

Policy Brief

Conditions Shaping Syrians' Futures and Prospects for Return

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Recommendations

1. Ensure safe and informed return

Establish transparent information systems and structured “go-and-see” visits so returnees can make free, informed return decisions. Harmonise civil documentation across jurisdictions and prioritise mine clearance to ensure physical safety upon return.

2. Restore housing, land, property rights and access to basic services

Create independent legal frameworks for property restitution and dispute resolution, and urgently rehabilitate water, sanitation, healthcare and education infrastructure in areas with high return potential.

3. Promote livelihood opportunities and economic reintegration

Support job creation, vocational training, microfinance and diaspora investment frameworks that benefit both returnees and host communities. Leverage Syrian professionals’ skills and networks as engines of economic recovery.

4. Strengthen transitional justice, inclusive governance and peacebuilding

Advance truth-seeking, reparations and accountability for war crimes. Strengthen nascent national commissions on transitional justice and missing persons, and support democratic governance, freedom of expression and meaningful participation for women, youth and minorities.

5. Engage the Syrian diaspora as partners in recovery and return planning

Develop inclusive mechanisms—advisory councils, digital platforms and working groups—that engage the full diversity of Syrian diaspora voices. Provide clear legal pathways for those who choose to stay in Germany, and enable time-limited re-entry options to encourage voluntary return without perceived irreversibility.



The Refugee Advisory Board Germany was established to ensure that national and international decision-making is informed by the perspective and expertise of forcibly displaced people who provide critical feedback on international refugee issues and programmes. As the first national board of its kind in Europe, board members work together to contribute their insights to national and international dialogues and to participate meaningfully in policymaking.



Background

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, discussions on the return of Syrian refugees intensified across diaspora communities, inside Syria and among host countries. The approximately 948,000 Syrians living in Germany—of whom around 667,000 hold temporary residence permits (Mediendienst Integration, 2025)—have been debating the issue in several respects. Many have built lives in Germany through education, employment and civic participation, with a growing number obtaining permanent residency or citizenship. Public discussions on return gained momentum during the parliamentary elections in 2025, when migration and refugee policy featured prominently.

These domestic debates have been accompanied by renewed diplomatic engagement, with official governmental visits in both directions creating space for broader discussions on reconstruction and voluntary return.

Syria's reconstruction needs remain immense. The World Bank (2025) estimates total costs at US \$216 billion, with direct physical damage of US \$108 billion—nearly one-third of pre-war capital stock—with Aleppo, Rif Dimashq and Homs among the most severely affected. The health infrastructure has been severely disrupted, with over 50 per cent of facilities partially or fully non-functional and food insecurity affecting more than 12 million people (WHO, 2025; FAO & WFP, 2025).

Despite these conditions, return movements have already begun: More than 1.5 million refugees and 1.8 million internally displaced persons have returned since December 2024, and surveys indicate that many more are willing to return once conditions allow (UNHCR, 2025). However, around 4.5 million Syrians remain in neighbouring countries, most living below the poverty line, and UNHCR's US \$1.5 billion appeal for 2025 has received only 33 per cent of its target funding—underscoring that displacement pressures persist. At the 2025 Global Refugee Forum, Syria made its first pledge to support sustainable returns, alongside reaffirmed commitments from Germany and key host countries (UNHCR, 2025).

The sustainability of these return movements remains uncertain. While agreements between the Syrian government and some political groups have contributed to some degree of stabilisation in parts of Syria, localised violence, tensions between armed actors, and governance gaps remain. Human rights organisations continue to document serious protection concerns—including fatal attacks, arbitrary detention and alleged reprisals targeting individuals on the basis of political affiliation, ethnic or religious identity (Amnesty International, 2025).



Beyond these security concerns, returnees and residents face specific structural vulnerabilities. Since 2011, the Syrian conflict and large-scale displacement, combined with pre-existing factors such as Syria's gender-discriminatory nationality law, have dramatically increased the risk of statelessness—particularly among children who cannot inherit Syrian nationality through their mother, whether inside the country or in the diaspora, owing to gaps in identity documentation amongst others (Syrian Nationality Hub, n.d.). If children do not acquire nationality from their father, they may be left stateless (Stateless Hub, n.d.).

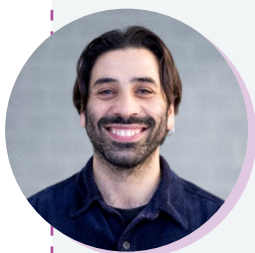
Since December 2024, explosive ordnance contamination has posed a severe and growing threat to the safety of all Syrians, including returnees. Explosive ordnance incidents have caused 1,419 casualties across 760 recorded incidents, with 155 children killed and 359 children injured (UNICEF, 2026). Many children are particularly vulnerable as they are often unaware of the risks and daily exposed to contaminated areas.

Recommendation 1: ***Ensure safe and informed return: Protection mechanisms and civil documentation***

Security conditions—including risks of small arms proliferation, diversion and illicit circulation, potential acquisition by non-state armed actors and contamination from explosive remnants of war and landmines—as well as legal protection concerns, access to services, and livelihood opportunities, remain deeply uneven across governorates, making informed decision-making essential. Those planning to return must have access to up-to-date, reliable information on conditions in their areas of origin.

Return decisions should be supported by transparent information systems developed in collaboration among Syrians, Syrian government bodies, host countries and UN agencies. Structured “go-and-see” visits—similar to those facilitated by Turkey—allow prospective returnees to assess conditions without pressure or loss of protection status (Human Rights Watch, 2025). Accessible digital platforms can further support genuinely free and informed choices, ensuring that return reflects individual volition rather than the absence of alternatives.

Legal identity and documentation remain central protection concerns. Documentation gaps dispropor-



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tionately affect women—particularly regarding family law, inheritance and property rights—, and children born during displacement face heightened risks of statelessness and barriers to accessing services. These challenges are compounded by a fragmented documentation landscape in which both state and non-state actors have issued civil documents, creating overlapping systems and legal uncertainty.

A coordinated effort to unify the civil registry—within Syria and across documents issued in host countries—is essential. Host-state authorities, UNHCR, Syria's civil directorate and civil society should work under a shared framework to recognise and harmonise documentation issued across different jurisdictions and conflict periods. Recognising documents issued by de facto authorities would provide a legal basis for this harmonisation and protect returnees from carrying documents that are unrecognised in their country of return.

Strengthening community safety and protection by addressing small arms and light weapons proliferation and illicit circulation, alongside mine action, is a critical component of safe return. Since December 2024, children have accounted for 30 per cent of those killed and 40 per cent of those injured by explosive remnants of war, while an estimated five million children live in contaminated areas (UNICEF, 2025). Systematic clearance of landmines and unexploded ordnance across farmland, roads, and residential areas must be prioritised and adequately resourced, both before and during return processes.

Recommendation 2: Restore housing, land, property rights and access to basic services

A central priority is ensuring that internally displaced persons (IDPs)—who constitute the largest displaced population inside the country, currently exceeding 5.5 million—can return safely and with dignity (UNHCR, 2026). The humanitarian situation remains critical: The United Nations estimates that around 16.5 million people will require assistance in 2026 (UNHCR, 2026).

Without clear and accessible mechanisms for housing, land and property restitution, many returnees risk finding their properties destroyed, occupied or legally

contested. The World Bank estimates that conflict damage to infrastructure and buildings amounts to approximately US \$108 billion (World Bank, 2025). Independent legal frameworks—capable of adjudicating disputes, providing documentation assistance and offering compensation where restitution is not feasible—are essential to secure tenure, reduce tensions between returnees and current occupants and enable durable reintegration.

Access to basic services is equally foundational. More than 50 per cent of basic services infrastructure in Syria is not operational, and returnees arriving in already-vulnerable areas risk overstressing local resources. Water, sanitation, electricity, schools and healthcare centres require urgent rehabilitation. Rehabilitating essential infrastructure is not only a precondition for safe return but also critical for the economic recovery of both returnees and resident populations. Targeted investments should prioritise areas with high return potential while ensuring broad regional benefits.

Linking return planning with stabilisation—including security guarantees, infrastructure rehabilitation and local governance readiness—ensures that returns proceed at a sustainable pace and do not overwhelm communities or institutions. Local municipalities must also be supported to build administrative capacity, strengthen fiscal systems and engage communities in participatory planning, enabling them to respond effectively to the needs as return populations grow.

Recommendation 3: Promote livelihood opportunities and economic reintegration

Economic reintegration is central to sustainable return and long-term social stability. Without viable livelihoods, returnees face heightened risks of secondary displacement. Policymakers must support job creation, vocational training, enterprise development, micro-finance access and linkages to diaspora investors. Economic programmes should benefit both returnees and host communities to limit competition over scarce resources, foster shared resilience and strengthen social cohesion.

Experiences of Syrian refugees in Germany illustrate the human capital potential of diaspora communities. Many Syrians have successfully integrated into the German labour market over time, acquiring skills, qualifications and creating professional networks that can contribute directly to Syria's recovery. Initiatives such as *Neuanfang für Syrien* ("A New Beginning for Syria") established by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented by GIZ and *German–Syrian Hospital Partnerships*—which draw on Syrian professionals and diaspora networks to rebuild sectors such as healthcare and local governance—offer promising models for structured diaspora engagement in economic recovery.

Partnerships with private sector actors, international financial institutions and diaspora business networks can accelerate local economic recovery. Diaspora investment, remittances and skills transfer represent significant untapped resources for reconstruction. Governments and development actors should design enabling frameworks—including investment guarantees, import/export facilitation and support for small and medium-sized enterprises—that make it viable for diaspora members to invest in Syria's recovery. Health and food security must be integrated into livelihood planning: Restoring agricultural supply chains, supporting small farmers and rehabilitating food markets are essential to ensure that returnees and host communities can sustain themselves.

The Policy Brief *Bilateral Labour Recruitment Agreement: Germany–Syria* by Jamil Alyou includes valuable recommendations on how structured labour mobility frameworks between Germany and Syria could further support skills transfer, address labour shortages and strengthen long-term pathways for circular migration and economic cooperation.

Recommendation 4: ***Strengthen transitional justice, inclusive governance and peacebuilding***

Sustainable return requires more than physical safety—it demands a credible path toward justice, accountability and inclusive governance. Years of conflict have shattered trust between communities and state institutions. Transitional justice mecha-

nisms—including truth-seeking initiatives, case documentation, reparations programmes and community reconciliation efforts—are central to healing fractured societies and creating conditions conducive to return. Accountability for war crimes and gross human rights violations fosters the rule of law, deters future abuses and rebuilds confidence in public institutions. Inclusive dialogues involving victims, civil society, academia and affected communities are essential to strengthen social cohesion.

The issue of missing persons and enforced disappearances is urgent. Presidential decrees issued in May 2025 established Syria's National Commission on Transitional Justice and the National Commission on Missing Persons, tasked with investigating serious human rights violations and determining the fate of up to 200,000 missing persons (International Commission on Missing Persons, 2025). However, these institutions remain nascent—and critically, enforced disappearances have not ceased with the fall of the Assad regime, raising concerns that this may be hardening into a pattern that reproduces violations. Both commissions must be genuinely independent, complementary to existing UN documentation efforts and centred on the participation of victims and their families.

Peacebuilding efforts should also prioritise locally led dialogue initiatives, intercommunal mediation, trauma-informed psychosocial support and mechanisms for non-violent conflict resolution to rebuild trust across communities fractured by years of violence and displacement.

Beyond legal mechanisms, Syria will need a broader societal process of confronting its recent past—embedding honest historical memory into education, public commemoration and political culture as an ongoing, intergenerational process involving survivors, civil society and communities across sectarian and geographic lines.

Democratic governance is equally foundational. Credible, accountable institutions underpinned by democratic principles require investment in electoral processes, freedom of expression, independent media and civil society participation. Governance frameworks must empower youth, women, minorities and diaspora representatives, while municipalities receive targeted support in capacity-building, participatory planning and fiscal decentralisation.

Recommendation 5:

Engage the Syrian diaspora as partners in recovery and return planning

Germany's Syrian community—nearly one million people—represents an invaluable network of professionals, entrepreneurs, academics and civic actors. Diaspora engagement must reach beyond voices close to government to include NGOs, youth, women's and queer organisations as well as grassroots networks. Inclusive mechanisms—advisory councils, digital platforms, thematic working groups—can meaningfully inform return strategies. Between 2016 and 2024, approximately 244,000 Syrian citizens acquired German citizenship, with 83,185 naturalisations in 2024 alone (Weber, 2025). Return policies must reflect this reality: Not all Syrians will return, nor should all be expected to.

As of December 2025, around 320,000 Syrian nationals (60 percent of those who arrived in 2015) are employed in Germany, 85 percent in regular employment, paying social insurance contributions—with 63 per cent working in sectors critical to the economy such as transport, manufacturing, healthcare and hospitality. A large-scale departure would not reduce unemployment; it would deepen labour shortages Germany can least afford (Brücker, Hauptmann & Kosyakova, 2026).

Return discussions must account for what return would mean and what departure would entail—not only for individuals, families and society but for the economy and the broader public interest in Syria and in Germany alike.

A framework that maximises benefit for all requires three commitments. For Syrians who have become part of German society and wish to stay, clear and legally stable residence pathways are essential—through simplified procedures, qualification recognition and family reunification support. For those who choose to return voluntarily, a time-limited re-entry option would reduce the perceived irreversibility of return and encourage more people to consider it seriously. And whether Syrians remain in Germany or return to Syria, the professional, social and civic ties they have built represent a long-term asset—Germany has the opportunity to cultivate these networks as a foundation for economic partnership and civil society collaboration.

Germany's Neuanfang für Syrien platform offers a replicable model of structured diaspora engagement. Yet Syria's diaspora is spread across many host countries, each with distinct dynamics and ties to different parts of Syria. A transnational exchange among similar platforms would offer a more holistic understanding of return. Coordinating these perspectives would enrich policy design and prevent diaspora voices from remaining fragmented across national silos.

Conclusion



A sustainable return framework for Syria must balance political aspirations with on-the-ground realities. While return movements have already begun, the conditions necessary for large-scale, voluntary and durable return are still developing.

Syria's reconstruction needs are vast, and its governance, infrastructure and service systems remain fragile. Without coordinated investment in housing, livelihoods, protection and institutional recovery, return risks becoming premature and unsustainable—potentially leading to secondary displacement and renewed instability. Syrian refugees and diaspora communities represent a critical asset for reconstruction: Their skills, resources and transnational networks can con-

tribute significantly to rebuilding efforts if they are given a meaningful role in policy design.

A phased, rights-based and regionally coordinated approach offers the most viable pathway forward—prioritising locations where basic safety, services and economic conditions can be restored, beginning with IDPs, while ensuring that return remains voluntary, informed and dignified. This must be understood within a broader regional and global context, as geopolitical shifts and host-country dynamics continue to shape the feasibility and sustainability of policy responses. Ultimately, how Syria's displaced are supported will be a defining test of the international community's commitment to rights-based, durable solutions.

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