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A narrative shatters:

Syrian refugees refuse to return despite Assad's ouster

The fall of Damascus has not led to mass repatriation – Syrians abroad remain unconvinced by promises of reform amid insecurity, economic collapse, and fragmented governance under Syria's new, unelected, foreign-backed leaders.



Photo Credit: The Cradle

The fall of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 was expected to trigger a mass return of Syrian refugees. It did not. Six months on, UN figures show fewer than eight percent of Syrians abroad have made the journey home. The promise of a new era

in Damascus has collided with the harsh realities of insecurity, poverty, and heightened foreign interference.

The Syrian refugee crisis – now in its 14th year – was born of war, western-imposed economic blockade, and the disintegration of state institutions that started in March 2011. What began as internal displacement soon morphed into a mass exodus across West Asia and into Europe, producing one of the most severe refugee crises of the 21st century.

Life after Assad: The enduring refugee crisis

Despite the [fall of the Assad government](#), the Syrian refugee crisis remains unresolved. As of early 2025, the UN reports that approximately [6.2 million Syrians](#) remain registered as refugees abroad – primarily in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt – with millions more residing in Europe and North America. Only a fraction have returned since the Syrian opposition assumed power.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) estimates that about [400,000 refugees returned](#) between December 2024 and April 2025. This number [rose slightly](#) to 481,730 by May, still below eight percent of the total refugees abroad. This disparity underlines a stark reality: The fall of Assad *did not* translate into mass return as the west suggested for years, which reveals that there are deeper, unresolved issues that keep Syrians away from Syria.

In West Asia's key host countries, [Türkiye](#) hosts between 2.7 and three million Syrian refugees under a temporary protection regime, in addition to roughly one million [unregistered](#) Syrians. [Lebanon](#) hosts around 750,000 registered refugees, though Beirut places the actual figure closer to 1.5 million. Jordan houses approximately 650,000 Syrian refugees.

While many refugees may dream of returning, reality intervenes. A mid-2024 survey found [57 percent](#) hoped to return one day, yet fewer than two percent believed this was feasible within the following year. UNHCR identifies safety concerns and the lack of stable livelihoods as the most significant obstacles. These core issues shape the calculus of return – a calculus that has not shifted meaningfully since Assad was in power.

Why Syrians aren't going back

A May poll cited critical return deterrents: housing and property conditions (69 percent), service availability (40 percent), safety (45 percent), and economic hardship (54 percent). Fourteen years of war have left Syria fractured, devastated, and distrustful. There is no unified, trustworthy security or governance structure. The post-Assad era remains deeply uncertain to Syrian refugees.

The current political set-up in Damascus is a patchwork of domestic and foreign-influenced actors. Despite Assad's ousting, returnees consistently cite improved security and essential services as prerequisites. A recent survey indicated that [58 percent](#) of Syrians abroad would return only under "safe and dignified conditions," while 31 percent remain undecided.

Governance challenges are equally daunting. The new leadership, installed on 8 December 2024 and headed by Al Qaeda-linked Ahmad al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammad al-Julani), has pledged reform. But memories of infighting among rebel groups linger. Many Syrian refugees are alarmed by the ascension of militant factions, including former Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) affiliates, fueling fears of [sectarian reprisals](#) and authoritarianism.

Beyond Syria's borders, refugee networks now serve as lifelines. After more than a decade abroad, Syrian refugees have established enduring community ties. In Turkiye, 60 percent of working-age Syrians are [employed](#), mostly in informal sectors. These jobs, although low-paid, offer stability compared to war-torn Syria.

Yet, most Syrians in Turkiye remain socially unanchored: Over half report [feeling disconnected](#) from Turkish society, where racism has become rife, while 84 percent still feel moderately connected to Syria. This duality reflects a long-term migration trend where refugees retain ties to their homeland while integrating abroad.

A recent survey shows that [just seven percent](#) of Syrians in Turkiye have concrete plans to leave. Others express the desire to relocate, but without actionable steps. Citizenship also affects permanence: Around 238,000 Syrians had been [naturalized](#) in Turkiye by mid-2024, granting them full legal protections, including immunity from deportation. Turkish opposition sources, however, estimate this figure could be as high as 2.5 million.

The return paradox: Poor conditions in host nations, yet no return?

Even deteriorating conditions in host countries have not significantly altered return patterns. Economic collapse in Lebanon, rising costs in Turkiye, and recent conflict along the Lebanese border have not pushed Syrians homeward. Studies consistently show return decisions hinge more on improvements in Syria – security, jobs, services – than on hardships abroad.

Divisions among external powers inside Syria further complicate matters. Turkiye, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and western states continue to prioritize their respective geopolitical gains over stability. The result is a fragmented political order dominated by armed factions and foreign patrons, with little accountability to actual Syrians.

This instability has real consequences. The [massacres](#) along Syria's coast last March, reportedly instigated by UAE-backed elements, required intervention by the new Damascus authority. Such events erode trust and deter return.

Economically, Syria remains in free fall. According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), 90 percent of Syrians live below the poverty line. The World Bank projects an additional [one percent GDP contraction](#) in 2025. The World Food Programme (WFP) says 9.1 million are [food insecure](#), with 3.6 million reliant on aid.

Electricity is available just [two to three hours a day](#), crippling industry and inflating living costs. Despite promises by the transitional government to reform banking and attract Persian Gulf investment, remaining sanctions and market isolation are still serious hurdles, even after Washington lifted most restrictions in May 2025.

Unemployment is rampant, fuel and transport costs are surging, and social safety nets are vanishing. Monthly incomes in many regions [fall below \\$40](#), while basic food baskets cost twice that amount. The exodus of Syrian professionals continues to deplete the labor market, deepening reliance on remittances in the absence of a coherent reconstruction plan.

Syria remains a high-risk return

Historical experience shows that displaced people return only when pull factors at home outweigh push factors abroad. Currently, that equation does not favor Syria. The conditions for a safe, voluntary, and dignified return are still nowhere in place.

The reluctance of millions of Syrians to repatriate was never actually about leadership change – credible data simply does not exist on this. It is about the cumulative consequences of war: insecurity, economic collapse, political fragmentation, and the absence of justice or reconciliation.

Unless [those in power](#) focus on rebuilding credible institutions and securing livelihoods – not just reshuffling elites – the prospect of return will remain a perilous gamble.

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