

Refugee return to post-Assad Syria: the politics of protection

Summary report
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Summary

*The roundtable, moderated by **Mohammad Kanfash** (Centre for Conflict Studies, Utrecht University), brought together **Nora Stel** (Radboud University), **Ali Aljaseem** (Utrecht University), **Tineke Strik** (Member of the European Parliament, GroenLinks) and **Farouq Habib** (White Helmets) to discuss politics, trends and prospects for Syrian refugee return.*

Speakers and participants highlighted that Syrian return dynamics are often shaped more by host country interests than by refugees' aspirations or improved conditions in Syria since the fall of Assad. They noted that the distinction between voluntary and forced return is increasingly blurred, with restrictive policies and growing (political) pressure influencing decisions to return.

Participants stressed that the fall of the Assad regime does not automatically create conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return. Syria continues to face significant economic hardship, damaged infrastructure, limited public services and unmet needs among internally displaced people. Economic concerns remain a key factor for many refugees.

The discussion concluded that return should remain a choice rather than an expectation and that improving conditions in Syria requires coordinated international support and a Syrian-led recovery process.



A reception area in Ar-Raqqa governorate, Syria, 2024

(Forced) returns and geopolitics

Returns to Syria are currently in many, if not most cases, not driven by Syrians' own aspirations or developments related to the situation in Syria, but by the interests of host countries. The intention to return is decreasing amongst Syrians. Yet, return remains a dominant focus in public and policy debates in Turkey, Lebanon, and European host countries.

The distinction between forced and voluntary return is often illusory: So-called “voluntary” return is in many cases pushed to such an extent that it can be considered coerced. These “voluntary” returns are then, at times, used to legitimise further coercion since they supposedly signal that return is feasible.

Inter-regional and intra-regional return dynamics influence one another. Discourses, policies, and practices in one context are used to justify decisions in other contexts. Return can become a bargaining chip in geopolitical negotiations. Competing bilateral return initiatives are not needs-based or following Syrian priorities but appear to primarily operate to reduce refugee numbers in host countries.

Return should be coordinated and phased, with the return of IDPs and regional refugees taking precedence over the return of Syrian refugees in Europe.

Politicisation of returns

The issue of Syrian returns should turn from a humanitarian discussion to a political discussion. It is a political matter, and should not be treated as a humanitarian one.

In addition to coerced and voluntary returns, the concept of “transactional” return was mentioned, where the visit from the Syrian president al-Sharaa and German Chancellor Friedrich Merz established a framework to return up to 80% of the roughly 900,000 Syrian nationals in Germany back to their homeland over the next three years.

The reality in Syria is deteriorating over time. Conditions have worsened not only in terms of security but also economically. Sanctions were lifted, but it is still almost impossible to make financial transactions. The currency fluctuation in Syria is impacting people’s everyday lives. Large-scale return places additional pressure on the country, while the needs of IDPs remain insufficiently addressed.

The average amount for a family to live a dignified life in Syria is 1500 euros a month. However, the most common amount that they get is approximately 120 dollars. Inflation has surged, partly due to rising fuel costs and increased wheat prices. The Dutch “return support” amounts to 5,000 euros for each adult and 2,500 euros for each minor child, which only sustains families for a limited period. Economic concerns remain the primary issue among Syrian refugees. Moreover, approximately 50% of Syria’s infrastructure has been destroyed. In many regions, basic services such as schools and hospitals are lacking, and the government is unable to provide sufficient services.

The role of Europe

Turkey is closing refugee camps and reducing support funding. Geographical restrictions are making it harder for refugees to stay and are increasingly oriented toward exit. Many Syrians feel forced to return. According to DG ECHO, Syria does not meet the criteria for safe return. At the same time, the EU is reducing humanitarian aid and encouraging investment in reconstruction.

The EU's push to return the relatively small number of Syrian migrants currently residing in Europe seems misplaced when you consider the far larger displacement crisis within Syria and neighbouring countries.

EU countries were suspending the processing of Syrian asylum applications. Since December 2024, in the Netherlands, there has been a moratorium on decisions for applications from Syrians, but it will resume processing all pending and new asylum applications. However, to be eligible for asylum, they

must prove that they would face a real risk of serious harm if they return. Syrians now need to prove that they face risks of inhumane and degrading treatment. According to the Netherlands, certain groups, such as the LGBTIQ+ community and Alawites, may be at increased risk. However, there are more minorities that are vulnerable. Even in such cases, asylum criteria have become more restrictive.

Austria was the first EU country to forcibly return a Syrian national after the fall of the regime. Germany is moving in a similar direction. While returns are currently framed as targeting criminals, politicians have stated that “we do not exclude other categories”, which suggests that the same logic could be applied to a much broader population of refugees.

In the Netherlands, official government documents are being used to justify forced return policies, but these documents contradict what independent experts on Syria are actually saying.

Evolving political discourse on return policies

The end of the Assad regime does not automatically mean that Syria offers a safe and dignified return. There are still protection concerns + public services, housing and poverty remain issues. Refugee return is used for political messaging, and the line between voluntary and forced return becomes blurry under the current conditions.

There are recent changes in tolerance towards Syrian refugees by Turkish authorities – many investors and entrepreneurs who rely heavily on Syrian labour are starting to witness shortages.

Although many Syrians express a desire to return, this does not mean it is currently safe to do so. While 3.4 million people have returned, this should not be interpreted as return becoming the norm. EU governments are expanding return support programmes, potentially reducing refugees’ ability to remain. The key question remains whether such returns are truly voluntary.

Three things should be distinguished:

- There are Syrians who choose to return, and they deserve support.
- There are Syrians who have legitimate reasons not to want to return (yet). These people still need and deserve protection
- It should be avoided that governments or donors start measuring the success of Syria policy by return numbers, return shifts from being a right (that is freely chosen) into an expectation.

“Return should be a choice by Syrians, not a consequence of coercive policies and frameworks”.

The panel added that the tolerance towards Syrian refugees in the region depends on the goodwill on local politicians. Should that shift, the living conditions can be negatively affected for Syrian families and communities. The lack of services and pressure on the country is also affecting social cohesion. Moreover, the large movement of Syrians out of Lebanon following Israeli attacks should not be considered a voluntary return migration.

It is not just about those returning but also about those who are already there who are already suffering from dire economic conditions.

Discussion

It was added by a participant that civil society in Syria is deeply fragmented; some groups are close to the new government, others distant, and some have roots in the former Assad regime. Coordination between civil society and authorities remains largely absent. Under the Assad regime, Syria was effectively run by criminals, and those individuals still hold significant financial power. The longer the international community delays meaningful engagement, the more the new authorities will reach out towards these same actors.

There were hopes/expectations that Gulf states would invest in Syria. However, partly due to the regional war, attention has shifted, while conditions in Syria are getting worse.

For participants, the international community and Syrian authorities must act to improve the living conditions in Syria. Returns are only possible when socio-economic conditions are improved, and when an environment for recovery is enabled, and this requires action from humanitarian and development actors, but more importantly, a Syrian-led plan. One participant noted that when governments do engage in international cooperation for Syria, the focus tends to fall heavily on security rather than on the economic and social conditions. There is a shared responsibility here. Syrian authorities need to create the conditions for cooperation, but international partners such as the EU must also step up, while now the funding is falling short. Conditionality for return safety - dignity, voluntariness - should be just as firmly established as conditionality for EU funding. The EU needs to move beyond talk and materially support Syria's recovery, while respecting the autonomy of Syrian authorities and remaining vigilant about how transition-period funds are spent. Moreover, Syria needs a dedicated reconstruction pillar within the Global Europe funding instrument, equivalent to what exists for Ukraine and is being proposed for Gaza. Finally, there is a need for much greater parliamentary engagement with the Syrian government on reconstruction. The current hesitancy, particularly in European parliaments, is a missed opportunity at a critical moment.

There is an excess of information and facts in reports and conferences; what is needed now is action and coordination. There is enough available knowledge; it now needs to be driven towards implementation.

Picture: UNICEF