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Syrian Refugee Returns: What Policy Must Do

The German debate on swift returns of Syrian refugees is at odds with empirical evidence and Germany's efforts to protect and integrate them. Evidence shows that premature return to insecure environments often leads to renewed displacement, undermining long-term development and stability goals in both host and origin countries.

Recommendations

1. Allow refugees to travel to Syria to prepare for their return

Many Syrian refugees in Germany want to visit their former homes or relatives but face legal risks. Some have always planned to return but need concrete information about conditions and how to better prepare. Allowing short-term visits without jeopardising their protected status in Germany could help them make informed decisions about returning.

2. Provide targeted support to those who may need or wish to return soon

Return counselling should provide realistic risk assessments and, for now, discourage return if legal alternatives exist. In the fragile context of Syria, the impact of return assistance may be negligible due to ongoing insecurity and weak institutions. A sustainable approach requires targeted vocational training and job placement to support (re)integration and cooperation with Syrian authorities.

3. Prioritise transitional support to foster conditions for sustainable return

To create conditions conducive to return, Syria's institutional weaknesses must be overcome. Germany should lead a meaningful and informed debate on the feasibility and timing of returns. This includes drawing on international experience and collaborating with UN agencies to address immediate needs and support long-term stability in Syria, as well as preparing Syrian institutions to receive returnees.

4. Harness the potential of the Syrian diaspora through enhanced integration efforts

Germany should harness the potential of the Syrian diaspora for Syria's reconstruction by supporting key initiatives and strengthening capacity. Integration efforts have equipped Syrians with new skills, enabling them to contribute to German and Syrian society. Promoting the exchange of skills and investment, particularly in small and medium-sized enterprises, can aid returnees' reintegration and Syria's rebuilding, in line with stabilisation goals through inclusive policies and collaboration with diaspora organisations.

Background

Recent developments following the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024 have brought the protection status of Syrian refugees in Europe and their prospect of a return to the forefront of policy debates. According to UNHCR, 5.2 million Syrian refugees are currently registered in neighbouring countries (UNHCR, 2024a). There are more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Europe, including about one million in Germany. Despite a decline in large-scale violence, Syria remains a fragile state, characterised by widespread mistrust of the governing authorities, ongoing internal conflicts and a high dependency on humanitarian assistance (Dinçer & Şahin-Mencütek, 2025). The premature return of refugees risks exacerbating the situation, especially in the face of serious challenges such as food insecurity, high inflation, demographic shifts and territorial disputes, as well as safety risks. For families with children born in exile, reintegration is particularly difficult and requires long-term planning and preparation. Claims like these have a divisive effect, spreading fear and uncertainty among Syrians currently living in Germany. They also portray the asylum system as an obstacle to swift political action rather than a legitimate instrument providing much-needed protection and legal safeguards.

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Within hours of Assad's ousting from Damascus, German politicians were making claims, widely reported in the media, that Germany would incentivise and eventually enforce returns to Syria. The German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees announced that all pending asylum applications filed by Syrians would be put on hold, a move that other EU countries are following.

This debate does not reflect the findings of research and lessons learned from past repatriation experiences, especially as it eclipses the need for a development-oriented and human rights-based stabilisation of Syria.

While the debate has intensified in the run-up to the federal elections in February 2025, it is far from new. Mainly conservative and more populist parties consider return as a necessity for social cohesion and/or a solution to economic pressures or national security concerns. In response, voices from the (former) governing coalition as well as civil society, warn against the risks of immediate returns, underlining the unpredictable (in)security situation in Syria.

This debate does not reflect the findings of research and lessons learned from past repatriation experiences, especially as it eclipses the need for a development-oriented and human rights-based stabilisation of Syria. Political calls for more, faster or stricter returns—often used for short-term electoral gains—ignore the legal frameworks governing the revocation of protection status and undermine trust in institutions. Meanwhile, growing populist support and anti-Arab rhetoric undermine the Syrian diaspora's sense of integration and belonging in Germany. Ensuring transparency and upholding the rule of law are fundamental principles that must guide return policies.

1 Allow refugees to travel to Syria and prepare for their return

The German government's recent proposal to allow Syrian refugees to temporarily return to Syria without losing their protection status in Germany is a step in the right direction. Flexible residence models that allow Syrians to realistically assess reintegration opportunities on the ground create the possibility for a well-planned and sustainable return.

Many Syrians want to return to Syria (UNHCR, 2024b). What varies are their intentions and prospects for return and reintegration. Research on return aspirations shows that individual characteristics such as ethnic and religious affiliations, as well as gender, age, education and life-cycle stage, can shape their post-return experiences and influence people's desire to return. Return prospects also vary widely between government-controlled and other parts of the country.

Currently, the largest group of people who cross the border (often abandoning the possibility of returning) are those whose lives in exile have denied them integration, dignity and the prospect of realising their life aspirations. Returning safely to a region still marked by high levels of insecurity requires having ties to controlling groups or networks. For those without such links, the prospects of returning safely are minimal. Research shows that two main conditions facilitate sustainable return and help returnees to play a positive role in reconstruction efforts: the return preparedness of individuals and the availability of resources, services and livelihood options in the home country.

Allowing Syrians in Germany to visit their homeland for a limited period of time without jeopardising their residence status could help them to better prepare for a potential return.

Return preparedness consists of a genuine desire to return (not a result of external pressure) and the mobilisation of material and immaterial resources for one's return. A high level of integration in the destination country puts migrants in a better position to return sustainably. Those who have not had the opportunity to integrate and who may face removal orders due to their insecure legal status are much less prepared to become agents of development and peaceful transition and may even become a burden on their families upon their return.

Many members of the Syrian refugee community in Germany express a strong desire to visit their countries after several years of not being able to do so. Allowing Syrians in Germany to visit their homeland for a limited period of time without jeopardising their residence status could help them to better prepare for a potential return. Such visits would provide refugees with first-hand information about the realities on the ground, enabling them to make informed and voluntary decisions about their future. These visits would also allow them to support their families and contribute to reconstruction efforts. Individuals who have made significant efforts to prepare for their return—such as saving money and acquiring valuable skills—face the risk of losing their investments if they are forced to return before conditions allow them to make use of their resources and expertise. Currently, Turkey allows each Syrian family to send one member for up to three visits until July. There are precedents for such initiatives; for instance, UNHCR facilitated "go-and-see" visits for displaced Sudanese in 2005 and Kenyans in 2008

2 Provide targeted support for those who may need or wish to return soon

Germany should draw on its extensive experience of the potential and limitations of return counselling and assistance. Return counselling should be honest about the risks and uncertainties in Syria and—at this point—discourage return if there is a legal alternative, such as a work or student visa or a visa to pursue vocational training.

Return assistance can help people to bridge the first, often difficult, phase after return (Schmitt et al., 2019). If returnees have the prerequisites and additional resources for this phase, return assistance can, in stable contexts, help them to establish long-term livelihoods. However, reports find little evidence that return assistance influences the reintegration process (EU-IOM, 2021). Instead, they point to the stronger influence of individual, social and contextual factors (Şahin-Mencütek, 2023). Contextual conditions such as ongoing violence and insecurity, weak institutions, institutions in transition, a weak economy and a lack of infrastructure a) cannot be addressed by return assistance and b) can easily negate individual reintegration efforts. Returning now would force people to spend their savings without any long-term effect.

Supporting refugees in realising their life goals increases their integration prospects and the likelihood of a successful, self-determined return in the future.

Where there is no foreseeable alternative to return, return assistance should be targeted and comprehensive, exploring additional options, such as investing in vocational training programmes (with a transnational dimension), setting up job placement programmes and tailoring training to local job openings and supporting language learning for young people where deemed beneficial. Notably, 12 per cent of Syrians with protection status in Germany were born there, and one-fifth of all people with a Syrian migrant background are currently in education in Germany (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2024). Supporting refugees in realising their life goals increases their integration prospects and the likelihood of a successful, self-determined return in the future.

3 Prioritise transitional support to create conditions for sustainable return

While the end of Assad's rule may symbolise freedom for those who have faced decades of oppression, it does not automatically translate into a safe or stable environment.

Syria's future trajectory in the post-Assad era remains uncertain. The presence of armed groups, widespread economic and physical devastation, and ongoing security concerns continue to pose a risk to returning refugees. This unpredictability significantly compounds the risk of direct violence against various identity-based or religious groups (minorities). This risk may stem from specific power struggles or from a broader inability to establish the rule of law in a transitional context. Such an environment is often conducive to impunity, further undermining the prospects for stability and reconciliation in the post-Assad era.

It is expected that the implementation of the lengthy processes of institution-building, reform and infrastructure development in Syria will not be evenly distributed. Livelihood opportunities, sources of income and access to public services are likely to remain concentrated in the capital and a few major cities, leaving many regions neglected and underserved. This imbalance risks exacerbating existing inequalities

and could trigger renewed internal and international displacement. Without comprehensive long-term investment in reconstruction, reconciliation and responsible migration governance, returns could ultimately be temporary and precarious.

Recognising these challenges, the German government recently announced its commitment to support the rebuilding of Syria's health system. This initiative underscores Germany's commitment to rebuilding critical infrastructure—investments that are essential to stabilising the country and creating conditions conducive to sustainable returns. Observations on the ground indicate that immediate support is also urgently needed for energy (electricity) and communications infrastructure. In this context, German development assistance can be strategically combined with diaspora resources, such as remittances and private investment, as well as the transfer of skills and expertise, to maximise impact.

Furthermore, UNHCR, with its mandate to mobilise and allocate resources for repatriation and reintegration programmes, may play a pivotal role in coordinating international and non-governmental organisation (NGO) efforts. It is essential to address both short- and long-term needs to rehabilitate key public service infrastructure, including the health, education and employment sectors. Transparent and inclusive planning processes involving government agencies and NGOs are crucial to ensuring the successful reintegration of returnees and fostering long-term stability.

It is essential to promote a more meaningful and informed debate on the feasibility and timing of returns. Once again, Germany can lead by example as it did with the reception of Syrians in 2015, demonstrating how a balanced and forward-looking return migration policy can address immediate humanitarian concerns and long-term development goals. The mobilisation of UN agencies, including IOM, UNHCR and UNDP, as well as the World Bank, can create synergies (the Syrians Refugee Response 3RP already has a structure).

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For return to be feasible and sustainable, a comprehensive reconstruction process is essential—one that goes beyond rebuilding physical infrastructure to address the socio-economic and psychological impact of displacement.

LESSONS FROM OTHER CASE STUDIES: THE RISKS OF PREMATURE RETURN

Voluntary returns to Bosnia-Herzegovina after the Dayton Agreement (1995–96) fell far short of expectations, even more so for the minorities. Although substantial assistance was offered for their return, it could not compensate for the lack of security and the traumatic memories associated with the place of displacement. Instead, territorial transfers led to further displacement. Unresolved property issues and houses that had either been destroyed or occupied by others were persistent problems upon return. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, returnees were not unanimously welcomed, and social cohesion between those who had suffered during the war and those who had continued their lives abroad was fragile.

Similar to the situation in Syria today, family ties and enthusiasm for newfound freedom drove the spontaneous decisions of Kosovo Albanians to return when the war ended. Those who did not find employment with international organisations often regretted returning as they became dependent on aid or a burden on their struggling families. Amid the destruction of production facilities, people found that "you cannot eat freedom". Some non-Albanian communities faced even greater reintegration challenges and renewed violence and displacement years after the war due to a difficult reconciliation process and widespread impunity.

4 Harness the potential of the Syrian diaspora through enhanced integration efforts

Many Syrians in Germany support family members in Syria by sending them remittances to meet their daily needs. This support is likely to become even more important during the uncertain transition, helping to mitigate supply shortages, insecurity and the lack of access to public services. Research shows that when this lifeline is cut, such as through premature return before economic conditions support self-sufficiency, another family member may have to migrate, or the whole family may face displacement.

Beyond these family-based support networks, displaced Syrians living and working in host countries such as Germany have the potential to contribute significantly to Syria's reconstruction efforts. They can provide support in business creation, trade links, investment, remittances, the circulation of skills and the exchange of experiences through transnational networks that can foster development and stabilisation.

To maximise the diaspora's potential to contribute to the reconstruction of Syria, Germany should facilitate resource mobilisation (provide funding for Syrian refugee activists and representatives to participate in international fora, such as EU–Syria dialogue platforms) and ensure legal status for Syrians so that they can continue to engage as transnational agents of inclusive development. To further enhance their contributions, greater efforts

should be made to support their political representation in relevant diplomatic channels. Strengthening their inclusion in policymaking processes would not only empower Syrians abroad but also ensure that their perspectives and needs are considered in shaping Syria's future. The BMZ should also assess whether there is a need or demand for strengthening capacity and invest further in this effort. In this context, BMZ has launched A New Beginning for Syria, a platform that aims to facilitate networking among civil society, municipalities, academia and the private sector. It provides a space for those interested in contributing to Syria's reconstruction to learn about Germany's development efforts in this context.

In Germany, Syrian refugees have made great efforts to integrate, supported by the government and civil society.

An extraordinarily active and diverse civil society has developed from the Syrian diaspora. Many organisations have emerged outside the country, specialising in almost every area imaginable. Sustained institutional support for these organisations through funding, programmes to strengthen capacity and partnerships with international stakeholders could further increase their impact and foster long-term engagement in Syria's reconstruction.

In Germany, Syrian refugees have made great efforts to integrate, supported by the government and civil society. These efforts have already benefited German society and the economy. Within a decade, Syrians have become valuable contributors, with many working in key sectors such as healthcare, manufacturing and logistics. For

REFUGEE ADVISORY BOARD

The recently established Refugee Advisory Board (RAB) for Germany provides an avenue for structured engagement and advocacy, building a bridge between policymakers and refugee communities. Germany should financially support the Refugee Advisory Board, as it committed to do at the Global Compact meeting. This board—the first of its kind in Europe—demonstrates Germany's leadership in promoting innovative, inclusive approaches to refugee participation and policymaking.

example, Syrian doctors, nurses and other professionals are helping to address labour shortages in the healthcare sector—a sector facing challenges due to Germany's ageing population and staff shortages.

Investment in the reception and integration of refugees pays off over time: Employment rates for refugees rise dramatically within 15 years of arrival, shifting the fiscal balance as they contribute more through taxes and social

contributions (Bach et al., 2017). Premature return risks not only stalling personal progress but also depleting the skilled labour force in Germany, leading to negative social and economic consequences. Integration and return policies must therefore balance economic considerations with the protection of human dignity, aspirations and rights, including permanent residency, which are crucial for Syrians to realise their potential in Germany and Syria.

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