Wilfried
Martens Centre
for European Studies

Can Syrians Return Home?

IN FOCUS

Challenges and Scenarios

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Summary

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 marked a pivotal moment in Syria's history, opening doors to political change and the possible return of millions of displaced Syrians. Out of the 12 million displaced, approximately 2.8 million have so far returned to their areas of origin.[1]

Clashes between the Druze and Bedouin tribes in July 2025, alongside attacks on Christians in June 2025, the state's failure to prevent them, Turkish and Israeli interventions, and remnants of the former regime, will make the return of refugees and displaced persons more difficult and once again place the future of Syria and its refugees at risk.

Ongoing economic collapse, damaged infrastructure, legal uncertainty over property and weak institutions complicate repatriation. The main host countries, Lebanon, Türkiye and Jordan, are tightening refugee policies and reporting higher numbers of returns, some voluntary and others occurring amid increasing pressure or deteriorating conditions. These developments have prompted growing concern among humanitarian actors about the voluntariness and sustainability of such returns. Even after the regime's fall, mistrust, security concerns and fears of exclusion or renewed violence remain among all religious groups that are commonly referred to as minorities and displaced people and prevent them from returning home.

[1] UN, 'Syria: Return of Millions Brings Hope but Challenges Remain' (24 September 2025), accessed at https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/09/1165945 on 14 October 2025.

The brief presents three possible return scenarios: a democratic transition, an uneven transition and renewed repression. It highlights the roles of Syrian authorities, host countries, regional actors, the UN, the Arab League and the EU. It urges a coordinated, rights-based approach to refugee return focused on justice, security, legal reform, economic recovery and cooperation.[2]

Keywords Syria – Refugees – Displaced – Assad regime – Host countries – Return – EU

The situation in Syria in the post-Assad regime era

Since the outbreak of conflict in 2011, over 12 million Syrians, more than half the pre-war population, have been displaced by force.[3] Of these, more than 7 million are internally displaced people (IDPs), while approximately 5.5 million have sought refuge abroad. Neighbouring countries have borne the brunt of this crisis: Türkiye hosts the largest Syrian refugee population in the world, while Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt have also absorbed substantial numbers under immense political and economic strain. In Europe, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Austria and Cyprus are homes to sizable Syrian diaspora communities.

The international community has long grappled with the question of when and how Syrian refugees might return. Before Assad's regime fell, safe return was nearly impossible due to state repression, forced conscription, arbitrary detention and a lack of legal guarantees or infrastructure. With Assad's regime gone, hope has returned, but so too have new dilemmas. The political situation inside Syria remains precarious. Though regime-era repression has lifted in some areas, the interim[4] authorities have yet to demonstrate inclusive governance or a clear roadmap for a transition to democracy. And nor have they established the rule of law under which inclusive citizenship prevails. Armed factions, local militias and external

[2] I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Chelsea Nshuti.

[3] UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees), 'Syria Regional Refugee Response' (updated 11 September 2025), accessed at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria on 22 September 2025.

[4] The label 'interim' in current reports comes from UNHCR, international media and NGOs referring to the situation as a 'transitional phase' or 'interim governance'.

actors, many aligned with conflicting interests, still dominate large parts of the country, undermining the credibility and capacity of the transitional government in Damascus.

Moreover, the destruction wrought by years of war is immense. Critical infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, water systems and housing remains either damaged or destroyed in many regions. Legal uncertainties regarding property ownership, civil documentation and land tenure continue to pose serious obstacles to return and reintegration. Meanwhile, the psychosocial trauma of displacement, shaped by years of fear, instability and often discrimination in exile, remains a hidden yet critical barrier.

The host countries in Syria's neighbourhood, too, are approaching a breaking point. Lebanon, already politically fragile and economically paralysed, continues to host the highest number of refugees per capita in the world—Syrians make up nearly one in four residents. Türkiye, Jordan and Iraq all face rising domestic pressure to reduce the presence of Syrian refugees. This often leads to restrictive policies, limited access to legal residency and growing rhetoric linking refugees to national instability. In Europe, polarisation over migration is intensifying as governments weigh integration fatigue against the uncertain feasibility of safe repatriation. The rise of identity politics points to a political, cultural, societal and even religious confrontation over the issues of asylum and migration.

Table 1 Distribution of Syrian refugees by country

Türkiye	2,453,000[a]	2 October 2025
Lebanon	635,000	30 September 2025
Jordan	447,000	30 September 2025
Iraq	304,000	30 September 2025
Egypt	123,000	30 September 2025
Germany	788,000 (752,000 refugees and 63,000 asylum seekers)	End 2024
Austria	128,000 (105,000 refugees and 13,000 asylum seekers)	End 2024
Sweden	27,000 (26,000 refugees and 1,000 asylum seekers)	End 2024
Netherlands	86,000 (71,000 refugees and 15,000 asylum seekers)	End 2024
Cyprus	29,000 (15,000 refugees and 14,000 asylum seekers)	End 2024

Sources: UNHCR (UN High Commissioner for Refugees), 'Syria Regional Refugee Response' (updated 2 October 2025), accessed at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria on 14 October 2025 (rows 1–5); UNHCR, 'Refugee Data Finder', accessed at https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download on 14 October 2025 (rows 6–10).

Note: The figure cited for Lebanon refers to refugees registered with UNHCR. The government estimates that there are 1.1 million Syrians in Lebanon.

[a] Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Despite these challenges, the return of refugees and displaced persons has got underway. Since December 2024 over 2.8 million Syrians—1.8 million IDPs and 1 million international refugees[5]—have returned to their areas of origin. However, these returns vary greatly in terms of context, voluntariness and sustainability. Some have been motivated by the symbolic end of regime tyranny and a desire to participate in rebuilding Syria. Others have returned under pressure, due to deteriorating conditions in host countries, loss of legal status or fear of deportation. In many cases these returns occur in the absence of meaningful guarantees of safety, justice or restitution.

[5] UN, 'Syria: Return of Millions Brings Hope'.

New government and the economy

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 ended one of Syria's most repressive chapters. While it opened the door to potential transformation and return, the immediate aftermath has been marked by fragility, institutional breakdown and unresolved sectarian tensions.

President Ahmad al-Shara's interim government came to power with high expectations but quickly drew criticism for a lack of inclusivity and transparency. Although formally established through a National Dialogue and Constitutional Declaration, it is dominated by actors linked to Islamist factions such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, sidelining all other religious communities. These groups are commonly referred to as 'minorities' and include the Alawis, Christians, the Druze and secular actors.

Security has improved in major cities such as Damascus and Homs, as regime-era checkpoints and arrests have disappeared. Yet much of Syria remains under the control of militias and foreign-backed groups. In the north-east, the Syrian Democratic Forces hold sway; in the northwest, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham dominates. The coastal insurgency,[6] the clashes in Sweida and the subsequent government crackdown have highlighted the dangers of sectarian reprisals. Despite local improvements, the overall security environment remains fragmented and fragile.

Syria's economy is in collapse. War, years-long sanctions and corruption have triggered widespread poverty and unemployment. While some sanctions were lifted post-Assad, reconstruction is hindered by the lack of a stable political framework.

The divide-and-rule policies of Assad's regime left deep social scars. With the fall of the regime, many Syrians hoped for national reconciliation, but exclusionary politics and sectarian violence, especially the coastal attacks, have instead fuelled new fears. While Sunni communities report increased optimism, Alawis, Christians and the Druze remain cautious. Dominated by Islamist and rural factions, the interim government lacks legitimacy and inclusiveness; it has alienated secular, urban

[6] That is, sectarian violence in Syria's Latakia and Tartus provinces in March 2025, following the fall of the Assad regime. The violence, which killed around 1,400 people and may have included war crimes, erupted after regime loyalists attacked interim government forces. In response, government forces and affiliated groups targeted and killed hundreds of civilians, mostly Alawites, the sect historically dominant under Assad.

and minority communities. A national election held in October 2025 did little to alter these developments. A complex system of indirect voting by regional electoral colleges filled two-thirds of the parliament, with the rest appointed directly by the president.

IDPs in Syria

The Syrian conflict has triggered one of the largest displacement crises in modern history. Over 12 million Syrians, more than half the pre-war population, have been displaced, roughly 7 million internally and 5.5 million across neighbouring countries and Europe. As Syria transitions post-Assad, the legal status, distribution and living conditions of these populations are critical to understanding return prospects.

As of August 2025, some 7.4 million people remained displaced within Syria.[7] While some have returned post-Assad, many still live in overcrowded camps or damaged housing with limited services, especially in Idlib and Aleppo. Groups such as Alawis, Christians and the Druze fear reprisals in areas dominated by factions linked to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Camps near the Turkish border have become semi-permanent, with poor access to water, healthcare and education. Lack of documentation further hinders rights and return.

Table 2 Internal displacement and return figures as of August 2025

Category	Number
IDPs	7.4 million
IDPs returned to origin	1.7 million
Refugees returned from abroad	850,000

Source: UNHCR, Syria Governorates IDPs and IDP Returnees Overview (rows 1 and 2); UNHCR, 'UNHCR Syria Operational Update, August 2025' (18 September 2025), accessed at https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/unhcr-syria-operational-update-august-2025 on 14 October 2025 (row 3).

[7] UNHCR, 'Syria Governorates IDPs and IDP Returnees Overview' (As of 14 August 2025)' (18 August 2025), accessed at https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/118123 on 14 October 2025.

Syrian refugees abroad

Türkiye hosts over 2.4 million registered Syrians, according to current UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) figures.[8] According to official Turkish data, in August 2025 the number of Syrian refugees in the country had dropped from as many as 3.5 million to just over 2.5 million due to voluntary returns,[9] mostly in 2025.

While initially welcoming, public sentiment has turned hostile due to economic pressures. Legal restrictions have tightened, with rising deportations and limited residency renewals. Although 150,000–200,000 Syrians have acquired citizenship, most face increasing uncertainty. Although no authoritative source (UNHCR or the EU) has documented systematic forced returns of refugees from the neighbouring countries to Syria, the tightening of policies in the countries of reception has created conditions that may indirectly pressure refugees to return. UNHCR's position remains firm: returns should not be forced at this stage. Human Rights Watch, in contexts such as returns from Lebanon, has reported that returnees face real dangers such as arbitrary arrest, torture, enforced disappearance and death after returning.[10]

Lebanon hosts around 1.1 million Syrians, including 635,000 who are registered with UNHCR.[11] Lacking formal refugee status, most live below the poverty line, depend on aid and face employment restrictions. The March 2025 violence in Syria's coastal regions sent 36,000 Alawi, Christian and Druze refugees into the Lebanese area of Akkar, where they encountered a hostile and fragile environment. Since December 2024, 120,000 *newly displaced* Syrians have arrived in Lebanon.[12]

8 UNHCR, 'Syria Regional Refugee Response, Türkiye' (updated 2 October 2025), accessed at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/113 on 14 October 2025.

9 *Turkish Minute*, 'Turkey Says Syrian Refugee Population Drops to 2.5 Million Amid Rising Returns to Post-Assad Syria', 30 August 2025, accessed at https://www.turkishminute.com/2025/08/30/turkey-says-syrian-refugee-population-drops-to-2-5-million-amid-rising-returns-to-post-assad-syria/ on 14 October.

10 J.-N. Beuze, 'EU Countries Must Not Force Syrian Refugees to Return Amid Ongoing Instability', *European Economic and Social Committee* (13 January 2025), accessed at https://www.eesc.europa.eu/en/news-media/eesc-info/eesc-info-january-2025/articles/126028 on 29 September 2025.

11 UNHCR, 'Syria Regional Refugee Response, Lebanon' (updated 2 October 2025), accessed at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71 on 14 October 2025.

12 Ibid.

Jordan hosts about 447,000 Syrian refugees,[13] mainly in urban centres and camps such as Za'atari. While the situation is more stable than in Lebanon, economic pressures are rising. Refugees can work in designated sectors but face barriers and high dropout rates in education.

Iraq hosts some 304,000 Syrians.[14] They are mostly Kurds residing in Iraqi Kurdistan. Iraq offers better access to services and mobility, but return is impeded by instability in Iraq and fear of marginalisation or forced conscription in zones influenced by Türkiye or the Syrian Democratic Forces.

Egypt hosts at least 123,000 registered Syrians.[15] Early arrivals were often integrated through businesses and schools, but recent arrivals face legal and economic obstacles. Residency renewal is difficult, and economic decline has worsened refugees' living conditions. Despite better movement and education access, formal employment remains elusive.

About 1.4 million Syrians have resettled in *Europe*,[16] with Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands and Austria hosting the largest numbers. Legal protection is stronger, but integration is uneven. Language, cultural gaps and rising far-right sentiment among Europeans hinder inclusion. Some Syrians return voluntarily for personal reasons, but many, especially those with families, prefer to remain, despite persistent feelings of alienation or racism. By October 2025, Austria, following court approvals,[17] had forcibly deported three Syrian criminals.[18] Several EU member states, including the Netherlands and Germany, are offering lump-sum payments to incentivise Syrians to return.[19]

Syrian displacement is marked by diverse conditions across the host countries. While the fall of Assad's regime offers new possibilities, struc-

13 UNHCR, 'Syria Regional Refugee Response, Jordan' (updated 30 September 2025), accessed at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/36 on 14 October 2025.

14 UNHCR, 'Syria Regional Refugee Response, Iraq' (updated 30 September 2025), accessed at https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/14201 on 14 October 2025.

15 Ibid.

16 J. Vignon, 'The Hasty Return of Syrian Refugees Would Not Serve European Interests', *Institute Jean-Jacques Delors* (17 December 2024), accessed at https://institutdelors.eu/en/publications/the-hasty-return-of-syrian-refugees-would-not-serve-european-interests/ on 29 September 2025.

17 H. Kriwak, 'European Rights Court Sides With Austria on Deporting 19-Year Old Syrian, *EU Observer*, 25 September 2025, accessed at https://euobserver.com/eu-and-the-world/arf312ad55 on 25 October 2025.

18 This is according to interior minister Gerhard Karner speaking at the International Centre for Migration Policy Development, Vienna Migration Conference, 21 October 2025.

19 Syria Justice and Accountability Center, 'Conditions for Safe and Dignified Voluntary Return Currently Absent in Syria', 11 September 2025, accessed at https://syriaaccountability.org/conditions-for-safe-and-dignified-voluntary-return-currently-absent-in-syria/ on 25 October 2025.

tural barriers and poor conditions in exile continue to shape people's decisions regarding return.

The possibility of return for displaced Syrians and refugees

The collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 sparked cautious optimism among displaced Syrians. Yet, the decision to return remains complex, shaped by security, legal status, infrastructure, trust and the conditions in the host countries. Still, Syrian citizens, both internally and internationally displaced, keep returning to areas of their former residence or at least to the country. From the almost three million people who have returned to the areas where they used to live, most cite the fall of Assad's regime as motivation, and not improvements in services or the economy. Return patterns vary. Urban areas such as Homs and parts of Damascus have seen more returns, while coastal and Islamist-controlled regions continue to be avoided.

Table 3 Refugee return by host countries

Host country	Number of refugees voluntarily returned	As of
Türkiye	412,000[a]	14 August 2025
Jordan	138,000	16 August 2025
Lebanon	26,000	20 August 2025
Iraq	5,000	7 August 2025
Cyprus	1,000	February 2025

Sources: UNHCR, 'Regional Flash Update #41: Syria Situation Crisis' (22 August 2025), accessed at https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/regional-flash-update-41-syria-situation-crisis on 14 October 2025 (rows 1–4); *Statewatch*, '€1,500 and a One-Way Ticket: How Cyprus Deports Syrian Refugees With EU Support' (17 February 2025), accessed at https://www.statewatch.org/news/2025/february/1-500-and-a-one-way-ticket-how-cyprus-deports-syrian-refugees-with-eu-support/ on 14 October 2025 (row 5).

[a] Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Etana[20] surveys show that 76% of Syrians abroad consider Syria unsafe, especially women, non-dominant religious populations and former political dissidents. Housing remains a major barrier: 45% of returnees find their homes destroyed, and 7% report severe damage or looting. Many lack property documents, these having been lost during flight or withheld by the regime. Without legal clarity or restitution, rebuilding becomes nearly impossible.

A growing number of Syrians are exploring the option of emigrating elsewhere. Educated youth and the groups that are referred to as minorities, in particular, fear both returning to Syria and remaining in hostile host states. A 2025 survey showed that 60% of respondents residing in the coastal communities (mostly Alawi) were considering emigration.[21]

Return is not simply a logistical or symbolic question: it is a test of Syria's transformation. While the fall of Assad's regime opened up new space, return remains constrained by insecurity, economic collapse and weak institutions.

The return of refugees to Syria should be prioritised, as it is tied to the future of the Syrian state's very identity. This issue is closely connected to the need to reshape all aspects of Syria's pluralistic social fabric. From this perspective it is important to note that the non-return of these refugees, whether forcible or voluntary, carries the dual risks of, first, fragmenting Syria's historical identity and, second, deepening the state of displacement and embedding it in the Syrian collective memory.

The return of Syrian refugees is not merely a practical matter: it has a deeply sociological and structural dimension within Syria's collective memory. This is a particularly important factor in terms of reunification and the contribution of returnees to building a new Syria—one founded on the values of freedom, democracy, pluralism, meritocracy, accountability, good governance, justice and citizenship.

[20] Etana, *Refugee Returns & Migration Dynamics After Assad* (December 2024), accessed at https://etanasyria.org/study-refugee-returns-migration-dynamics-after-assad-2/ on 29 September 2025. Etana is an independent organisation authentically linked to the Syrian social fabric while reaching to the highest political levels; it serves as a civil and diplomatic service for Syrians who want to live with freedom, dignity and justice.

[21] Ibid., p. 27.

Obstacles to and challenges facing the return of Syrian refugees and displaced persons in the post-Assad era

The fall of Assad's regime raised hopes for return, but realities on the ground continue to discourage large-scale, sustainable repatriation. Many areas lack state authority, exposing returnees to criminal groups, informal checkpoints and renewed violence. Lack of legal documentation—including identification papers, school records, and birth and marriage certificates—prevents returnees from reclaiming property, accessing services or securing employment.

One critical obstacle centres on housing, land and property rights.[22] Many returnees find their homes destroyed or occupied and lack documentation. No restitution mechanism is in place. Civil status documents, also lost or withheld during displacement, remain essential but inaccessible.

Best-case scenario: coordinated transition and inclusive return

In this scenario a civilian-led transitional government implements democratic reforms and power-sharing. A new constitution has been adopted, and national reconciliation includes transitional justice, victim compensation and property restitution. Infrastructure is rebuilt, and return becomes voluntary, safe and rights-based.

This scenario requires the Syrian government to undertake careful planning—first, in terms of communication and collaboration with the refugee community itself; second, with the host states; and third, with UN agencies and programmes. Careful planning begins with completing a

[22] UNHCR, *Housing, Land and Property Rights in Post-Conflict Societies: Proposals for their Integration Into UN Policy and Operational Frameworks Expert Meeting 10 and 11 November 2004 – Geneva* (February 2005), accessed at https://www.refworld.org/reference/confdoc/unhcr/2005/en/31168 on 28 October 2025.

comprehensive survey of those who wish to return and launching a process to prepare the appropriate conditions for them—not only at the level of providing basic services but also in terms of social, educational and professional reintegration. This, however, requires a vision and resources whose availability remains unclear up to this moment.

Stakeholder roles

- The *Syrian transitional government* ensures inclusion, transitional justice and public services.
- The *League of Arab States* coordinates regional support and reintegration.
- The *UN* oversees return conditions, reconciliation and humanitarian aid.
- *Host countries* shift to coordinated voluntary return policies.
- *Civil society and religious institutions* foster reconciliation and reintegration.
- *International and other non-governmental organisations (INGOs and NGOs)* provide legal aid, housing, education and trauma support.
- The *EU* supports the transition to democracy, funds reconstruction and ensures protection standards.

Worst-case scenario: fragmentation, repression and renewed displacement

The interim government collapses or turns authoritarian. Militias and warlords consolidate power. Sectarian violence escalates, especially against non-dominant groups. Host countries compel forced returns. Aid declines amid chaos.

Hence, the continued suspension of the constitution could trigger sectarian and denominational tensions, due to, first, the absence of a democratic framework based on citizenship and, second, the entrenchment of single-opinion rule, which makes exclusion an inevitable reality. Both di-

mensions undermine the option of refugee return. By contrast, the building of institutions would allow for broader democratic participation. And it would make the Syrian refugees who have returned, as well as those yet to return, a fundamental component of the building of a modern Syria.

Stakeholder roles

- The *Syrian transitional government* rules by force, suppresses opposition and obstructs refugee return.
- The *League of Arab States* provides only a fragmented response, with minimal coordination.
- The *UN* becomes marginalised, with limited access.
- *Host countries* force returns and restrict aid.
- *Civil society and religious institutions* are repressed or exiled, or become polarised or sidelined.
- *INGOs and NGOs* operate in emergency mode with minimal access. Aid efforts focus on survival, not reintegration.
- The *EU* withdraws support, reinstates sanctions and focuses on border control.

The most realistic scenario: an uneven transition, patchy returns and conditional progress

A fragile transitional government remains in place. Some regions stabilise and welcome returns, while others remain unsafe. Returns continue slowly, often driven by host-country pressure rather than attractive conditions in Syria. Infrastructure is partially restored, but legal and institutional reforms lag.

A gradual return cannot be sustained unless the Syrian transitional government, together with its allies in the Arab world and the international

community, invests in a systematic reconstruction plan. This plan must create job opportunities and restore the educational dimension. It needs to ensure that new generations are raised which can bring about a shift towards shaping a new Syrian identity based on the values of freedom, democracy, pluralism and social justice. This, in turn, requires a phase founded on transitional justice.

Stakeholder roles

- *Syrian transitional authorities* implement limited reforms, and governance remains weak.
- The *League of Arab States* gradually re-engages.
- The *UN* supports returns where safe, and monitors rights.
- *Host countries* maintain pressure while coordinating returns.
- *Civil society and religious institutions* operate in semi-permissive environments, support reintegration and facilitate localised reconciliation.
- *INGOs and NGOs* provide basic services and advocate for protections.
- The *EU* funds recovery zones, strengthens civil society and monitors returns via the Peaceful Transition Support Mechanism.

General policy recommendations

The collapse of Assad's regime presents a rare chance to reimagine Syria's post-conflict future and resolve one of the longest displacement crises. However, this opportunity demands more than symbolic acts: it requires bold, coordinated, rights-based policies across national, host-country, regional and international levels to ensure safe, voluntary returns. Without these policies in place, return momentum may fade, risking renewed trauma and displacement. Any return framework must address the distinct vulnerabilities and needs of each group, while preserving Syria's social fabric and identity.

At the national level, Syria's transitional government must build inclusive governance, represent all communities and enshrine political pluralism in a new constitution developed with civil society and international oversight. Legal and judicial reforms are crucial, including a unified mechanism for resolving property disputes, the transparent re-issuance of civil documents—especially for vulnerable groups—and a transitional justice commission to document war crimes and ensure accountability.

Security reform is essential: militias must be dismantled and replaced by a professional, civilian-controlled force reflecting Syria's diversity. Infrastructure reconstruction, especially in early-return areas, should prioritise housing, healthcare, electricity and education. Employment programmes targeting women and youth must be launched with private and NGO partners. Engagement with the diaspora population through consular and liaison offices is key to aligning return policies with people's needs.

At the national level, what is required is an initiative from the Syrian elites to launch an open dialogue on five decades of undemocratic rule, poor governance, lack of human security, the dominance of fear and militarisation. This entails the construction of a comprehensive narrative of truth-telling, accountability and national reconciliation.

Host countries such as Lebanon, Türkiye, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt share responsibility for safe returns. They must abandon restrictive refugee policies in favour of rights-based approaches, uphold the principle of non-refoulement, ensure returns are voluntary and safe, and extend legal protections and economic integration to refugees. Regional cooperation through multilateral forums could help depoliticise returns and reduce social tensions.

The Arab League and its members should lead Syria's reintegration by convening a pan-Arab conference on reconciliation, transitional justice and return strategies, and by establishing an Arab-led reconstruction fund. Religious and cultural institutions should support reconciliation and combat sectarianism through dialogue and moral leadership. The League could also mediate cross-border protection agreements to safeguard refugee rights.

The host countries have a responsibility to contribute constructively to Syria's future by adopting a policy of good neighbourliness, pursuing economic integration and exchanging expertise, as well as by helping to

restore the shared collective memory. These steps are particularly important because the memories shared by these countries and Syria have long been marked by wounds and disputes.

International actors—including the UN, the US and the EU, donors and INGOs—must go beyond rhetoric to anchor returns in peacebuilding and governance reforms, with independent monitoring to ensure rights are upheld. Economic recovery requires substantial funding that is tied to inclusivity and transparency, supporting civil society organisations focused on return monitoring, legal aid, women's empowerment and the protection of civic space.

The return of Syrian refugees and IDPs is a profound moral and political test, requiring fundamental changes in Syria, coordinated Arab and international support, and shared responsibility. It must restore dignity, citizenship and justice rather than perpetuate harm. Managed with integrity, the return of its people could be a transformative moment for Syria and the region, affirming that rebuilding and reconciliation are possible even after devastating collapse.

To date the international community has not demonstrated that it has the capacity to accelerate stability in Syria. Doing so would require serious initiative, and the EU may be the most able to act in this regard, given the geographical and sociological interconnections, not to mention shared interests. The stability of Syria is crucial for regional and international peace.

Recommendations for the EU

The EU, together with its member states, constitutes the political platform most capable of supporting the transitional phase in Syria. This applies not only to providing resources to aid reconstruction and to support the return of refugees but also to investing in the human dimension to help build a new leadership structure for Syria. This new leadership must be grounded in shared values after decades of dictatorship and the destruction of both the Syrian identity and the Syrian people.

Through its policy of dialogue, as well as its cooperation frameworks among the Mediterranean countries and, in particular, the neighbourhood policy, the EU could generate innovative political, social, educational and

legal options for Syrian society. This is especially true since a large segment of the refugees who may return to Syria will have spent more than 10 years in Europe, which could contribute to a positive cultural exchange.

The EU holds unique leverage as a principled, rights-based actor. It can

- promote political transition through conditional support and institution building;
- fund reconciliation and justice frameworks;
- ensure safe, voluntary return via independent monitoring and housing and infrastructure programmes;
- support host countries with education, jobs and legal protection for refugees; and
- push against border externalisation and forced returns, advocating dignity-based mobility.

Return scenarios will not unfold uniformly. The mixed conditions across Syria and the host states will produce overlapping realities. Together with Syrian, regional and international actors, the EU must work to ensure that the return becomes a process of national restoration, not renewed displacement.

The EU should act as a diplomatic bridge, coordinating reconciliation frameworks and voluntary return protocols, and providing legal alternatives to return, such as labour mobility and family reunification. Returning must align with global refugee frameworks such as the Global Compact, being characterised by responsibility-sharing and equitable resettlement.

About the author

Ziad El Sayegh holds a Ph.D. in Public Diplomacy and International Relations, with advanced studies in philosophy and theology, mediation, refugees, labour policies and social protection. He is the Executive Director of the Civic Influence Hub and has been a Senior International Fellow at the American University of Beirut's Asfari Institute since 2024. He has published extensively on public policy, migration, national security and citizenship.

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