



Voluntary Returns to Syria

Mapping Return Aspirations and Motivations of Syrians Residing in Sweden and the EU

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The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in December 2024 and the end of the over 13-year Syrian civil war is said to have marked a pivotal moment for Syrians displaced in the European Union (EU), with many hoping to return and rebuild their country of origin as a result. Syria, however, continues to find itself in a state of political uncertainty and a severe humanitarian crisis. As EU countries are preparing for, and at times encouraging, returns to Syria, what is the current state of knowledge regarding the return¹ aspirations and motivations of Syrians residing in Sweden and the broader EU?

¹ This policy brief mainly focuses on *voluntary returns*. In this case, this definition includes: those who are legal residents in the host country but want to/are considering return to their country of origin; those who have been denied legal residence in their host country (but want to return to their country of origin before their case is handled by force); or those who are still waiting for a decision in their migration case in their host country but want to return to their country of origin before they receive it. See the methodology section in this policy brief for more information about the terminology used regarding returns. It should also be noted that host country refers to the country that the migrant is residing in, but is not originally from (in this context, an EU country), while country of origin refers to the country that the migrant is originally from (in this context, Syria).

Background and Purpose

In the aftermath of the Assad regime's collapse in December 2024, EU countries have initiated plans to strengthen economic and security ties with Syria, following years of sanctions (Bayer & Dalatey, 2026). Significant aid grants to Syria are also being approved. The Swedish government, for example, has explicitly stated that it has readjusted its aid to Syria² in order to support reconstruction in the country and increase opportunities for returns (Utrikesdepartementet, 2025). Sweden's regional strategy for the Syria crisis 2024–2027 states that when it comes to the area of migration, refugees, and return, Swedish development assistance will focus on activities that contribute to the objectives of:

... reduced forced displacement and irregular migration and their root causes; better conditions for increased returns and voluntary returns to, and sustainable reintegration in Syria; [and] greater capacity in neighbouring countries to ensure a sustainable situation for refugees and host communities.

(Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025, p. 2)³

In addition to tying development aid to achieve the objective of increasing returns, both EU countries and Syria's neighbouring host countries have openly called for Syrians to return to Syria following the fall of the Assad regime (Davidoff-Gore & Fratzke, 2024). For instance, Germany's Chancellor, Friedrich Merz, drew widespread attention after suggesting that 80% of Syrians residing in Germany are to return to Syria within the next three years. Merz later clarified that he was merely conveying what he described as the wish of Syria's interim President, Ahmed al-Sharaa (a

² In June 2024, Sweden's regional strategy for the Syria crisis 2024–2026 was adopted and amounted to SEK 880 million. The strategy has now been extended until 2027, and increased by SEK 295 million (Utrikesdepartementet, 2025). Thus, Sweden's regional strategy for the Syria crisis 2024–2027 amounts to SEK 1.175 million.

³ The linkage of developmental aid with Swedish migration policy objectives has faced criticism, including conditioning aid to countries expected to reaccept deported citizens (Schaar, 2026), such as, Syrians convicted of crimes in Sweden (The Syrian Observer, 2025).

clarification that was thereafter denied by al-Sharaa) (Thurau, 2026).⁴ In another example, in June 2025, Sweden’s Migration Minister Johan Forssell, explained that the conditions for return to Syria have changed, and that “people that have come from Syria and have been granted temporary protection [in Sweden]– for many of them, it will become relevant to return home” [author’s own translation] (Radio Sweden, 2025).

In alignment with this stance, during 2025, the Swedish Migration Agency was tasked, through a government directive for appropriations, to map the need for measures ahead of possible returns to Syria. The mapping included, for instance, the practical conditions for voluntary return, the intentions of Syrian nationals in the EU to return, support mechanisms in Syria that can facilitate return, and the issue of voluntary return grants⁵ (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 3). On January 1, 2026, Sweden introduced a significantly increased voluntary return grant in order to encourage voluntary returns of individuals with certain residence permits.⁶ In its first month, the new voluntary return grant attracted 272 applications, 170 of which came from Syrian citizens (Willander, 2026).

At the same time as a rhetoric of return is pervasive across both Sweden and the broader EU, the current state of Syria can be described as both volatile and fragmented, potentially affecting the willingness of Syrians to return. The Syrian transitional government has stated their openness for all Syrians to *gradually* return to the country (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, January 2026, p. 144). During 2025, however, reports of brutal sectarian violence and the persecution of minorities in Syria made international headlines (Mixed

⁴ Despite the controversy, Syrian doctors have consistently been encouraged to remain in Germany, as they are known to fill critical gaps in the healthcare system (Thurau, 2026; Faiola & Brady, 2025).

⁵ In Swedish, this is referred to as *återvandring*, and can be translated to mean voluntary return or voluntary repatriation. In this case, voluntary return grants refers to grants facilitating the voluntary return of individuals with certain residence permits in Sweden, who meet certain requirements.

⁶ In Swedish, this is referred to as *återvandringsbidrag*. The grant, which was previously set at 10,000 SEK, now offers up to SEK 350,000 per adult (and up to SEK 600,000 per household), and is available to individuals with certain residence permits, who meet certain requirements, and want to voluntarily return to their country of origin or another country where they have the right to live.

Migration Centre, 2025). Not only is Syria itself experiencing significant volatility, but the Middle East as a whole is experiencing profound instability. Current regional hostilities related to the U.S./Israel-Iran war, ongoing since February 28, 2026, have contributed to an increase in returns to Syria from neighbouring countries. According to UNHCR, between March 2 and March 27, nearly 180,000 Syrians (and more than 28,000 Lebanese) have crossed the border from Lebanon to Syria, fleeing bombardments in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2026).

Thus, since the fall of the Assad regime, return dynamics remain complex and "...return experiences vary widely by area, community, and individual circumstances" (The Danish Immigration Service, December 2025, p. 19 & 29). The ongoing Syrian humanitarian crisis remains a significant concern influencing conditions for return. A report by International Rescue Committee (IRC) published in 2025, noted that more than 16.7 million people in Syria were reliant on humanitarian assistance in order to survive.⁷ According to the same report "...43% of Syria's hospitals, 63% of primary healthcare facilities, 63% of water support networks, 81% of electricity networks, and 33% of all schools are now either damaged or destroyed." (IRC, 2025, pp. 2-3). In addition to reporting difficulties with accessing basic services, returnees have also experienced significant difficulties with legal documentation and livelihood opportunities (EUAA, December 2025, p. 18).⁸ Given the widespread destruction in Syria described above, non-governmental organisations such as the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) argue that the current conditions on the ground do not provide a basis for safe and dignified returns (DRC, 2026).

Yet, what do we *actually* know about the return aspirations and motivations of Syrians residing in Sweden and the broader EU? The aim of this policy brief is to facilitate a better understanding of the return aspirations and

⁷ Statistics available in September 2025 contend that 90% of Syria's population are living in poverty, and 66% are living in extreme poverty (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 7).

⁸ It should be noted that the lack of access to documentation can have a profound effect on returnees, and is often not given a fair share of attention in return publications regarding Syria. According to an IOM report published in January 2026, "[w]ithout access to documentation, returnees are unable to access humanitarian assistance, government schemes, employment opportunities, alongside HLP [*housing, land, and property*] claims" (IOM, January 2026, p. 2).

motivations⁹ of Syrians residing in Sweden and the broader EU. It emphasizes the need for evidence-based policies that account for the complexities of voluntarily returning to a country that continues to exhibit significant vulnerabilities.

Methodology

This policy brief uses the Delmi research overview *The Role of European Host Countries in Voluntary Return Migration* (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025) as its point of departure. The report reviews 62 studies on the role of European national governments in influencing voluntary return migration of migrants residing in their countries, and different factors associated with voluntary return migration (in particular the return of migrants with a legal right to stay). This policy brief builds upon the findings in the report by incorporating a case study of Syria following the fall of the Assad regime. It is based on a review of all available published reports (to the best of the author's knowledge) from recognized organisations, covering the period from December 2024 to April 2026, and examining the return aspirations and motivations of Syrians residing in the EU.¹⁰

This policy brief, at times, focuses on the situation of Syrians residing in Sweden. However, target group analyses in Sweden was limited and omitted in instances where a small sample of Syrians interviewed did not permit broader generalizations.¹¹ Academic peer-reviewed articles were initially intended to be included in this policy brief. However, relevant studies covering return aspirations and motivations during the selected period were

⁹ Return aspirations refers to *whether* one wants to return, while return motivations refers to the reasons as to *why* a person wants to return.

¹⁰ Due to the limited number of reports available, this policy brief has also included reports by relevant authorities when of use, website articles by recognized organizations, and two academic blogposts on the topic (written by academics). Student dissertations have been excluded from the review. Reports on the return aspirations and motivations of Syrians residing in Syria's neighbouring countries during the same period were consulted for background knowledge (for the author) on how return aspirations and motivations differ between Syrians residing in the EU versus Syrians residing in neighbouring countries. Some statistics are included for comparison, when deemed appropriate.

¹¹ In this case: Infab, 2025.

only identified for Syrians displaced in Syria's neighbouring countries and were therefore excluded from the analysis.¹²

Definition of voluntary return

In Sweden, the term *återvändring* (often translated to mean voluntary repatriation) refers to the voluntary return of individuals with residency in the host country. In contrast, the term *återvändande* refers to the return of those who are denied residence in the host country and have to return either voluntarily (although the level of voluntariness in this case is often discussed)¹³ or by force.¹⁴ Other EU states however do not always make this distinction (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 19).

Thus, the term *voluntary return migration* can refer to those who are legal residents, those who have been denied legal residence (but want to return before their case is handled by force), or those who are still waiting for a decision in their migration case but want to return before they receive it. This policy brief therefore includes reports that look at the voluntary return motivations and aspirations of Syrians regardless of legal residence status, as this information is not always provided. In cases where legal residence status in the host country is explicitly linked to an individual's willingness (or unwillingness) to return, this will be noted in the results section.

Results

Statistics regarding Syrian displacement

As of June 2025, a total of over 12 million Syrians remained displaced. This number includes 6.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within Syria, and 6.1 million refugees and asylum seekers residing outside of Syria. The majority of Syrian nationals residing outside of Syria are residing in neighbouring countries (IOM, September 2025, p. 3), with many having

¹² For academic articles focusing on return aspirations and motivations of displaced Syrians in neighbouring countries to Syria after Assad's fall, see for example: Bimay, 2026; Diab, 2006; Smadi & Al-Madi, 2026; Sleiman, 2026.

¹³ For further discussion of the complexities surrounding the use of the term voluntary in the context of return migration, see Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025.

¹⁴ In Sweden, the Swedish Migration Agency is responsible for voluntary returns, while the Swedish Police Authority is often responsible for enforcing forced returns.

resided there for over a decade (IRC, 2025, p. 6).¹⁵ Although there was a sharp drop in Syrian asylum applications in the EU in early 2025, 1.3 million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers were registered as residing in the EU as of June 2025. The majority, 60%, were registered as residing in Germany, while 6–10% were residing in Austria, the Netherlands, and Sweden (IOM, September 2025, p. 3).

Statistics regarding actual returns from the EU to Syria

UNHCR reported, on August 7, 2025, that circa 1.1 million Syrians displaced *abroad* had returned to Syria under 2024 and 2025. Of these, more than 750,000 were recorded as having returned to Syria since the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024. Of all recorded returns under 2024 and 2025, only 0.6% were from *non-neighbouring* countries (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 7).¹⁶ The number of returns to Syria has been increasing since then. As of March 2026, over 1.28 million Syrians displaced *abroad* have been recorded as returning to Syria since December 2024 (IOM, March 2026, p. 3). The number of returnees from *non-neighbouring* countries continues to remain low, constituting less than 3% of all returns during the month of March 2026 alone (IOM, March 2026, p. 6).

¹⁵ The IRC has launched a series of *Regional Rapid Intentions Surveys* among Syrian refugees displaced in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Türkiye. Four surveys (mid-December 2024, mid-March 2025, mid-June 2025, and mid-September 2025) have thus far been conducted. In total, 3,700 surveys have been completed, representing circa 21,000 Syrian refugees in these four countries. According to the mid-September 2025 survey, 84% of respondents have been residing in host countries for over a decade, including 99% of respondents in Jordan, 75% in Lebanon, and 43% in Türkiye.

¹⁶ Returns from *neighbouring* countries during this period include: 41% from Lebanon, 36% from Türkiye, 16% from Jordan, 5% from Iraq and 2.4% from Egypt (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 7). It should be noted however, that the permanent nature of returns from neighbouring countries to Syria are difficult to map. For example, humanitarian workers in Lebanon have stated that it is not uncommon for Syrians residing in Lebanon to return to Syria “irregularly” to reunite with family and assess the situation, in order to then return back to Lebanon once again (Migrationsverket, August 2025, p. 6). Another report states that, according to the Syrian embassy in Beirut, Syrians initially displaced in Lebanon, who have returned to Syria, have thereafter returned back to Lebanon for work due to higher salaries. Other returnees have later returned back, once again, to Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan, once they were aware of the conditions on the ground in Syria when it comes to access to schooling, healthcare and livelihood opportunities (The Danish Immigration Service, December 2025, p. 29).

Reliable data on returnees to Syria from specifically the EU are limited. According to a European Commission Blueprint analysis from April 2025, 2,411 Syrian nationals residing in the EU who had not received a return decision had voluntarily returned to Syria between December 8, 2024, and the end of March 2025. During the same period, 1,518 Syrian nationals in the EU withdrew their applications for international protection (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 19). In May 2025, Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, stated in a news release that they had facilitated the voluntary return of more than 1,000 Syrian nationals from 14 different EU member states to Syria since March 2025 (Frontex, 2025).

Statistics regarding return aspirations from the EU to Syria

Regarding return aspirations for Syrians residing in the EU, however, there are a couple of published reports.¹⁷ UNHCR published a report in May 2025 examining the return aspirations of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers residing in Europe. 3,736 individuals¹⁸ (representing 17,378 household members) completed the survey in selected European countries (not all of which were EU member states)¹⁹ between March 14 and April 14, 2025. Focus group discussions were also held with over 150 Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in selected European countries (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 4 & 12).²⁰ While 3% of respondents were planning to permanently return to Syria within the next 12 months (with half having already made concrete preparations), 81% of respondents were *not* planning to return to Syria within

¹⁷ Surveys of return aspirations for Syrians displaced in Syria's neighbouring countries, or the situation for those having returned from primarily neighbouring countries to Syria, are however easier to come by. See for example: UNHCR, April 2026; IRC, 2025; Upinion, May 2025; NRC, May 2025; IOM, January 2026; IOM, March 2026.

¹⁸ Regarding legal status: 41% of respondents were recognized refugees, 40% obtained complementary protection, 10% were asylum applicants and 8% obtained humanitarian status.

¹⁹ Survey countries included were Austria (22% of responses), Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus (8% of responses), Denmark, France, Germany (10% of responses), Greece, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the Netherlands (36% of responses), and the United Kingdom (7% of responses). Additional responses due to snowball sampling from: Croatia, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta and Romania.

²⁰ Focus group countries were Austria, Cyprus, France, Germany, Greece, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

the next 12 months.²¹ Although the main reasons for returning included accessing property and reuniting with relatives, as well as securing work/livelihood opportunities and feeling that security had improved, the main reasons for *not* returning were primarily influenced by concerns regarding safety and security in Syria and needing to maintain legal status in host countries (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 3 & 8).

A report published by IOM in September 2025 also specifically examined the return aspirations and intentions of Syrians residing in the Netherlands. A total of 897 individuals (representing 2,822 household members)²² participated in the survey²³ between May 15 and June 30, 2025 (IOM, September 2025, pp. 8, 10 & 33). Similarly to the statistics presented in the UNHCR (May 2025) report, 70% of survey respondents expected to remain in the Netherlands over the coming year. Circa 20% remained undecided whether to return or not. 58% of survey respondents stated that they would consider returning to Syria at a later point in time, *were* conditions there to improve, while 35% of respondents stated that they do not wish to *ever* return to Syria (IOM, September 2025, p. 1 & 11).

For survey respondents in the Netherlands, 46% of respondents pointed to a lack of safety and security as a main barrier to return, "...followed by limited housing, lack of employment opportunities, and limited access to essential services and infrastructure" (IOM, September 2025, p. 1). Reported barriers to return aspirations in both the UNHCR (May 2025) and IOM (September 2025) studies align closely with findings from Delmi's research overview on voluntary return migration (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025).

²¹ According to information provided to the Swedish Migration Agency from UNHCR, only 56 individuals in Sweden were part of the report's data sample. Of these respondents, 37 individuals had replied that they planned to stay in Sweden the next 12 months, 6 planned to return permanently to Syria the next 12 months, 7 planned to move to another country, and 6 were unsure of their plans (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 20).

²² Of the individuals interviewed, 55% had Dutch citizenship, 25% had a residence permit (based on family, work or study reasons), 5% had refugee status, 4% had temporary/subsidiary protection and 11% were asylum applicants. Less than 1% had no permit or expired stay.

²³ The survey included a mixture of quantitative phone surveys and in-depth qualitative phone interviews.

The overview indicates that conditions in the country of origin play a central role in shaping return decisions. In particular, political instability, insecurity, and economic conditions are commonly identified as major obstacles, alongside limited access to basic services and infrastructure. It also highlights that the possibility of future mobility or re-migration to the host country is an important factor in influencing return decisions (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 63). These factors will therefore be explored further in this policy brief, as they are discussed in the reports covered.²⁴

Conditions related to EU host country: legal status

According to Delmi's research overview, migrants are more likely to consider return if they are able to retain their legal status in the host country, access mobility rights (for example, dual citizenship or re-entry possibilities), and obtain transnational connections,²⁵ thereby opening up for possibilities of remigration/circular migration (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 7 & 79). The overview found that preservation of legal status was of particular importance for migrants, with the aim of safeguarding future mobility options "...when return involves significant uncertainty in the country of origin", and migrants often delayed or avoided return until a legal status in the host country was acquired (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 52 & 54). Legal status thus becomes a "...critical enabler of choice" contributing to the "...feasibility, safety, and timing of return" (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 55).

The importance of maintaining legal status in the host country²⁶ — and thereby preserving future mobility options — was also highlighted by Syrians

²⁴ For information on how gender and age influence return decisions, please refer to the reports covered in this policy brief themselves. Although gender and age are both mentioned in the UNHCR (May 2025) report and the IOM (September 2025) report, their correlations to (un)willingness to voluntarily return are not thoroughly discussed. Gender is, in general, often an underrepresented and omitted variable when it comes to research on return (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 71).

²⁵ For interesting transnational connections between Syrian healthcare professionals residing in Germany and healthcare initiatives in Syria after the fall of the Assad regime, see: Faiola & Brady, 2025.

²⁶ The acquisition of legal status vastly differentiates for displaced Syrians in Europe versus Syrians in neighbouring countries to Syria. According to the IRC *Rapid Return Intentions Survey* from September 2025 (conducted in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, and Türkiye), only 3% of respondents obtained citizenship in their host country and 1%

residing in European countries.²⁷ In the UNHCR (May 2025) report, participants in focus group discussions in Austria, Cyprus, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom expressed widespread concern about losing their legal status in host countries. Focus group participants revealed a fear of losing the option to remigrate if conditions in Syria were to deteriorate after a return. Maintaining legal status would also, according to focus group participants, help protect established livelihoods in the host country, such as acquired properties. Of those who were surveyed and were planning to stay in their host country for the next year (81% of respondents), 88% claimed that maintaining legal status was a very important motivation. This made it the second most reported decision-making factor, after feeling safe and secure (93%) (UNHCR, May 2025, pp. 6-8).

Discussions about so-called “go-and-see” visits often open up for grey areas regarding the ability to maintain one’s protection status in the host country. “Go-and-see” visits are initiatives/programs that would allow Syrians residing in the host country to visit or spend time in Syria in order to assess the possibility of a permanent return.²⁸ In September 2025, the Swedish Migration Agency stated that they were examining the conditions for “go-and-see” visits for Syrians with certain residence permits in Sweden who were considering voluntary returning to Syria (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 4). Discussions within the EU have also considered whether individuals granted a protection status could take part in “go-and-see” visits without risking the

obtained work permits. 100% of respondents in Jordan. 74% in Türkiye, and 43% in Lebanon relied on Temporary Protection IDs. According to IRC, “[w]hile these documents can offer basic legal recognition and short-term protection, they rarely guarantee durable rights or access to key services” (IRC, 2025, p. 7).

²⁷ According to an article published by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), as of December 2023 (one year before the fall of the Assad regime), nearly 180,000 Syrians held long-term residency in EU countries, more than 300,000 had received EU citizenship since 2013, and more than 780,000 Syrians residing in the EU still had refugee status or subsidiary protection. This number can be compared to circa 4.5 million Syrians displaced in Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan, who “...either do not have a refugee status based in law or have one that can be easily revoked by a political determination” (Davidoff-Gore & Fratzke, 2024).

²⁸ There are, at the time of writing and to the best of the author’s knowledge, no up-and-running “go-and-see” visits that would allow Syrians to return to Syria to assess a potential return, without losing their protection status in their European host country.

loss of that status (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 24).²⁹ Previous research, however, regarding “go-and-see” visits to countries such as Bosnia and Kosovo, found limited evidence that the initiatives had a real impact on return migration (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 46).

When it came to discussions about “go-and-see” visits to Syria, 44% of survey respondents in the UNHCR (May 2025) report expressed an interest.³⁰ However, barriers preventing them from participating in these visits included the fear of losing their legal status in their host country as a result of the visit, as well as security concerns in Syria. Participants in focus group discussions noted that the impact of “go-and-see” visits on their legal status was often unclear. Furthermore, they expressed fears that temporarily visiting Syria could “...be perceived as a signal that Syria is safe, potentially leading to the cessation of legal status” (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 3 & 10). Similarly to the UNHCR (May 2025) report, more than half of respondents (54%) in the Netherlands expressed an interest in participating in “go-and-see” visits, if they were able to visit Syria to assess the current conditions *without* jeopardizing their legal status in the Netherlands (IOM, September 2025, p. 2 & 24). Thus, maintaining one’s legal status in the European host country influenced the return aspirations of Syrians interviewed in both reports.

Conditions related to current situation in Syria: security

As noted earlier, among respondents in the UNHCR (May 2025) report who intended to remain in their host country for the next year (81% of

²⁹ Syria’s neighbouring countries have also been experimenting with “go-and-see” visits. Türkiye allowed for “go-and-see” visits from Türkiye to Syria between January 1, 2025, and July 1, 2025. Heads of households (or another adult family member if need be) were permitted to travel back and forth to Syria up to three times, if they returned through the same border crossing in which they left, in order to prepare for a potential return to Syria. More than 27,000 “go-and-see” visits were registered according to UNHCR. Since July 1, 2025, a temporary protection status holder in Türkiye will lose their status if they leave Türkiye (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, January 2026, pp. 139-140).

³⁰ “Go-and-see” visits were seen as essential in order to: reconnect with Syria, understand the current conditions on the ground, and make an assessment regarding the feasibility of return. Visits could also, according to some focus group participants, “...allow them to check on the condition of their homes, assess whether properties had been damaged or destroyed, check the availability of job opportunities, and carry out administrative procedures that cannot be completed from abroad” (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 10).

respondents), feeling safe and secure was the most frequently cited factor, with 93% identifying it as a very important reason for staying (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 6).³¹ In the IOM (September 2025) report, 447 individuals (i.e., nearly half of all respondents) in the Netherlands had concerns about returning to Syria, mainly due to fears of their own safety or the safety of their family members (IOM, September 2025, p. 23). This finding is not unique to the case of Syria in itself, but a common precondition for those displaced as a result of conflicts. As previous research has found, “...peace and security are not simply desirable conditions but fundamental preconditions for voluntary return particularly among those who left insecure and unstable conditions in the origin country” (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 64).

In the Syrian context, focus group participants in the UNHCR (May 2025) report highlighted concerns about kidnappings, killings, and arbitrary arrests, frequently linked to ethnic and political tensions. Targeted violence against, for example Kurds and Alawites, was also a major concern vocalized in these discussions (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 6). Nearly half of the 897 respondents who were surveyed in the Netherlands reported having personal concerns about returning to Syria due to largely having fears for their own or their family members’ safety. While 17% feared for the safety of women and children, 24% expressed fears of being targeted due to their ethno-religious affiliation, 15% due to their political background, and 3% due to their gender orientation (IOM, September 2025, p. 23). As reports have shown, targeted violence against ethno-religious minorities did not disappear with the fall of the Assad regime (Amnesty International, n.d.).

Conditions on the ground do however, when it comes to *overall* security, appear to be improving in Syria. Every so often IOM releases their Syrian

³¹ Access to safety and security in Syria continued to be a top-cited factor to influence return decisions for Syrians displaced in neighbouring countries as well, according to the IRC *Rapid Returns Intentions Survey* conducted in mid-September 2025 (IRC, 2025, p. 8). In UNHCR’s *Enhanced Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees’ Perceptions and Intentions on Return* (a survey of 7 800 Syrian households across Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon), 77% of respondents reported safety concerns about returning in June 2025. This number dropped to 69% in December 2025. Concerns were defined as “...armed actors, kidnapping, communal violence, weak law enforcement, and unexploded ordnance” (UNHCR, April 2026, pp. 1-2).

Communities of Return Index. In round 4, data was collected between January 1 and February 4, 2026, through a network of 409 field enumerators and 11,343 key informants spread across all 14 governorates in Syria (IOM, January 2026, p. 20). During this period of time, key informants reported relatively positive perceptions of safety and security. The average index of assessed locations reached a score of 4 out of 5, meaning that safety and security during this time period was “mostly conducive” for return and sustainable reintegration.³² 97% of assessed locations reported feeling safe during daytime, compared to 81% feeling safe at nighttime (IOM, January 2026, pp. 6-7).³³

Postwar violence is however ever present, as 31% of assessed locations reported the presence of mines or unexploded ordnance. 11% of communities reported some limitations on free movement (IOM, January 2026, p. 6), an indication of insecurity in terms of governance fragmentation. There is considerable geographic variation in levels of insecurity spread across Syria. For instance, 100% of key informants in Al-Hasakeh and 86% of key informants in Ar-Raqqa reported restrictions to free movement. Restrictions to free movement could be linked to an escalation of hostilities in North East Syria during that time period (IOM, January 2026, p. 7).

Despite this, Al-Hasakeh remains highly ethnically diverse, underscoring concerns raised by focus group discussants in the UNHCR (May 2025) report about the relationship between insecurity and minority identity. According to a report by the Danish Immigration Service, published in December 2025, mistrust toward interim authorities among ethnic minorities remains

³² The analytical framework used in the IOM *Communities of Return Index* reports examine five principal dimensions (of which safety and security is one) “...applied at community level to assess the extent to which locations provide conditions conducive to safe, dignified, and sustainable return.” A scoring index is used to indicate the relative conduciveness of conditions for return and sustainable reintegration: 0-1.5 (not conducive), 1.6-2.5 (challenging), 2.6-3.5 (partially conducive), 3.6-4.5 (mostly conducive), and 4.5-5 (fully conducive) (IOM, January 2026, p. 1).

³³ In the IRC *Rapid Returns Intentions Survey*, the prioritization of safety and security in Syria for Syrians displaced in neighbouring countries, although still a top-cited factor, has dropped from 45% of respondents in mid-December 2024 to 26% of respondents in mid-September 2025. The IRC has stated that this is either due to the perception of the security situation as having improved/stabilized, or that return decisions are becoming more multifaceted for those considering return (IRC, 2025, p. 8).

prevalent, driven by recent security incidents and their limited representation within the interim government. Thus, the majority of those returning to Syria are Sunni Arabs (The Danish Immigration Service, December 2025, p. 20).

Conditions related to current situation in Syria: economic conditions

Previous research findings also tell us that stable economic conditions in the origin country are a critical precondition for voluntary return. Many migrants would rather endure hardships experienced in the host country, instead of returning to a context with insecure economic conditions. In this case, stable economic conditions in the origin country are equated to mean the availability of secure livelihoods (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 65).

In focus group discussions reported in the UNHCR (May 2025) report, the main factors necessary in order to facilitate a return to Syria in the future, were listed as "...safety and security, improved infrastructure, and access to livelihood opportunities" (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 3). Participants in focus group discussions also highlighted that basic needs would be difficult to meet in Syria, due to the lack of job opportunities. Thus, a decision to remain in the host country was mentioned by participants in Germany and the UK as necessary in order to financially support family members still living in Syria. Of survey respondents who did not plan to return to Syria within the next 12 months, 68% cited livelihood opportunities as an important factor contributing to that decision (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 7).³⁴

Housing (54%) and employment-related support (53%) were cited by overall survey participants in the IOM (September 2025) report as top priorities when it came to necessary interventions to support return within Syria. Employment-related support included job training and financial support to start up a business in Syria (IOM, September 2025, pp. 25-26). Of the 9% of respondents in the Netherlands that expressed a willingness to return to Syria

³⁴ Economic conditions in Syria were reported as increasingly relevant when it came to influencing return-related decisions for Syrians displaced neighbouring countries as well, according to the IRC *Rapid Returns Intentions Survey* conducted in mid-September 2025. 6% of respondents in the mid-December 2024 survey stated that job availability or economic opportunity in Syria was a key influence in shaping return intentions, compared to 19% of respondents in the mid-September 2025 survey (IRC, 2025, p. 9).

within the next year, 19% perceived improved employment opportunities in Syria. Correspondingly, 19% of respondents willing to return to Syria within the next year *also* reported challenges regarding social integration in the Netherlands, despite 71% of them obtaining Dutch citizenship (IOM, September 2025, p. 12). Thus, a perceived improvement in livelihood opportunities were a pull factor for those wishing to return, and could be viewed as a worthy trade-off for hardships endured in the host country.

According to IOM's *Syrian Communities of Return Index* (with data collected between January 1 and February 4, 2026), economic conditions on the ground in Syria remain considerably difficult (IOM, January 2026, p. 4). This finding aligns with the concerns of those planning to stay in their host country and underscores the need for employment-related support not only for returnees but also for Syrian communities more broadly. The high cost of living in Syria was reported by key informants on the ground (84% of communities) as the most significant barrier to a sustainable return and reintegration. 76% of communities reported limited livelihood opportunities, making it difficult to meet basic needs (IOM, January 2026, p. 4). 74% of communities reported relying on the agriculture and livestock sector as their primary source of livelihoods. Shortages of equipment and tools (42%), insufficient water availability (33%) and lack of capital or investment (33%), were cited as constraints in communities where the sector was functioning at a limited capacity (IOM, January 2026, pp. 12-13). This highlights the need for investments in infrastructure restoration in Syria, with an objective to establish sustainable livelihood opportunities for *both* returnees and Syrian communities at large.

Conditions related to current situation in Syria: housing, infrastructure and basic services

Returning to a post-war setting, such as Syria, often entails housing, land and property (HLP) disputes, damaged and destroyed essential infrastructure, and a limited access to basic services. According to statistics published in September 2025, 5.7 million people in Syria lack adequate housing, as one third of all housing has been severely damaged or destroyed in the war (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 7). For Syrian respondents in the Netherlands,

housing was mentioned as a key barrier to return.³⁵ While 81% of respondents stated that they had previously owned their houses or apartments in Syria, fewer than 30% of those believed that they could return to their homes. The overwhelming majority of those who believed that they could *not* return stated that this was due to home damage or destruction (69%). Only half of those who used to own land in Syria (34% of all respondents) predicted that they would be able to use it upon return to Syria (IOM, September 2025, pp. 21-22). Although research on the topic matter is scarce, some studies show that the restoration of property, such as reclaiming lost property or receiving compensation, can help support return processes (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 55).

Additionally, a large portion of the country's infrastructure has been destroyed or severely damaged in the war. Statistics published in September 2025 stated that as a result of the war, the capacity of the country's national electricity grid was reduced to less than 25% and energy production had fallen by circa 80%. Half of Syria's water treatment plants and sewage systems were out of function, and half of the population's children, age 6 to 15, were not able to go to school (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 7). Numerous studies have established that the quality of infrastructure and basic services in countries of origin play a critical role in shaping return decisions. Major deterrents to voluntary return include "...a lack of quality schools, hospitals, reliable utilities, and other fundamental services" (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025). These services have all been negatively affected by the civil war in Syria. Of the respondents intending to stay in their European host country over the next year (81% of respondents), the third most commonly reported factor for their decision to stay was better access to services. 85% of respondents cited that this was a very important reason (UNHCR, May 2025, p. 6).³⁶

³⁵ Conditions on the ground confirm that conflicts surrounding HLP disputes are widespread throughout Syria. 52% of locations assessed in the IOM *Communities of Return Index* reported incidents related to the use of sticks and other non-firearms related to conflicts surrounding HLP disputes (IOM, January 2026, p. 7).

³⁶ Throughout all four IRC *Rapid Returns Intentions Surveys*, the lack of basic services and infrastructure inside of Syria remains the most pressing concern for roughly 78% of the respondents residing in neighbouring countries (IRC, 2025, p. 9).

Conditions related to emotional connection and agency

Recent research analysing hundreds of social media posts by Syrian returnees has highlighted the central role of dignity in motivating return. Narratives shared on digital platforms have often been found to frame return in deeply symbolic terms, with individuals describing a return to Syria as “the soul returned to the body” and asserting that “a loaf of bread eaten in my homeland is worth nothing less than paradise” (Zeyn, 2026). Testimonies also revealed that voluntary return in the form of repatriation are often driven by a desire to restore national belonging, regain personal freedom, and reclaim a dignified Syrian identity beyond the refugee label (Zeyn, 2026).

For the 9% of respondents in the Netherlands that wished to return to Syria within the next year, reasons cited for this return were mainly related to emotions, as they “...highlight the emotional bond they share with Syria, their homeland, and often want to participate in the process of rebuilding the country (64%)” (IOM, September 2025, p. 12).³⁷ The willingness to return due to the act of restoring one’s sense of “...agency, dignity, and capacity for self-determination” (Zeyn, 2026), is currently a rather underexplored topic that warrants further research. Conventional assessment frameworks tend to focus on material conditions like security, housing, and employment. These approaches, according to the research currently conducted by Zeyn, potentially risk overlooking equally important drivers of return, such as dignity, psychological freedom, and a renewed sense of national belonging (Zeyn, 2026).

Additionally, previous research looking specifically at Sweden and Italy showed that feelings of long-term discrimination and cultural exclusion have contributed to migrants viewing return as a viable option, despite years of residing in the host country. For most however, negative experiences in the host countries did not have a direct influence on return decisions, with many migrants choosing to “endure” hardships in order to access other factors that benefit one’s quality of life (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 57 & 62).

³⁷ Although the data is too small to draw broader conclusions, Seefar and the Swedish Migration Agency conducted a mini study, where five individuals who had returned to Syria from different EU countries, including Sweden, were interviewed. The study found that a wish and feeling of obligation to rebuild Syria motivated returns (Migrationsverket, 2025, p. 21).

The literature reviewed in Delmi’s research overview, found that an idealized version of home is not always aligned with the realities of what returning to a war-torn society entails. Long-term residence in the host country has the potential to sometimes lessen one’s emotional connection to the origin country (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025, p. 66). This can especially be the case for children, either born in the host country of their parents or having lived in the host country for a large proportion of their lives, meaning that what constitutes “home” isn’t necessarily the same within the family.

Respondents in the Netherlands who stated that they did not intend to return to Syria under any foreseeable future (35% of all respondents), stated that their children’s education and future opportunities in the host countries were influential in the decision to stay in the Netherlands (IOM, September 2025, p. 18). In the UNHCR (May 2025) report, 75% of respondents intending to stay in their European host country, claimed social and economic integration in their host country as an important motivation to stay. 22% of the respondents intending to stay in the host country stated that the fact their children didn’t know Arabic was a very important motivation to stay, while 16% stated that it was somewhat important. Parents in focus group discussions explained that many of their children were either born in the host country or had spent a significant portion of their life there, and were more fluent in the host country language than they were in Arabic. This would pose significant challenges upon a potential return (UNHCR, May 2025, pp. 6-7).

Conclusions and Recommendations

In a context where a broader return rhetoric has emerged across EU states following the fall of the Assad regime, this policy brief seeks to clarify what is currently known about the return aspirations and motivations of Syrians residing in Sweden and the wider EU. To do so, it triangulates:

- findings from previous research on factors that motivate or discourage voluntary return migration (Voyer, Nelin, & Zethraeus, 2025);

- a very limited but substantial body of reports on the return aspirations and motivations of Syrians in European countries (primarily UNHCR, May 2025; IOM, September 2025); and
- assessments of conditions on the ground in Syria (primarily IOM, January 2026).

The analysis shows that the key factors identified in previous research as shaping return aspirations are also evident in the Syrian case. It further demonstrates that concerns expressed by Syrians displaced in Europe about conditions in Syria are consistent with reported realities on the ground.

The vast majority of respondents in both the UNHCR (May 2025) and IOM (September 2025) reports indicated that they did not plan to return to Syria within the next 12 months. In both studies, **the risk of losing legal status in the host country emerged as a key concern.** In the UNHCR (May 2025) report in particular, it was the second most frequently cited reason among those intending to remain in the host country during the next 12 months. Maintaining legal status is especially significant when it comes to decisions about voluntary return to fragile, post-conflict settings such as Syria. It enables Syrians in host countries to safeguard the livelihoods they have established over time, while exploring opportunities for return, acknowledging their agency as individuals who, during prolonged displacement, may have built social networks, secured employment, and acquired property in their host country. While the reports indicate a degree of interest among Syrians in Europe in undertaking “go-and-see” visits to Syria, this interest is often tempered by concerns that leaving the host country — even temporarily — could jeopardize their legal status.

Similarly to the desire to maintain one’s legal status, **safety and security issues in Syria emerged as a key concern.** In the UNHCR (May 2025) report in particular, it was the primary reason cited among those intending to remain in the host country during the next 12 months. Participants in both reports cited fear of targeted violence due to ethno-religious affiliation. Reports from key informants on the ground in Syria indicate that security conditions have improved, although levels of (in)security vary considerably across governorates. It is also sometimes difficult to judge what is meant by the term security and in relation to what. For example, for key informants

who have remained in Syria during the war, the current security situation could be experienced as a vast improvement in comparison to how it was experienced during the height of the civil war. For someone who left Syria during the beginning of the civil war, the current conditions on the ground could be judged differently.

Economic conditions, and access to infrastructure and basic services in Syria, were mentioned by respondents in both reports as barriers to return. These fears also align with the current conditions on the ground, which confirm that these are three factors posing extreme hardships for Syrians in their day-to-day lives. Additionally, it should also be noted that **respondents' emotional connection to Syria, the hope to rebuild Syria, restored "national belonging" and the role of agency remain under-researched in the area of return migration, albeit cited by those *with intentions to return*.** What prolonged displacement does to one's relationship to the concept of home, and how different concepts of home can exist within the same family (i.e., in the case of respondents: children who speak a European language, but not Arabic), should be of interest for future surveys.

Finally, it should be noted that policy discussions in the EU on the voluntary return of displaced Syrians tend to focus on the factors that might motivate them to return back to Syria. However, **these debates often overlook the reasons why a majority of displaced Syrians are choosing to remain in their host countries.** As a result, there is limited reflection, in relation to these discussions, on the ways in which EU host countries may have successfully implemented integration initiatives when it comes to displaced Syrians.

Based on these findings, the following recommendations are suggested:

- **Allow for Syrians to retain legal status in the host country while they explore potential return opportunities in Syria.** As frequently emphasized by NGOs working on voluntary return, both previous research and findings from respondents in the Syrian case highlight the importance of maintaining legal status in the European host country as a "critical enabler of choice" (Voyer, Nelin, &

Zethraeus, 2025, p. 55). The possibility to retain legal status while exploring opportunities in Syria also creates scope for transnational arrangements that can benefit both host and origin countries—for example, Syrian doctors addressing critical labour shortages in Germany while simultaneously contributing to the reconstruction of Syria’s healthcare system (see, for example, Faiola & Brady, 2025). Clear, accessible information should be regularly communicated by official and trusted sources. This should be done on three key issues in order to allow Syrians in the EU to make informed decisions: first, how changing conditions in Syria may influence the legal status of Syrians in the EU; second, which types of residence status may be at risk if individuals travel to Syria, whether for “go-and-see” visits or on their own initiative; and third, whether voluntary return grants allow recipients to retain their residence permits for a limited period in case they reconsider their decision, choose to return to the host country, and relinquish the grant.

- **EU host countries should continue to monitor the humanitarian crisis in Syria, in order to adhere to a practice where safe, voluntary and dignified returns includes not only safety from state violence, but equally the ability to rebuild livelihoods.** Many Syrians displaced in the EU cited challenges to rebuilding livelihoods in Syria as a major barrier to return. As stressed by Nimer and Rottmann (2026), the concept of “safety” cannot solely be equated to “the absence of violence” or “safety from state violence” as a prerequisite for governments encouraging return. As the authors state, “[s]afety...means more than just surviving- it means having a home worth returning to” (Nimer & Rottmann, 2026).
- **Voluntary return policies and practices need to take into consideration the experiences of displaced ethno-religious/ethnic minorities, in order to further explore what a safe, voluntary, and dignified return would mean for them.** Targeted violence against ethno-religious minorities in Syria was a continuous fear mentioned by respondents in both the UNHCR

(May 2025) report and the IOM (September 2025) report. These topics however, in current reports, are not covered extensively, and thus warrant the need for further research. There is no data, to my knowledge, of how many displaced Syrians in the EU belong to an ethno-religious/ethnic minority. For example, do initiatives such as Syria's interim President al-Sharaa's move in January 2026 to formally recognize Kurdish as a "national language" and restore citizenship to all Kurdish Syrians (Al Jazeera, 2026) have an effect on, for example, Kurds displaced in the EU considering returning?

- **Surveys on return intentions should broaden their scope to include questions on dignity, restored national belonging, and freedom from authoritarian control (as recommended by Zeyn, 2026).** Zeyn's research highlights that return programmes often prioritise "economic optimisation" over "psychological restoration," thereby overlooking key motivations for return (Zeyn, 2026). Moreover, earlier research conducted before Assad's fall shows that PTSD can significantly shape return decisions among displaced Syrians (Yildiz & Strohmeier, 2024). Despite this, psychological factors remain underexplored in studies of return aspirations and should be systematically integrated into survey design.
- **Research comparing the return of Syrians displaced in the EU versus Syrians displaced in neighbouring countries is needed.** This could provide answers to questions regarding for example, how many Syrians having returned to Syria from neighbouring countries or having resided in Syria during the war, are reliant on remittances from Syrians displaced in the EU, and how this plays a role in affecting the return aspirations and motivations of Syrians in the EU.

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Voluntary Returns to Syria

Mapping Return Aspirations and Motivations of Syrians Residing in Sweden/the EU

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