

# Home is Where the Heart Is? Forced Migration and Voluntary Return in Turkey's Kurdish Regions

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What influences the decisions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return home after prolonged displacement? This article investigates the attitudes of victims of forced migration by analysing survey data on Kurdish displaced persons and returnees in Turkey. In an attempt to give a voice to displaced persons, we survey the conditions under which IDPs return home despite continuing tensions, lack of infrastructure and risk of renewed violence. The findings suggest that integration into a new environment in Western Turkey, measured by economic advancement and knowledge of Turkish, reduces the likelihood of return. Yet contrary to conventional wisdom, more educated IDPs demonstrate a stronger desire to return to their ancestral communities, suggesting that education increases available options for displaced persons. The findings are relevant in informing global responses to forced migration as well as understanding the local experiences and perceptions of IDPs in conflict-ridden societies.

**Keywords:** forced migration, Kurds, social capital, education, Turkey

## Introduction

Forced migration is an issue of inquiry across multiple disciplines, yet little systematic effort has been made to collect data on returnees' intentions or the actual returns in post-conflict zones (for exceptions, see Black and Koser 1999; Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005; O'Loughlin *et al.* 2011). While academic studies indicate it is extremely difficult to reverse conflict-induced displacements (Lustick 1993; McGarry 1998; Carmichael 2002), voluntary

repatriation remains a key priority for international organizations such as UNHCR (2013).<sup>1</sup> By focusing on a central question in refugee studies—why and how do some displaced manage to return home—this article aims to inform regional and global approaches to forced migration. The Kurdish experience on displacement and voluntary return in Turkey is particularly interesting given the variation in experience, especially the decisions of minority Kurds to return home under conditions that seem prohibitive, including the absence of political settlement in the country.

Academic work on refugee studies and related policymaking frequently lack reliable data, largely because relevant surveys are still relatively rare (Jacobsen and Landau 2003; Bloch 2007). As a result, international organizations, governments and NGOs are often forced to make decisions without consulting vulnerable groups most likely to be affected (Ó Tuathail 2010: 262). This article aims to help fill this gap in the literature by analysing survey data collected among victims of displacement (i.e. displaced persons). So far, there has been mixed and contradictory evidence in the literature as to whether return is feasible following protracted displacements,<sup>2</sup> or, in some cases, if it is even desirable (Warner 1994; Zetter 1999; Adelman and Barkan 2011).<sup>3</sup> To shed light on return under prohibitive conditions, this article focuses on two groups of Kurdish Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs): those who remain displaced and have resided in urban environments in Western parts of Turkey since the 1990s; and those who have opted to return to their pre-conflict homes and communities despite continuing low-intensity violence. By doing so, we hope to contribute to an emerging area of research aiming to give a voice to victims of displacement by using surveys with large numbers of respondents.

The existing literature points to several reasons why refugees and displaced persons will either return home or integrate into a new environment. Previous studies focusing on displaced persons and refugees in Bosnia (Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005; Sert 2008), the South Caucasus (Toal and Grono 2011), Kazakhstan (Kuşçu 2014), Colombia (Ibáñez and Moya 2010) and Turkey itself (Ayata and Yüksek 2005; Çelik 2005b; Kurban *et al.* 2006) have identified specific factors which victims of displacement prioritize, including economic opportunities, security provisions or prospects of residing among co-ethnics.

Voluntary peaceful return following displacement remains a critically important area in refugee studies.<sup>4</sup> The existing literature has pointed to several reasons why refugees and displaced persons will opt to return home or integrate into a new environment. For one thing, living conditions in the new environment in displacement matter. Victims of displacement could be temporarily accommodated in designated refugee camps and face unbearable restrictions, or they could be integrated within a new environment in mixed neighbourhoods in major metropolitan centres; such alternative options might well influence the intentions to return home (Black 2001; Ó Tuathail 2010; Başer and Çelik 2014). In addition, the ethnopolitical make-up of the

neighbourhoods of pre-conflict residence, particularly majority/minority patterns, could influence the extent to which victims of displacement opt to return or integrate into a new post-war environment (Celik 2005a; Toal and Dahlman 2005; Belloni 2006; Sert 2008).

By examining the claims in the literature and highlighting the demographic profile of Kurdish returnees (e.g. age and gender), their needs, and institutional support mechanisms, we aim to assist scholars and practitioners to understand how the actions of governments, ethnic minority parties, NGOs and international organizations could boost the success rate of voluntary returnees elsewhere.

### Main Hypotheses on Return

We examine alternative explanations of return based on a survey of 370 Kurdish returnees and non-returnees. The survey investigated economic, psychological and socio-political factors of forced migration in Turkey; it was drawn from the existing literature and included novel hypotheses on the role of social capital. We use the survey data to consider how these factors affect the intentions and actual outcomes of return. More specifically, we test the following set of hypotheses, as summarized in Figure 1.

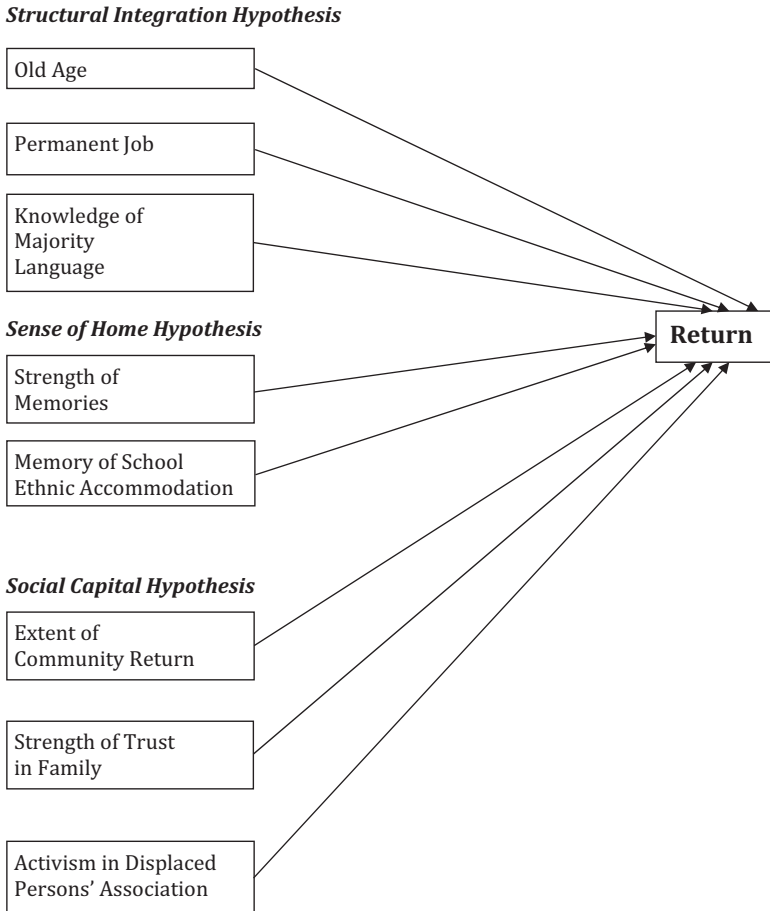
The *integration hypothesis* argues that displaced persons are less likely to return home after the passage of time and after successfully settling in a new environment when such an option exists in the first place (see also Zolberg 1989: 406; Zetter 1999; ICG 2002; Ibáñez and Moya 2010). There could be several related indicators of integration, including a permanent job, property, and language proficiency (Wahlbeck 1999; Annan *et al.* 2011; Toal and Grono 2011). If this hypothesis is correct, displaced people with permanent jobs, good knowledge of the majority language and high education levels will be *less* likely to return.

An alternative hypothesis focuses on pre-conflict memories. Several studies indicate the desire to return to pre-conflict homes tends to be strongest for those refugees who spent their formative years there. As Jansen (2009: 55) observes in his ethnography of returns in Bosnia, elderly refugees are 'dying to return and returning to die.' Refugees who are too young to remember much of the pre-displacement life are generally less committed to return, and the generation born after the forced migration may not even associate 'home' with the pre-displacement region (Hammond 1999: 236–240; Romano 2005; Loizos 2009: 71–73). Following this logic, the *sense of home hypothesis* argues that older displaced people, with positive memories of the pre-displacement life, will be more likely to return than the young or those with negative memories. If this thesis is correct, advanced age and positive memories of pre-displacement homes will improve the odds of return (see also Ayata and Yükeşer 2005: 36).

The *community effort hypothesis* draws on social capital literature (Putnam 1993: 167; Varshney 2001; Castles 2003; Çelik 2005b; Steele 2011) to

Figure 1

**Hypotheses on Causes of Return of Kurdish IDPs**



emphasize the efficacy of trust, norms, and networks to facilitate and coordinate return actions. The community effort hypothesis also emphasizes the role of formal associations, along with informal neighbourhood and kinship networks, in decisions to return or stay away (Stefanovic and Loizides 2010). If this hypothesis is correct, the displaced persons who are active in refugee organizations, have strong trust in their families, and belong to communities where many others have returned will be more likely to return.

Finally, the *security hypothesis* states that the decision to stay away because of a fear of ethnic violence (Lake and Rothchild 1996; Walter 1999; Annan *et al.* 2011) is likely associated with a sense of vulnerability (greater for

women and families with small children), traumatic war-time experiences (such as an individual's victimization or loss of a significant other) and the presence of ethnic others in the village (such as settlers or a military forces). Unfortunately, as will be shown below, measurement difficulties constrained our ability to test the security hypothesis properly.

### **The Kurdish Conflict: Broader Context and Alternative Narratives**

Since the mid-1980s, the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK) has engaged in a violent rebellion against the Turkish state, with approximately 30,000 casualties (mostly ethnic Kurds).<sup>5</sup> While ongoing, the war became less intense after the capture of the PKK leader, Abdullah Öcalan, in February 1999 (Romano 2006). Even so, an estimated 378,335 to 1.2 million people have been displaced within Turkey, mostly in the major urban centres of the country (HRW 2005; IDMC 2012a, 2012b). By July 2009, approximately 187,000 had returned to their homes (IDMC 2012a; 51), but the majority had not. On the one hand, the low overall return level may not be surprising, as returnees continue to face physical insecurity, limited public services and lack of identity recognition (Ayata and Yükseser 2005; Çelik 2005b; Kurban *et al.* 2006). On the other hand, despite the absence of a comprehensive peace settlement in the region, the Turkish government has introduced policies to facilitate the return process, including a law on compensation. State commissions in each province are authorized to estimate damages to properties and loss of income to compensate the displaced persons on the basis of their pre-displacement revenues (Kurban *et al.* 2006: 33–34).

The partial de-escalation of the Kurdish conflict in the past decade provides solid grounds to study variations in the intentions and outcomes of decisions among victims (i.e. displaced persons) themselves. Ideally, the Kurdish experience in Turkey could inform other cases of (potential) minority return despite a political deadlock, as in Sri Lanka, South Sudan or Colombia (see for instance, Ibáñez and Moya 2010).

Perceptions are extremely important in understanding the broader context of such decisions in conflict-ridden communities. Essentially, Kurds and majority Turks tend to understand the war of the 1990s in very different ways. Minority Kurds interviewed in the Southeast regions of Turkey during the fieldwork for this project in April 2011 emphasized their aspirations for cultural and political rights. Feelings of victimization were particularly strong among the IDPs, who emphasized their desire to maintain the right of return to their pre-1990s ancestral lands in the Kurdish regions of Turkey. As they tell their life stories, displacement was enforced by the Turkish military, or by local 'village guards' armed to contain the Kurdish PKK uprising (Wahlbeck 1999; Çelik 2005b). In most cases, villages were burnt by the military and evacuation of civilians happened overnight, leading to the destruction of ancestral communities. Unlike internal migrants in the rest of the country, Kurds were forced to leave their homes against their wishes (Kurban *et al.*

2006). Forced displacement was not implemented simply in response to the PKK rebellion in the 1990s but has been a feature of well-documented assimilationist policies since the creation of modern Turkey (van Bruinessen 1999; Wahlbeck 1999; Harff and Gurr 2004: 27–43; Hassanpour and Mojab 2005).

In contrast, Turkish public opinion has generally framed the conflict as one between the legitimate state and the PKK terrorists. For the most part, popular discourse emphasizes the casualties from this struggle while underplaying the crimes committed by the military and the violent nature of forced migration from the Kurdish regions of Turkey. In this framing, displaced Kurds in Western Turkey are perceived as internal migrants, often unwelcome, especially if associated with the PKK. At the political level, successive governments have attempted to ‘depoliticize’ Kurdish ethnonationalism and address it as a problem to be solved by regional economic development (Yeğen 1999; Somer 2005). The difference in interpretation is also illustrated numerically: government institutions initially claimed about 300,000 displaced persons, while Kurdish NGOs cite up to three million (Ayata and Yüksek 2005).

Turkish public opinion remains divided on how to handle the Kurdish issue; on the one hand, polls show that the Turkish public sees the PKK insurgency as the most serious problem for the country, while on the other, the majority of the population seems to be increasingly in favour of the peace process announced by the government in December 2012 (Caha 2013). As demonstrated elsewhere, in a highly politicized environment, surveys are extremely important in challenging conventional beliefs (Kolossoff and O’Loughlin 2011). For instance, the 2006 Hacettepe University survey of IDPs in Turkey represented a turning point in the government’s response to displacement by addressing the issue of numbers of the displaced. Commissioned by the government as a response to international pressure, the attempt was originally criticized as ‘likely to produce another underestimate’ of these numbers (Human Rights Watch 2005: 20). Yet the Hacettepe survey has nonetheless clarified the numbers of the displaced and noted some major gaps in public policy, for instance, the lack of awareness among the displaced of the available channels for state compensation (Hacettepe Üniversitesi Nüfus Etütleri Enstitüsü 2006).<sup>6</sup>

As for Kurdish public opinion itself, most scholars suggest the PKK uprising has contributed to a strong awareness of a distinct ethnic identity (Van Bruinessen 1994, 1998; McDowall 1997; Romano 2006). Admittedly, it is hard to estimate the political orientation of the Kurdish populations given the level of repression. Roughly speaking, minority Kurds tend to be divided between those voting for ethnic Kurdish parties and those opting for mainstream Turkish parties that appear more accommodating of their rights and identity. In the 1990s, moderate Kurds voted for leftist parties but since then, the left in Turkey has generally failed to gain a significant vote in the predominantly Kurdish regions. In the past decade, roughly 40 per cent of the

voters in these regions supported the pro-Islamic Justice and Development Party (AKP) of PM Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Güzeldere 2009). Despite the diversity in responses, Kurdish elites, even those supporting AKP, have insisted on the necessity of recognizing and accommodating Kurdish minority rights. In other words, the future support of the Kurdish voters for the ruling party in Turkey is largely conditional on minority rights and the successful conclusion of the long-delayed peace process (Gunter 2013; Hooper 2013).

### Survey Data and Methods

The data used in our analysis were collected in a survey conducted in Turkey from October to December 2012.<sup>7</sup> We include data on both currently displaced people and returnees, and we focus on three metropolitan areas in Turkey with high concentrations of displaced: Istanbul (60 respondents), Adana-Mersin (60), and Diyarbakir (60).

Diyarbakir is the largest Kurdish-inhabited city and unofficial capital of the region; Istanbul has received the largest numbers of displaced (IDMC 2012a; Kurban *et al.* 2006); and the Adana-Mersin metropolitan area is predominantly Turkish inhabited but in close proximity to Kurdish areas.<sup>8</sup> Apart from Istanbul, Adana and Mersin are the only traditionally non-Kurdish provinces with an

Figure 2

### Internal Displacement in Turkey (IDMC Map)



Source: [http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/%28httpInfoFiles%29/2997A AFC50626566C12571800053D66B/\\$file/Displacement-Turkey-green-s.jpg](http://www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/%28httpInfoFiles%29/2997A AFC50626566C12571800053D66B/$file/Displacement-Turkey-green-s.jpg)

elected Member of Parliament hailing from the minority Kurdish party (BDP-Peace and Democracy Party), an indicator of the high concentration of displaced Kurds.<sup>9</sup>

In Turkey, there is no formal recognition or registration of members of the Kurdish minority; therefore, we had to use independent reports on the distribution of forced migration (Kurban *et al.* 2006; IDMC 2012a). The survey agency pre-selected the neighbourhoods with a higher concentration of displaced Kurdish persons. Within each neighbourhood, households were randomly selected. The questionnaire consisted of questions divided into specific sections on pre-conflict experience, conditions leading to forced migration and experience in exile. It also asked about return intentions among those still in displacement and return experience among returnees, as well as general political attitudes (for a summary of key questions see Table 1).

In addition to the 180 currently displaced, we located and interviewed 189 Kurdish returnees in the southeast part of Turkey. Because of significant security concerns, returnees were chosen in villages where the general situation was deemed acceptable.<sup>10</sup>

All interviews, both with the displaced and the returnees, were conducted face to face in respondents' homes. The respondents could choose to have interviews conducted in Turkish or Kurdish. The data collection procedure ensured their informed consent. The response rate was 40 per cent. Data analysis was done using SPSS 20.0.<sup>11</sup>

## **Findings**

### *Social Structure and Economic Integration*

After exploring the bi-variate effect of several structural variables, we find an overwhelming majority of returnees (78.8 per cent) work in agriculture (among the currently displaced, only 6.6 per cent do so). A significant majority of returnees (77.2 per cent) agreed they 'had to return because they were too poor in displacement'. These findings support the thesis that failed economic integration into an urban economy is associated with return. Our findings also indicate returnees are more likely to suffer economic deprivation than non-returnees. While 46 per cent of the returnees reported difficulties in accessing good health care, only one per cent of the displaced had the same concern. Presumably, this variation reflects the differences in the quality of health care services in urban Turkey and remote rural areas in the southeast where the Kurds are returning.

The first model in Table 2 looks at the impact of structural factors on the odds of return. Net of other factors, older people are more likely to return than younger ones: the average age of returnees is 49 and the average age of displaced persons is 43. The permanently employed are about three times more likely to stay displaced than to return, net of other factors in the model. Those receiving state compensation for their lost property are about



Table 1

**Variable Descriptions and Expected Effects**

Variable	Description	Expected Association with the Return
<i>Dependent Variable</i>		
Return	Whether the respondent has returned to the pre-displacement location.	
<i>Structural Variables</i>		
Gender	Self-reported	Men more likely to return, due to security concerns.
Age	Self-reported	Older respondents more likely to return.
Education	Self-reported	Better educated less likely to return.
Permanent employment	Self-reported	Permanently employed less likely to return.
State compensation	Self-reported	Those who received state compensation are more likely to return.
Knowledge of Turkish	Self-reported	Respondents with good knowledge of Turkish less likely to return.
<i>Sense of Home Variables</i>		
Memories of home	'How would you describe your memories direct or indirect, from your life in your original home, before the displacement?'	Respondents with strong and positive memories of home more likely to return
Good pre-conflict relations with schools	'Overall, how would you describe relations of members of your [ethnic] group with schools in your region before the conflict?'	Good pre-conflict relations with schools increase the likelihood of return.
<i>Social Capital</i>		
Community returns	'Following displacement did members of your village return back to their homes?' very few/less than half/about half/more than half/almost the whole	High level of community return increases chances of respondent's return
Improved trust in family	'How did the conflict change your fellow villagers' view of others? People trust their families as before' (1-less 2-same, 3-more)	High level of trust in family increases the likelihood of return.

Source: 2013 Kurdish returns data set.

\*Options were 1. 'Strong: I have strong and vivid memories of life at my original home.'

2. 'Moderate: I have fragmented memories of my life there but they seem very far away now.'

3. 'Indirect: I was not born or too young, but my parents have spoken to me extensively about life at our original home.'

4. 'Vague: I only have vague memories of my childhood and from my parents.'

5. 'No strong memories, direct or indirect.'

2.7 times more likely to be returnees than to remain displaced. As the extent of compensation is estimated by the various committees on the basis of previous ownership and loss of income, this is an intuitive finding in the sense that people with more to regain are also more capable of supporting their

Table 2

**Odds Ratios for Logistic Regression of Return, Kurds in Turkey 2012**

Independent Variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
<i>Structure and Integration</i>			
Age	<b>1.021*</b> (.008)	1.012 (.010)	1.018 (.015)
Gender	1.651† (.275)	<b>2.666**</b> (.338)	<b>2.546*</b> (.451)
Education	1.457 (.290)	1.741 (.103)	<b>2.678*</b> (.476)
Permanent employment	<b>.291***</b> (.324)	<b>.325**</b> (.370)	.821 (.507)
State compensation	<b>2.738***</b> (.244)	<b>2.964***</b> (.287)	1.732 (.412)
Knowledge of Turkish	<b>.517***</b> (.135)	<b>.490***</b> (.160)	<b>.416***</b> (.244)
<i>Sense of Home</i>			
Memories of home		3.348† (.657)	2.305 (.805)
Good pre-conflict relations with schools		<b>5.381***</b> (.287)	<b>2.256*</b> (.381)
<i>Social Capital</i>			
Community return			<b>8.080***</b> (.295)
Improved trust in family			.473† (.398)
Constant	1.950 (.578)	.046** (1.128)	.041† (1.711)
<b>Cox &amp; Snell R<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>20.7 %</b>	<b>30.7%</b>	<b>54.2%</b>
Number of respondents	370	320	309

Significance: NS= not significant, †p<.10, \*p<.05, \*\*p<.01, \*\*\* p<.001.

Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. Gender was coded as 0=female and 1= male.

return (i.e. rebuilding their houses and starting to reuse the land). Yet it is important to note that compensation is not conditional on return; individuals are able to spend their compensation as they wish, either in the old or new residencies.<sup>12</sup>

Knowledge of the Turkish language is another strong and statistically significant predictor. Each unit increase in (self-assessed) knowledge of Turkish cuts the probability of return by half.<sup>13</sup> Finally, while men and the better educated are more likely to return than women and the poorly educated, education and gender are not statistically significant predictors in this model. Pseudo R-square indicates a weak model fit. The model correctly predicts the dependent variable in only 68 per cent of cases, low for a binary outcome variable.

### *Sense of Home*

The second model in Table 2 includes both structural variables and memories of pre-displacement life. Respondents reporting good pre-displacement relations with local school authorities are more than five times more likely to return than those without good relations with school authorities, net of other factors. While respondents with happy memories are more than three times more likely to return than those without such memories, this relationship is only statistically significant at the 90 per cent level. Once sense of home variables are inserted in this model, age is not statistically significant. This finding is not surprising, as older people are more likely to have strong memories of pre-conflict life.<sup>14</sup>

In this model, gender is a statistically significant predictor. Men are more than 2.5 times more likely to return than women, net of other factors. The impact of other predictors changes very little compared to the first model. Pseudo R-square indicates a slightly improved model fit. This model correctly predicts the outcome variable in 76 per cent of cases.

### *Social Capital*

The third model adds two social capital variables: extent of community return and level of trust in family now, compared to pre-conflict levels. Community return is very strongly associated with individual return, with one unit increase in the extent of the community return raising the odds of individual return eight times.<sup>15</sup> Contrary to our expectations, increased trust in family *reduces* the odds the individual will return, approximately by half.

As before, men and the better educated are more likely to return than women and the poorly educated, but in this model, both gender and education are statistically significant. As in the previous two models, knowledge of Turkish strongly reduces the odds of return. Good pre-conflict relations in schools are still statistically significant and increase the chances of return, but the impact of this variable is reduced. Permanent employment and state compensation have the same general association as before, but they are not statistically significant in this model. Pseudo-R square now indicates a strong model fit. This model correctly predicts who will return in 92 per cent of cases.<sup>16</sup>

### Discussion: The Way Home

By and large, the findings support the *integration hypothesis*. We find that the displaced who have developed a good knowledge of the Turkish language and obtained permanent employment are less likely to return. Most assuredly, assimilation in the language of the dominant group has multiple normative underpinnings, as displaced persons, particularly those in the younger generation, lose part of their culture (Başer and Çelik 2014). However, as the Irish, Basque and other cases from the region suggest, linguistic assimilation does not necessarily lead to loss of national identity (Connor 1972; McGarry and O'Leary 1993; Iğsız 2006). At the same time, memories of pre-displacement homes, especially positive memories of educational experiences, considerably increase the chances of return. In fact, contrary to our expectations, better educated IDPs seem more likely to return. Arguably, those with at least some formal education received it before their displacement, during their formative years, and this has strengthened their attachment to the pre-displacement residence. Alternatively, those with better education might have a stronger sense of national identity, as suggested by Lange (2012), linked to a stronger desire to return home. As the results on education are counter-intuitive, more research may be needed across other cases to discover why longer years of education considerably increase the chances of return.<sup>17</sup>

This article also finds considerable support for the *sense of home hypothesis*. In line with the findings of several other researchers (Hammond 1999; Jansen 2009; Loizos 2009), we find older respondents significantly more likely to return than younger ones. In his review of anthropological literature on return migration, Gmelch (1980: 145) argues that migrants usually connect a sense of home to the place where they spent their formative years, in other words, their school years. Our qualitative interviews indicate that some teachers in the region might have been open to expressions of Kurdish identity, thus adding to positive formative experiences and helping to explain this stronger attachment.<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, we find clear support for the *community effort hypothesis*, with one unit increase in the extent of the community return raising the odds of an individual's return eight times, net of other factors. Related qualitative studies in Turkey (Çelik 2005b) as well as Ukraine (Nikolko and Carment 2010) have also pointed to the role of community effort, yet this article is one of the first quantitative studies to demonstrate the role of social capital in the process of voluntary return. More specifically, returnees strongly agree that they were encouraged to return because others from their village or neighbourhood also returned.

While these findings support the community effort hypothesis, several issues remain to be clarified. The existing evidence cannot tell us exactly how the causal mechanism works. As the vast majority of returnees and displaced say they have never heard of any formal organizations of the displaced, the formal NGOs do not seem to play a major role in this

process.<sup>19</sup> Informal coordination with neighbours appears to be much more significant. Arguably, the presence of many other returnees may help by recreating the pre-displacement social environment and sense of home. In addition, community return might trigger a sense of security, even in dangerous areas, due to the perception of safety in numbers.

Moreover, findings on the role of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and other court decisions on compensations have direct implications for the study of forced migration. Displaced persons are more likely to return (or contemplate return) if courts recognize their property rights and provide them with legal remedy and compensation. However, even within the same cases, there have been differential decisions on displaced persons and their rights (Paraskeva 2008; Rumelili *et al.* 2011), suggesting the limitations of legal mechanisms in supporting displaced persons or affecting return outcomes.

We cannot dismiss the possibility that a high level of returns in some neighbourhoods or villages is the result of higher levels of security in these areas (fewer guerrilla activities or state counter-insurgency operations, for example). Since we only have cross sectional data, we cannot tell whether improved local security leads to higher returns (as many people want to return to safe areas) or if high returns lead to an improved sense of security (as the sense of safety in numbers reduces fears of new violence). This dilemma could be resolved by local qualitative studies of the organization of returns and the processes of cooperation among neighbours in small geographic areas.

Lack of variables to measure the security concerns of the displaced and returnees correctly is the most significant limitation of our models. Nonetheless, perception of security is clearly a key factor in the return process. For example, when asked about the factors inhibiting their return, the displaced rank 'I would be worried about my safety' at 9.06 out of 10 and 'I would be worried about the safety of my family' at 9.23 out of 10.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, when asked about the factors that could persuade others to return, returnees rank 'improvements in security situation' at 9.66 out of 10.<sup>21</sup> As expected, security concerns top the list for both returnees and non-returnees. However, as the measurements indicate nearly universal extreme security concerns, there is so little variation in the security variable that it cannot be used as a predictor in multivariate models.

### **Conclusion: Your Children Aren't Coming but Your School Friends Might**

While many scholars have focused on ethnic cleansing (e.g. McGarry 1998; Carmichael 2002; Mann 2005), only a handful of academic studies have examined voluntary return (Vasileva 1992; Koinova 1999; Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005; Ibáñez and Moya 2010; Toal and Grono 2011). And among these, the general assumption is that forced migrations and displacements are irreversible once new demographic facts are established on the ground (e.g., Kaufmann 1996) with few scholars emphasizing successful cases of return

(Dahlman and Ó Tuathail 2005; Belloni 2008). Displacement and forced migration remain difficult challenges in many parts of the world. Millions of internally displaced, from Rwanda to Sri Lanka and Colombia, as well as generations of Palestinians across the Middle East remain in limbo, uncertain whether to opt for integration into a new environment (when permitted by the authorities) or wait for an opportunity to return to their ancestral lands (Ibáñez and Moya 2010; Haklai 2011; McDoom 2011). Meanwhile, the 2014 World Refugee Day was marked by another unfortunate record: global forced displacement topped 50 million for the first time since the period after the Second World War, driven mainly by wars across Turkey's borders in Syria and Iraq as well as Central Africa (UNHCR 2014a). As forced migration assumes unprecedented levels, giving a voice to those affected most by conflict is a necessary step in shaping future humanitarian missions.

This article challenges the common assumption, particularly among academics in the field, that displacement is irreversible (Zetter 1999; Adelman and Barkan 2011) by investigating Kurdish returns in Turkey. It highlights the importance of analysing the intentions of IDPs themselves, and it formulates and tests a set of hypotheses emphasizing the role of structural, integration, identity, and community variables in the return process.

Public policies seeking to reverse forced migration seldom consult the actual victims of displacement, but this should be a key consideration, especially in countries with problems in minority representation, such as Turkey (Yanik 2011; Aktürk 2012). Both policymakers and scholars have yet to take advantage of theoretically-informed survey findings on the needs of displaced persons (Ergil 2000; Ekmekci 2011; Levitt and Ciplak 2012). Despite their own limitations, surveys could provide important insights in channelling the appropriate resources for potential returnees. As the majority of the early returnees are likely to be older, the provision of good health care services might be a crucial support to early returnees. In particular, findings on the demographic and age profile of returnees could influence relative preferences and funding priorities for schools (for younger parents with children) or hospitals (for the elderly).

A notable finding of this article is the role of social capital as expressed in family and community ties. The importance of displaced persons' associations suggests the validity of the *community effort hypothesis* as an explanation of the decision to return or stay away. But our findings also suggest that social capital needs to be disaggregated to determine its effects. Contrary to our expectations, the most beneficial work in coordinated refugee returns seems to be done not by formal and permanent refugee NGOs, but by informal associations of neighbours. Community return strongly improves the chances of individual return, while increased trust in family makes return less likely. Finally, findings point to a potential inter-generational conflict in the family with regard to return, with the older generation wanting the family to return to the old 'home' and the younger generation seeing the current residence as the new one.

A number of scholars (Malkki 1995: 509; Jansen and Lofving 2009: 14; Koser and Black 1999: 3, 9) emphasize the need to acknowledge a multiplicity of refugee experiences, without assuming that all refugees necessarily see their pre-displacement place of origin as ‘home’, to which they want to return. The desire to help refugees to exercise their right to return should not cause us to turn that right into an obligation and voluntary returns into forced movement. Instead, researchers and policy makers should allow those who have suffered forced migration to choose whether they want to return and, if so, under what circumstances. The difficult but successful returns of the Kurds in Turkey can help us understand which refugees are most likely to want to return and what can be done to help them succeed.

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1. UNHCR describes voluntary repatriation as the ‘solution of choice for the largest number of refugees’ and highlights that ‘for millions of refugees around the world, going home remains the strongest hope of finding an end to exile’ UNHCR (2014b). The United Nations’ Pinheiro Principles also stipulate that ‘all refugees and displaced persons have the right to have restored to them any housing, land and/or property of which they were arbitrarily or unlawfully deprived, or to be compensated for any housing, land and/or property that is factually impossible to restore as determined by independent, impartial tribunal’ (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2005).
2. UNHCR (2013) defines protracted displacements as those involving 25,000 or more refugees for more than five years.
3. Adelman and Barkan (2011) are probably the strongest proponents of the ‘irreversibility thesis’ we challenge in this article. They emphatically argue that ‘the ideology and commitment to return conveys the notion of repatriation as a distant, impractical solution in the face of real desperation’ (2011: xvii).
4. For a discussion and critique of the ‘hierarchy’ across various durable solutions to displacement see Chimni (2004) and Souter (2014).
5. Although a figure of 30,000 deaths prevailed in both Turkish and international media, there is some ambiguity about exact numbers, ethnic origin, and political proclivity (PKK or Turkish state) of the casualties in this war; see Human Rights Watch (1995); Turkish Parliament Debates 27 June 1995; Kirişçi and Winrow (1997).

6. Much of the subsequent criticism focused not on its findings *per se* but on the lack of transparency. For instance, Kurban (2013: 349) argues that neither ‘Hacettepe University nor the Government has released the findings of the qualitative component of this research’. For other criticism, see Kurban *et al.* (2006: 17–20).
7. The Optimist Research and Support Services which conducted this survey is a regular member of the Turkish Research Association. Previous academic clients include Essex University (UK), Tilburg University (Netherlands), and Bogazici University (Turkey). See [optimistresearch.com](http://optimistresearch.com) (accessed 14 November 2013).
8. Unlike many other societies, the forced migration of Kurds in Turkey did not separate demographically rival communities into distinct territories (see Brubaker 1995; Belloni 2006; Bieber 2006; O’Leary 2007). On the contrary, displacement was part of the migration and urbanization movements of recent decades, leading to more ‘ethnic mixing’ as displaced Kurds found refuge in cities with almost exclusively ethnic Turkish populations.
9. See a list of elected MPs in the 24th period of the Turkish Grand National Assembly at [http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/milletvekillerimiz\\_sd.liste](http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/milletvekillerimiz_sd.liste) (accessed 14 November 2013).
10. To understand our data collection approach and put the survey findings in context, it is necessary to take into account the political sensitivities of the Kurdish issue in Turkey. In the past decade, the Turkish government and leaders of the ethnic Kurdish community have taken a series of steps aimed at permanently ending the violent conflict and improving the integration of the Kurdish minority in Turkey. At the same time, memories of the recent armed struggle and state counter-insurgency are fresh in many people’s minds; this heightens their safety concerns and influences their readiness to discuss the war years. Consequently, to reflect the concerns on the ground and to make data collection possible, we had to make a series of adjustments in our methods. For general security reasons, it was necessary to remove from the questionnaire some of the questions dealing with memories of war and inter-ethnic relations in Turkey.
11. As discussed below, the removal of some of the security-related variables reduced our ability to control for the impact of security concerns in multivariate analysis. Still, there was little variation in related questions, as almost everyone in the sample expressed concerns about security. Security was also reported to us as a major consideration in our interviews with political leaders, NGOs, and other experts working with the displaced in Turkey (interviews in Istanbul, Ankara, and Diyarbakir in June 2011 and April 2012).
12. These changes in government policies reflected the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) which recommended the introduction of effective domestic remedies within Turkey before IDPs could apply directly to the Court (Rumelili *et al.* 2011). Such decisions were not only common to Turkey with regards to the Kurds but also Cyprus (Paraskeva 2008) and the former Yugoslavia (Palko 2012). For a detailed account of the compensation law in Turkey, see Kurban *et al.* (2006: 33–34).
13. Among the respondents reporting ‘extremely poor’ level of fluency in Turkish, 81.2 per cent are returnees and 18.2 per cent are non-returnees. Conversely, among the respondents reporting ‘very good’ level of fluency in Turkish only 13.5 per cent are returnees and 86.5 per cent are non-returnees.



14. The average age of respondents reporting 'vague, indirect, or no memories' of their pre-conflict home is 33 years; the average age of respondents reporting 'moderate' or 'strong' memories is 49 years.
15. When asked about the factors which encourage them to return home, returnees rank 'other displaced persons from my village/neighbourhood returned' at 8.03 out of 10.
16. We tested whether membership in formal refugee associations raises the odds of return. However, the vast majority of respondents (more than 99 per cent of both returnees and non-returnees) are not aware that any such organizations even exist. Thus, we find no support for the argument that formal refugee associations create social capital that facilitates return.
17. Qualitative studies have also indicated the problem of education among the Kurds. For instance, in their interviews with Kurdish youth Başer and Çelik (2014) note that 'not only is the quality of schools in the region substandard, but many children do not remain in school, especially after completing primary school, either because their families cannot afford the education-related expenses or because they have to work in order to contribute to the family income.'
18. Authors' interviews in Istanbul, Ankara, and Diyarbakir in June 2011 and April 2012.
19. While this finding might reflect genuine lack of knowledge, it might also be influenced by respondents' safety concerns.
20. The scale of importance ranges from 1 to 10, with higher numbers meaning greater importance. We are reporting average scores for all displaced.
21. More specifically, 75.7 per cent of returnees assigned a ranking of 10/10 to the importance of security improvements for others to return.

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