RAB Germany

Policy Brief

Bilateral Labour Recruitment Agreement: Germany–Syria

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A Policy Framework to Address Germany's Skilled Labour Shortages and Syria's Reconstruction Needs

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Recommendations

1. *Target critical sectors for mutual benefit*

Prioritise recruitment on industries where Germany faces severe labour shortages (e.g. healthcare, skilled trades, IT) and where Syrian citizens—including those displaced—have existing skills or can be trained to ensure the partnership meets genuine economic needs in both countries.

2. *Develop and recognise skills*

Invest in language and vocational training and streamline the recognition of qualifications so that Syrian recruits can integrate rapidly into the German labour market, following models such as the recent Germany–India fast-track skilled visa initiatives.

3. *Ensure fair recruitment and worker protection*

Design the agreement in line with International Labour Organization (ILO) standards to ensure ethical recruitment, decent working conditions and robust protection of migrant workers' rights.

4. *Facilitate circular migration for reconstruction*

Establish temporary and circular migration schemes that allow Syrian workers to contribute to Germany's economy while later applying their enhanced skills back home to Syria's reconstruction, avoiding permanent brain drain.

5. *Leverage existing frameworks*

Draw on best practices from Germany's recent bilateral agreements (e.g. with India, the Western Balkans, Georgia) and international compacts (ILO guidelines, Global Compact for Migration) to inform the agreement's design, implementation and monitoring mechanisms.

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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.

Addressing Germany's Labour Shortages and Syria's Reconstruction

Germany faces a critical labour shortage due to an ageing population and years of strong economic demand. In 2023, roughly 1.7 million jobs remained vacant, with acute gaps in sectors such as healthcare, IT, engineering and construction leading to weaker GDP growth since 2016 (statistik.arbeitsagentur.de).

At the same time, Syria is emerging from over a decade of conflict that devastated its economy—the gross domestic product (GDP) has contracted by an estimated 84 per cent since 2010—and has left over 90 per cent of Syrians in poverty. Rebuilding Syria will require massive human capital; the United Nations (UN) estimates reconstruction costs of around US $400 billion.

Paradoxically, while Syria's domestic economy struggles to absorb workers, many Syrian nationals (including refugees abroad) have acquired education and skills that could be utilised more efficiently. For example, Germany has taken in around one million Syrian refugees during the war, many of whom have since filled gaps in critical industries.

This situation presents an opportunity for a mutually beneficial labour mobility partnership. A carefully structured bilateral labour recruitment agreement between Germany and Syria can help fill Germany's labour needs while enabling Syrians to support their country's reconstruction through remittances, skills transfer and circular migration.

Recommendation 1:
Target critical sectors for mutual benefit

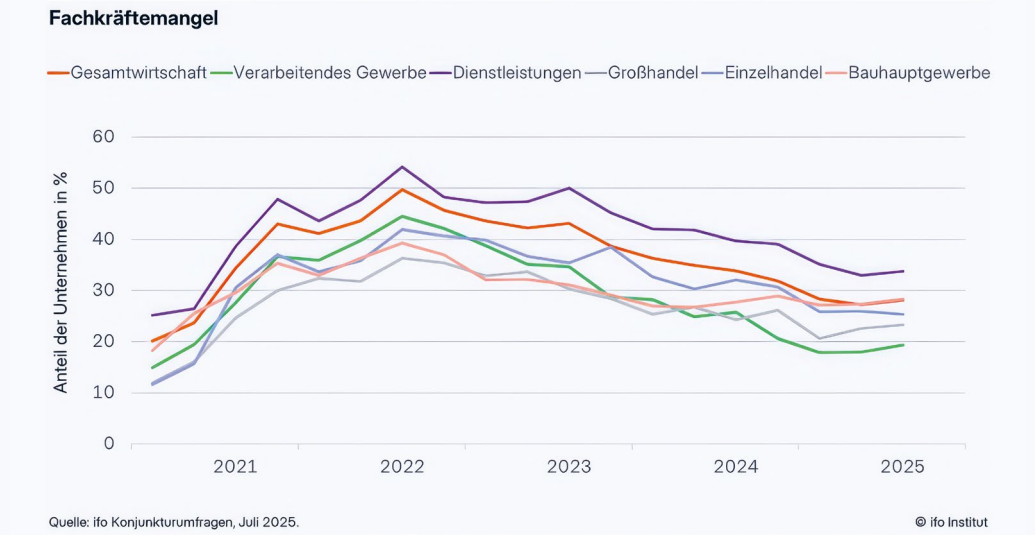
Germany should **prioritise recruitment in sectors with acute labour shortages that align with Syria's workforce availability and reconstruction needs**. Over one-third of German firms report unfilled skilled positions (ifo.de). Shortages are most severe in healthcare (e.g. nurses, elder care), IT and engineering, construction trades and transportation (statistik.arbeitsagentur.de). Meanwhile, Syria has a surplus of workers in need of employment due to the collapse of its industries during the war. The conflict caused millions of job losses between 2011 and 2016 (UNDP). Many Syrians—including refugees in Germany, Turkey and elsewhere—have training or experience in many of these fields, which are vital for Syria's reconstruction and sought after in Germany.

A Germany–Syria labour agreement should **focus on sectors where this synergy is strongest**. For example, **construction and skilled trades** are prime candidates: Germany urgently needs tradespeople (electricians, plumbers, masonry workers) for its infrastructure and housing projects, and Syria requires those very skills to rebuild homes, utilities and cities destroyed in war. By recruiting and training Syrian construction workers to work in Germany for a period, Germany fills immediate vacancies while Syrians gain income, experience and technical know-how to later help rebuild Syria's infrastructure.

Healthcare is another area: Germany's ageing society creates huge demand for nurses and caregivers, and Syrian medical professionals (doctors, nurses, technicians) are available—many fled during the conflict or are underemployed. However, to avoid depriving Syria's health system, the program could train new Syrian nursing staff (through scholarships or vocational programs) in addition to recruiting existing talent, creating a net gain for both countries' healthcare sectors. **IT and engineering** can likewise benefit; Syria has a young, educated population with many STEM graduates but few domestic opportunities, while German tech firms struggle to hire enough IT specialists. Pairing these needs means Syrian engineers and coders can contribute to Germany's digital and innovation economy and eventually transfer skills back to Syrian enterprises. Targeting such sectors ensures the agreement tackles genuine labour market gaps in Germany and builds human capital relevant to Syria's post-conflict recovery.

Germany must avoid exacerbating Syria's brain drain by aligning recruitment with both countries' needs. Priority should go to sectors with labour surpluses—like construction—while limiting recruitment in critical fields like healthcare unless offset by training. Regular reviews and consultation with Syrian stakeholders are essential to keep the program responsive and sustainable. By focusing on complementary sectors, Germany gains needed skills, and Syrians acquire experience valuable for future reconstruction (swp-berlin.org).

FIGURE 1. SKILLED LABOUR SHORTAGES IN GERMANY BY SECTOR (2019–2024)



Share of companies reporting vacant skilled positions, by industry. Shortages peaked in 2022 (overall ~ fifty per cent of firms) and remain high in services (black line) and construction (red line) (ifo.de). An ageing population leaves key sectors unable to find enough workers, prompting Germany to recruit abroad.

Recommendation 2:
Invest in training, skills recognition and integration support

Germany and Syria should **establish training and credentialing mechanisms** that prepare candidates for jobs in Germany and smooth their integration. This starts with language and vocational training **pre-departure**. German language proficiency is often a barrier (swp-berlin.org). The agreement should fund **German language courses in Syria or refugee-hosting countries** as a pipeline for participants. Additionally, **technical training programs** can be set up or expanded in collaboration with agencies such as GIZ (German development agency) to teach skills according to German standards. Such programs echo the concept of "global skills partnerships" where origin and destination countries jointly train workers in needed fields, sharing the benefits (idos-research.de). Germany's recent agreement with India provides a model: Under the "Focus on India" plan launched in 2023, Germany eased visa rules and supported pre-departure language and cultural training to speed up professionals' readiness. A similar approach with Syria would ensure recruits arrive job ready.

A critical component is the streamlined recognition of Syrian qualifications. Many professionals face delays due to Germany's lengthy credentialing processes. The bilateral agreement should include fast-track recognition pathways or bridging courses for partial equivalency, modelled on Germany's agreement with India, which reduced processing times to three to four months. German authorities—such as chambers of commerce or medical boards—could pre-assess Syrian curricula and guide targeted bridging programs, allowing workers to meet standards efficiently. Partnerships between Syrian and German institutions or online training modules can further accelerate integration. Existing frameworks, such as those from BMAS, BMBF and BIBB, offer proven tools that can be adapted to this context.

Effective integration support is essential for retention and success. The agreement should include on-arrival orientation, continued language instruction and social support for Syrian workers and their families—such as mentoring, housing assistance and access to community networks. For Syrians with refugee backgrounds, tailored measures such as counselling or engagement with the diaspora may be especially important. These investments also build transferable skills and human capital that benefit Syria's reconstruction. In sum, fast-track recognition, training pipelines and strong integration measures will make the labour partnership more effective, inclusive and development-oriented.

Recommendation 3:
Ensure fair and ethical recruitment with strong labour protections

Germany should ensure that such a labour agreement is grounded in fair recruitment and the protection of workers' rights. This is essential for ethical reasons and the credibility of the program. International frameworks such as the Global Compact for Migration and guidance from the ILO and IOM emphasise rights-based labour mobility as key to safe and mutually beneficial migration.

Practically, this means:
Transparent recruitment: No high fees for workers; placement costs should be borne by employers or governments. Germany's Federal Employment Agency could oversee recruitment, building on models like the Triple Win Program.
Clear contracts: Written job offers should outline wages, rights and duties in a language workers understand.
Legal protections in Germany: Syrian workers must receive equal pay and social protections, with the right to change employers and access legal aid or unions.
Monitoring mechanisms: Both sides should commit to labour inspections and a grievance process to prevent abuse.

On Syria's side, safeguards should protect returning workers from punitive measures or exploitation. Pre-departure orientation and support from international partners can help ensure ethical recruitment locally. Finally, the agreement should promote anti-discrimination efforts and public awareness in Germany to foster acceptance and prevent xenophobia (ethical recruitment).

Recommendation 4:
Facilitate circular migration and knowledge transfer for Syria's reconstruction

Germany should structure the program to **encourage circular migration** and support Syria's longer-term needs, allowing Syrian workers to return home with enhanced skills while future cohorts continue to migrate for work. Rather than permanent emigration, circular migration lets Syrians work in Germany, gain skills and reinvest them in rebuilding Syria. This model aligns with what development experts advocate as a "win-win" for post-conflict recovery (idos-research.de).

Key to this is **flexibility in visa and employment terms**. For example, Germany could issue two- to three-year work visas to Syrian recruits with the possibility of extension or renewal, but also with support for those who choose to go back after gaining experience. Returning workers could be prioritised for reconstruction roles through coordinated job-matching with international partners. Additionally, if a worker returns to Syria and later wishes to work in Germany again, the program could allow repeat circulation without restarting the entire immigration process. This ensures skills, and labour can flow to where they are needed most at different times.

Importantly, circular migration can help transfer knowledge and norms to Syria. Syrians gain advanced know-how in Germany and can apply it as peer-trainers back home. For instance, a Syrian civil engineer who spends three years with a German construction firm can later oversee housing reconstruction projects in Aleppo, applying German standards for quality and safety. To formalise this, the agreement might include a component of reintegration support: Providing returning workers with tools to apply their skills at home. This could be small grants, toolkits or partnerships with NGOs and Syrian businesses. Such support would amplify the developmental impact of the labour migration scheme.

Additionally, remittances earned in Germany will directly aid Syria's recovery by improving household welfare and potentially funding small businesses. Remittances can boost local economies and reduce aid dependency. According to international experience, well-managed labour mobility programs can boost remittance flows and development outcomes in origin countries (swp-berlin.org).

To avoid forced/ premature returns, the program must ensure that return remains voluntary and is based on informed choice. Return should be encouraged only when conditions in Syria allow, with pathways to permanent residency in Germany for those who cannot safely return. Framing return as an opportunity to contribute to Syria's reconstruction—with reintegration support—can promote circular migration.

Recommendation 5:
Leverage international frameworks and Germany's bilateral experience

Both countries should not undertake this partnership in isolation; they can **draw on international frameworks and Germany's own recent bilateral agreements to guide design and implementation**. Germany has been actively expanding its network of migration agreements under a comprehensive approach that links labour recruitment with broader cooperation. In fact, Germany appointed a Special Commissioner for Migration Agreements in 2023, reflecting high-level commitment to such tools (swp-berlin.org).

Germany's **Western Balkans Regulation** illustrates how legal migration pathways can be scaled effectively. By offering broad access to employment with a clear quota and simple procedures, it met labour needs while reducing irregular migration—leading to an expansion to 50,000 annual permits from 2024 (BMI). For Syria, a similarly clear visa category, generous quota and streamlined digital application process would be crucial.

Recent agreements with **India** and **Georgia** further highlight the importance of fast visa processing, digital systems, qualification recognition and including young people through education or internship pathways. Publicising legal options and engaging the **Syrian diaspora** as mentors or partners can support both uptake and integration. Together, these models show that successful labour migration hinges on simplicity, speed and strong institutional coordination.

Coordination with the **European Union** (EU) could provide additional backing. The EU has launched "Talent Partnership" initiatives with some countries to facilitate labour mobility and training. While Syria's political situation is complex, the EU could be invited to support elements of this plan. Indeed, experts have suggested expanding the EU's talent partnerships to new contexts as part of comprehensive migration management. If the Syria agreement proves conceptually sound, it might attract EU or international donor support as part of Syria's reconstruction assistance. Germany should also work closely with international organisations—**IOM, UNHCR and ILO**—especially if Syria itself has limited capacity. These organisations can help verify candidates, ensure the voluntariness of participation and monitor conditions. Germany must navigate the political sensitivities of cooperating with Syria, ensuring the agreement does not legitimise an ostracised regime. Channelling cooperation through technical bodies or third parties, and clearly communicating the agreement's humanitarian and economic purpose, can help maintain transparency and public trust.

Conclusion

A bilateral labour recruitment agreement between Germany and Syria offers a strategic and compassionate policy instrument to address two pressing challenges: Germany's shortage of workers and Syria's need to rebuild a shattered nation. By focusing on critical sectors, building workers' skills, protecting their rights, facilitating circular migration and learning from international best practices, the proposed framework strives for a balance of **conciseness and depth** in design—simple enough to be practical, yet comprehensive enough to ensure fairness and effectiveness. It represents a shift towards **managed migration pathways** that can reduce irregular migration pressures by opening legal channels (in line with Germany's goal of expanding regular migration options while also contributing to stability abroad). If implemented with care, this agreement could become a flagship example of how labour mobility can generate development wins for origin countries even as destination countries fill critical needs.

The success of a Germany–Syria labour agreement will depend on sustained political will, investment in training and integration, as well as flexible implementation. Measuring outcomes—such as job placements in Germany and contributions to Syria's reconstruction—will be key, and early challenges can be managed through robust planning and stakeholder engagement.

As shown by past similar agreements, bilateral labour partnerships can address labour shortages while supporting humanitarian and development goals. A well-designed Syria agreement would not only serve Germany's economic needs but also contribute to regional stability and global cooperation.

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