in regions and socioeconomic backgrounds. For instance, the study does not account for regional differences within Syria—such as urban versus rural areas—which could significantly shape students' perspectives on migration and their willingness to return. Additionally, the survey doesn't delve into cultural or familial influences, which likely play a crucial role in shaping students' decisions. Economic factors, which are often a driving force behind migration, were also not fully explored, leaving gaps in our understanding of how financial circumstances impact these choices.

Another limitation stems from the survey design itself. Due to time constraints and limited resources, we weren't able to conduct a detailed analysis of subgroups, such as comparing male and female students. Such an analysis could have revealed important differences in motivations and preferences based on gender. Moreover, the absence of open-ended questions meant we missed out on more nuanced responses that could have provided deeper insights into students' personal reasons for migrating or returning to Syria.

Looking ahead, a longitudinal study could offer a more dynamic perspective, tracking how students' attitudes and decisions evolve over time as they progress through their education or as conditions in Syria change. Addressing these limitations in future research would not only strengthen the validity and reliability of the findings but also provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex interplay between academic stages, cultural influences, economic status, and migration decisions.

This study reveals a strong desire among Syrian students to emigrate, regardless of their educational level. Additionally, it supports the hypothesis that migration motivations and preferred destinations are related to academic stage. However, it found no link between the desire to return to Syria and educational level, as most students expressed no intention of going back. These findings contribute to scholarly discussions on educational displacement while establishing an empirical framework for future research. More importantly, they provide an evidence-based foundation for developing targeted interventions such as enacting policies specifically designed to protect and support Syrian students' aspirations for stability and academic fulfillment.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Participants

The study employed a multi-platform recruitment strategy, utilizing private social media groups containing Syrian students, along with targeted emails sent to principals of various private schools in Aleppo, to confirm that participants were indeed Syrian nationals currently enrolled in high schools or universities. Eligible participants were identified as Syrian nationals enrolled in secondary or tertiary education institutions. After screening responses, we obtained 767 qualified participants who met our criteria.

Survey Generation

The survey consisted of six multiple-choice questions hosted on Google Forms. Participants were asked about their gender, their desire to migrate, their reasons for migration, preferred destination countries, and whether they envisioned returning to Syria someday. The survey remained active from February 10 to 16, 2025.

Statistics

All datasets were processed using Microsoft Excel for response categorization, descriptive statistical analysis, and graphical visualization. For additional details regarding the survey methodology, the complete questionnaire is accessible via the following link: <https://forms.gle/joJwCFrKtaLbBt5r5>.

Ethical Considerations

Before completing the questionnaire, participants were fully informed of the study's objectives and purpose. They received clear assurances that their data would be used strictly for research purposes, with guarantees against any personal exploitation. The investigation adhered to the ethical requirements outlined in the World Medical Association's Declaration of Helsinki (2013) (13). Participants were explicitly informed of their unconditional right to withdraw at any time if they experienced discomfort and were guaranteed complete freedom to respond without external pressure or coercion.

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