TRT WORLD research centre

Safe Return or Not?
Expectations vs. Reality of Syrian Refugee Repatriation

Kübra Aktaş

(Ömer Alven - Anadolu Agency)

The fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 was hailed as a turning point that could finally enable millions of displaced Syrians to return home. Yet nearly a year later, the optimism surrounding refugee repatriation has collided with a far more complex reality. This policy outlook, *"Safe Return or Not? Expectations vs. Reality of Syrian Refugee Repatriation,"* explores the disparity between projected and actual returns in the post-Assad era. Drawing on recent UNHCR and IOM data, it traces how fragile security, devastated infrastructure, and economic collapse continue to obstruct large-scale return. The analysis also reveals how political fragmentation and localised power struggles shape who can safely go back—and who cannot. Ultimately, it argues that durable repatriation hinges not on regime change but on restoring sovereignty, rebuilding essential services, and reviving livelihoods to make return both voluntary and sustainable.

Background

The collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 was widely seen as a turning point in Syria's protracted conflict. After over a decade of war and the displacement of more than 13.5 million Syrians (including 7.4 million internally displaced persons and over 6 million refugees abroad), Assad's departure raised hopes that refugees would finally journey home. Some observers and host countries spoke of a possible wave of voluntary returns. For example, UNHCR initially floated a scenario in which up to one million refugees could return in the first half of 2025 if conditions in Syria stabilised.

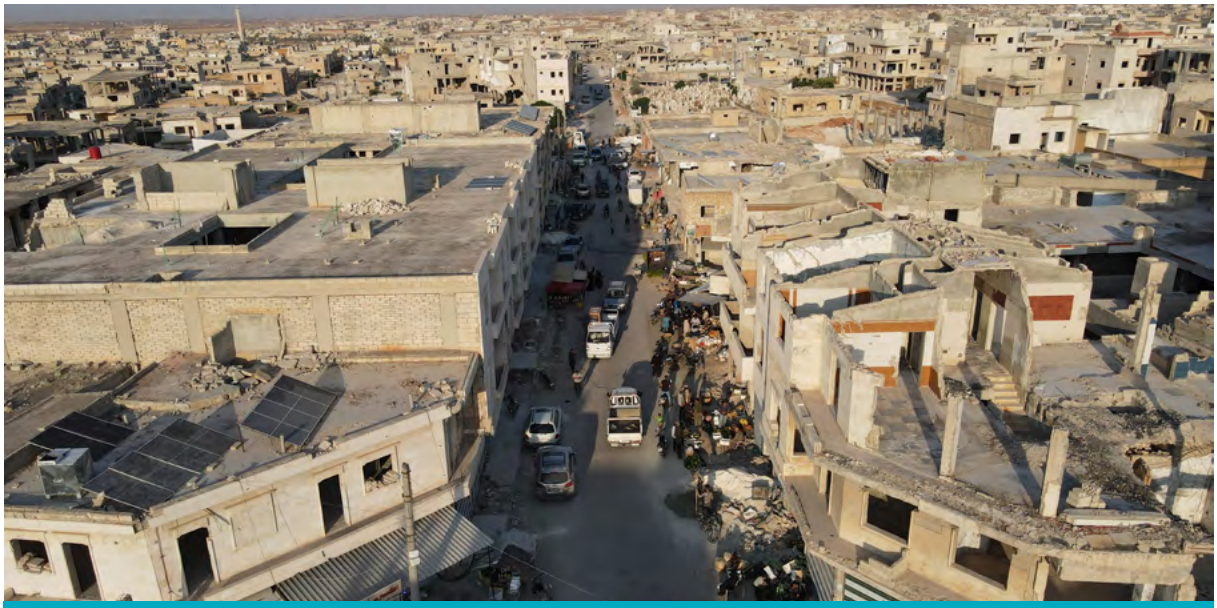
This optimism, however, was tempered by seasoned experts. The Migration Policy Institute reminded policymakers that historically it took nearly ten years for even half of Bosnia's displaced to return after the 1990s conflict. Indeed, UNHCR's own guidance in late 2024 emphasised that Syria was not yet safe for large-scale return and that repatriation should only occur once security, infrastructure, and basic needs had been addressed. In a December 2024 position paper, UNHCR emphasised that while every refugee has the right to go home, Syria's prevailing conditions—ongoing violence, widespread destruction, explosive remnants of war, and unresolved housing and property disputes—were nowhere near conducive to mass return. The agency explicitly urged states to refrain from forced repatriations and to suspend any negative asylum decisions for Syrians.

By mid-2025, realities on the ground bore out the cautious approach. Rather than an immediate mass exodus, returns have been gradual and limited by material conditions. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) estimated that as of June 2025, about 1.8 million displaced Syrians had returned to their home areas since Assad's fall – but the vast majority (around 1.3 million) were internally displaced people (IDPs) returning within Syria to their towns and villages. Only roughly 482,000 refugees were returning from abroad, well under early optimistic projections.

Initial tracking showed approximately half of those returning from abroad came from Türkiye, one-third from Lebanon, and the rest from Jordan, Iraq, and other countries. In Türkiye specifically, the Presidency of Migration Management reported about 411,649 Syrians returned voluntarily since December 2024, while some 2,555,560 Syrians remain under temporary protection there. By early September 2025, UNHCR figures indicated a total of around 862,000 cross-border refugee returns to Syria alongside 1.7 million IDP returns – steady movement, but far slower than the hopeful rhetoric of late 2024.

Crucially, conditions inside Syria have not improved enough to support large inflows of returnees. A May 2025 assessment by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) identified six structural barriers to sustainable return: destroyed infrastructure, lack of basic services, disrupted education, economic collapse, unresolved housing/land/property (HLP) issues, and ongoing security risks. NRC and other humanitarian actors warned that without major investments in recovery and reintegration, premature mass returns could backfire – exacerbating social tensions or even leading returnees to flee again.

In other words, the pace of repatriation is being dictated not only by political milestones, but also by tangible realities on the ground. This emerging gap between expectations and reality highlights urgent questions about the trajectory of Syrian refugee returns in the post-Assad era, and underscores that any large-scale repatriation will likely be a gradual process tied to improvements in security, infrastructure, and livelihoods rather than a swift flood triggered by regime change.



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Expected vs. Actual Returns

In the immediate aftermath of Assad's ouster, public expectations for refugee repatriation were high. Buoyed by the regime's fall, some politicians in host countries (especially in Türkiye) boldly predicted a rapid surge of returns. Early claims, often cited in media, suggested that *up to* one million Syrians could go back within months, provided if Syria became fully stabile. For instance, UNHCR officials noted the potential for such large-scale return *if* security improved and reconstruction began, a point that was widely picked up in the press and by policymakers. In Türkiye, which hosts the largest Syrian refugee population, this was welcomed as an opportunity to relieve domestic pressures.

However, these optimistic forecasts were highly conditional – and as events have shown, the reality brings a healthy dose of realism to the mix. Humanitarian experts consistently cautioned that without concrete improvements inside Syria, refugees would not rush home *en masse*.

In fact, **refugee return figures in 2025** have followed a realistic and gradual trajectory, falling predictably short of the overtly optimistic—and highly politicised—statements that preceded them.

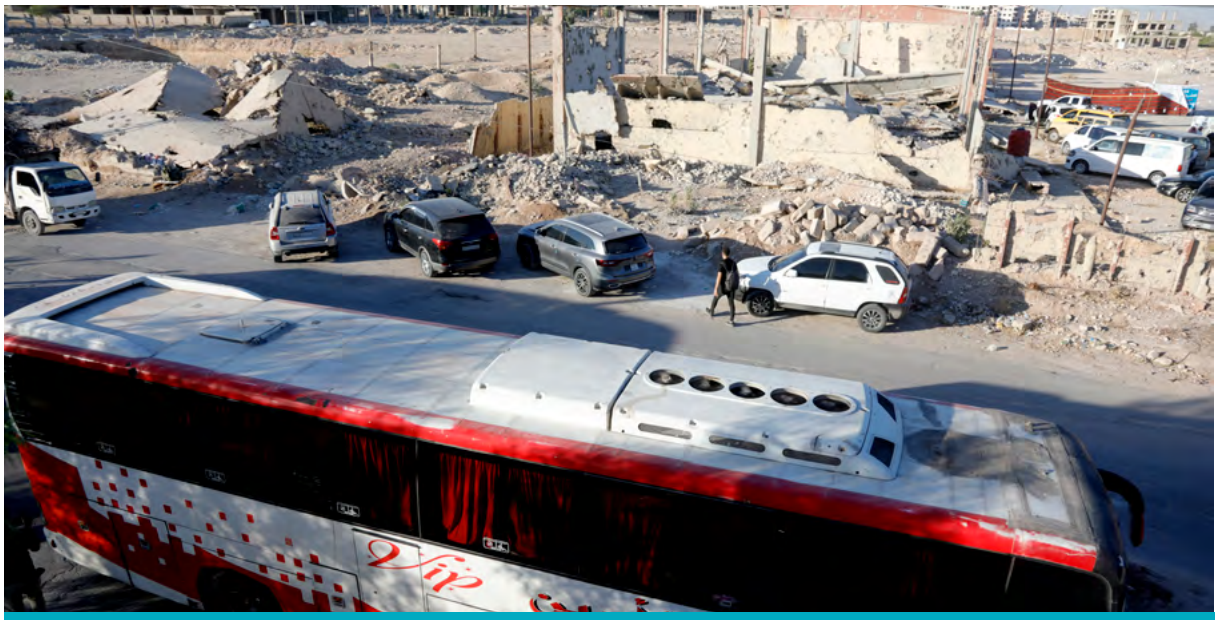
- ***Türkiye:*** Approximately **411,649** Syrians have safely and voluntarily returned from Türkiye to Syria from 8 December 2024 through August 2025. This reflects a noteworthy movement but represent only a fraction of the **2.56 million** Syrians who remain under Temporary Protection in Türkiye as of August 2025 (Türkiye's Syrian refugee population has declined from a peak of 3.7 million in 2021 to about 2.55 million as of September 2025).
- ***Lebanon:*** Around **270,000** Syrians have returned from Lebanon to Syria as of mid-2025, according to UNHCR monitoring, but nearly half of these movements were temporary or short-term visits rather than permanent repatriation. In July 2025, Lebanon, with UN support, launched a meagre initiative, providing $100 per returning individual (and $400 per family) as a scanty financial incentive to encourage refugees to go back. While thousands took up this offer, many have encountered poor conditions in Syria and some have later returned back to Lebanon when life at home proved unsustainable.
- ***Jordan:*** By June 2025, just over **100,000** Syrian refugees had returned from Jordan to Syria. More than half of these departures occurred in the second quarter of 2025, as momentum built after the school year and with organised efforts from refugee camps. Many returnees left from the main camps (Zaatari and Azraq), aided by UNHCR counselling and "go-and-see" visits to assess conditions. Still, the vast majority of Jordan's Syrian refugees (over **1.2 million** people) have not returned and continue to face hard conditions in Jordan's towns and camps.
- ***Iraq:*** Returns from Iraq have been minimal. By mid-2025 roughly **5,500** Syrian refugees in Iraq had gone back to Syria, mainly via the Fishkhabour crossing in the north. This small figure reflects both the relatively smaller Syrian refugee population in Iraq and Iraq's own struggles with instability and reconstruction. Syrian families in Iraq appear to be taking a "wait-and-see" approach, given that conditions in parts of Syria are not markedly better than in Iraq.

Humanitarian organisations warn that even these returns may not all be sustainable. In NRC's May 2025 assessment across Syria, about 43% of surveyed returnees said their homes were completely destroyed or virtually uninhabitable, and around 40% reported either lacking housing or missing adequate ownership documents to prove title or reclaim property. Returnees also described severe shortages of electricity, clean water, and basic services in areas of return—conditions NRC documents in detail for southern and central regions (power available as little as 45–60 minutes per 8 hours in some localities). Taken together, these material constraints help explain why some movements are cautious, cyclical, or reversible, reinforcing the case for planning on a long-haul trajectory rather than an overnight transformation.

Intention–Action Gap

The euphoria surrounding Bashar al-Assad's downfall ignited hopes of a mass refugee return. Surveys show that most Syrian refugees hope to go home eventually (around 80%), but only a minority intend to do so soon. This intention–action gap has played out after Assad's fall: in the first nine months, roughly **1 million** refugees returned to Syria, while about five times that number remain abroad. Many refugees are taking a cautious "wait-and-see" stance – some rushed back for short visits to celebrate or assess conditions, but have not yet moved back permanently. Clearly, a political turning point alone has not translated into mass repatriation.

A chief reason for this gap is that material conditions in Syria remain dire. After 14 years of war, much of the country lies in ruins – homes destroyed, infrastructure shattered – leaving returnees without adequate shelter, water, electricity or healthcare. Livelihood prospects are equally bleak, as many who fled have no jobs or farms to return to. At the same time, years in exile have allowed many Syrians to put down roots elsewhere. Some secured long-term residencies or citizenships in host countries, built careers, and educated their children abroad. These new ties, combined with uncertainty inside Syria, dampen the urgency to return now even though the desire remains. In short, most refugees ardently wish to go back to a safe Syria someday, but far fewer find it realistic under current conditions.



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Political and Security Dimensions

Even after Assad's fall, Syria's security landscape remains challenging for the State. While an internationally recognised central authority has taken shape in Damascus and managed to organise elections, its reach is critically undermined by foreign-backed secessionism. External interference, particularly from Israel, has actively stoked secessionist sentiments in Alawite, Druze, and Kurdish areas, fuelling a proliferation of armed insurrections that aim to create a massive security void.

In the west, remnants of the former regime's military and intelligence apparatus, though receiving external support, failed in their attempt to establish a guerrilla front in the coastal regions. Meanwhile, the YPG/PYD—a group sustained by U.S. backing—continues to exercise de facto control over vast swathes of the northeast, administering these territories as a separate entity. The situation is equally volatile in the south, as Suwayda remains dominated by local Druze militias that openly boast of their Israeli connections and pursue a secessionist agenda, further tearing at the country's fragile territorial integrity.

This situation undermines returnees' safety and complicates governance, making it difficult for refugees to reclaim property or trust that reconstruction efforts will be protected. A weak state apparatus means that rebuilding, property restitution, and basic service delivery remain inconsistent across regions.

Refugee return is not purely a humanitarian issue but also a deeply political one. Local actors often view population movements as tools to consolidate power. They may encourage the return of those seen as loyal while discouraging others based on perceived ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation. This has produced selective patterns of repatriation—a political economy of return—where demographic engineering is used to strengthen local control. Such practices weaken the principle of voluntary and safe return for all, replacing it with selective inclusion based on political or communal alignment.

These national fractures manifest differently across Syria's regions, directly shaping the security environment for returnees:

- ***Coastal Governorates (Latakia, Tartus):*** Traditionally strongholds of the former regime, these regions have seen periodic instability in the post-Assad period. Sporadic revenge attacks, score-settling, and community tensions have hindered stabilisation efforts. Many displaced families remain hesitant to return to areas, in which old grievances still fuel cycles of retribution.

- ***Southern Syria (Suwayda):*** In the south, Druze-majority regions continue to face volatility. Incited and funded by Israel, local armed factions attack other ethnic groups and practice ethnic cleansing. They also resort to kidnappings and extortion along major transport routes. These security challenges create an atmosphere of fear, limiting safe movement and deterring return. Israel's interference has complicated the area's fragile stability exponentially.

- ***Northeastern Regions (Hasakah, Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor):*** In the northeast, multiple local entities operate under the yoke of the YPG/PYD terror apparatus. As such, the situation remains volatile, while security and administrative control remain fragmented. The illegal YPG/PYD terror governance system makes it difficult

for returnees to reclaim property or access essential documentation. Many displaced families still view the region's divided authority as a key obstacle to safe and lasting repatriation.

Beyond these tangible security risks lies a deep trust deficit. Refugees closely follow developments at home and remain unconvinced that any actor can guarantee their safety. In many places, armed groups provide security in place of a national police or judiciary, fuelling fears of arbitrary detention, forced recruitment, or extortion. The absence of impartial institutions leaves returnees vulnerable, with little recourse to justice should they face abuses.

The mushrooming illegal secessionist systems create new problems as these pseudo authorities issue their own identification or property documents, many of which are not recognised elsewhere. This chaotic and unlawful pluralism creates uncertainty and risk: a document valid in one area might be invalid—or even dangerous—in another. Such inconsistencies make reclaiming homes or proving ownership extremely difficult, further eroding refugees' confidence in the safety and fairness of the return process.

Risks and Outlook

The road ahead for repatriation is fraught with risks, so a cautious outlook is warranted. Security remains precarious in post-conflict Syria. Assad's removal did not instantly bring peace – violence and instability persist in parts of the country. The United Nations warns that large-scale returns would be premature until safety can be assured, and under international law refugees cannot be forced back to an unsafe homeland. Yet some neighbouring countries facing domestic pressure have previously deported Syrians, raising the risk of involuntary returns before conditions are truly secure. Such premature repatriation would endanger lives and violate refugee protections.

Even voluntary returnees face daunting challenges that could imperil the sustainability of their return. Over a decade of war displaced millions and left Syria's infrastructure devastated. Early returnees have found their former homes damaged or destroyed, with basic services still in shambles. Without swift investments in rebuilding schools, hospitals, and houses, these initial returns may prove only

(Bakr Al Kasem - Anadolu Agency)

temporary, as UNHCR High Commissioner Filippo Grandi cautions. Refugee returns are therefore likely to unfold slowly over many years. Historically, even ten years after major conflicts, only about 30% of refugees return on average. Pushing people to go back *en masse* before conditions stabilise could undermine Syria's fragile recovery, risking renewed upheaval. By contrast, steady improvements in security and living conditions can gradually build confidence for more families to come home.

Policy Recommendations

Closing the return gap requires directly improving conditions in Syria. Efforts should focus on several priorities, including, **reinforcing sovereignty, housing and property, basic services**, and **livelihoods** – to make voluntary returns viable. Key recommendations include:

- **Reinforce Central Sovereignty and Legitimate Institutions:** To address the political and security impediments to safe return, the international community and the Syrian government must prioritize a dual track of reinforcing the central state's legitimate authority and dismantling the architecture of foreign-backed secessionism**.** The current fragmentation is the primary enabler of the "trust deficit" that deters sustainable returns.

- **Restore Housing, Land and Property (HLP) Rights:** Launch large-scale housing reconstruction and repair programs to address Syria's severe housing shortages, and establish transparent processes for refugees to reclaim lost homes or land, receive compensation, and obtain property documents. Clearing rubble and rebuilding shelters is urgent to provide safe, dignified housing for returnees. Removing legal obstacles (e.g. repealing confiscatory decrees) will reassure refugees that they can securely reclaim their homes.

- **Rehabilitate Essential Services and Infrastructure:** Repair and restore basic services across Syria. This means fixing war-damaged water systems, power grids, sanitation, roads, schools, and clinics. Donors must sharply increase funding for infrastructure and recovery projects, as current aid covers barely a quarter of needs. Rebuild hospitals and schools to serve both returnees and local residents, restoring healthcare and education in devastated areas. A related study on the return of displaced Syrian health workers highlights that enabling medical staff to go back is critical for restoring healthcare access, as without qualified personnel, rebuilt facilities cannot function effectively. Meanwhile, host countries and aid agencies should continue supporting refugees who remain abroad, so that returns are truly voluntary and not driven by desperation.

- **Revive Livelihoods and Economic Opportunities:** Spur job creation and economic revival to help returning Syrians sustain themselves. Provide returnees with grants or microcredit to start small businesses, and fund public works programs that rebuild infrastructure while creating jobs. Partner with Syrian enterprises to revive agriculture, manufacturing, and other key sectors wrecked by war. Expand vocational training – especially for youths who grew up in exile – to build skills for the recovering job market. Ensure livelihood programs benefit local residents as well as returnees to foster social cohesion and avoid job competition.

Effective implementation will demand strong coordination and political will. Syrian authorities must collaborate with UN agencies, NGOs, and donors to implement these measures, while committing to inclusive, accountable governance. Host countries also have a role: they can share data to verify property claims, permit "go-and-see" visits for refugees to inspect conditions back home (as has been piloted in Türkiye), and refrain from stripping refugee status prematurely.

Conclusion

Syrian refugee returns after Assad's fall are real, but gradual. Nearly 1.8 million displaced Syrians have gone back to their towns and villages since December 2024, yet the majority are internally displaced rather than refugees abroad. Only about half a million cross-border returns have taken place so far, underscoring that political change alone does not guarantee repatriation on a mass scale.

The evidence is clear: material realities—secure housing, functioning services, and viable livelihoods—will determine the pace and sustainability of returns. Without these, early movements risk being temporary or even reversed.

For policymakers, the priority is not to chase numbers but to invest in conditions that make return durable. Restoring sovereignty and territorial integrity as well as property rights, rebuilding essential infrastructure, and supporting livelihoods are the pillars that can gradually close the gap between refugee' hopes and their ability to go home.

If pursued patiently and effectively, these efforts can ensure that when Syrians do return, their decision is not only voluntary and safe, but also lasting and sustainable.