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Syrian refugees in Turkey: Real prospects for returning to Syria?

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Summary

The violent crackdown on the Syrian revolution by Bashar al-Assad's barbaric regime has triggered one of the most serious humanitarian crises since the Second World War. Neighbouring countries—Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey—have taken in the largest numbers. However, the regime's unexpected collapse in December 2024 has opened up new prospects for returning home. According to official figures, over a million Syrians have returned home since then. For the new Syrian government, the challenge is to demonstrate that living conditions are safe and dignified in order to encourage these returns, which are essential for the country's reconstruction. Meanwhile, authorities in the region's host countries are growing impatient at the prospect of shedding what they regard as a burden, with Syrian refugees in these countries often serving as scapegoats for economic and social difficulties. In this context, what are the real prospects for these people to return to Syria? By examining the cases of Jordan, Lebanon and, more specifically, Turkey, this article shows that the return process, far from being straightforward and inevitable, faces complex constraints and realities.

On this first anniversary of the fall of Bashar al-Assad in Syria and the establishment of the new regime under Ahmed al-Charaa, many questions arise about Syria's future, its internal reconstruction, and its place in the regional environment. Among these questions is the thorny issue of the return of Syrians who fled the war between 2011 and 2024 to seek refuge in neighbouring countries, Lebanon, Jordan, but also and above all Turkey, which has taken in the largest number. For example, in 2021, there were 3.8 million Syrians officially registered in Turkey. Syrians are not eligible for refugee status in Turkey, which only recognizes this right for people from member countries of the Council of Europe through a geographical reservation issued during the ratification of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (ratified in 1962). Here, we use the term "refugees" in a generic sense, broader than that defined by the Geneva Convention, to refer to a population that has had to flee their country of nationality or residence to escape danger. The question of the return of the refugees who are the subject of this study is certainly relevant, but it remains hypothetical due to the volatility of the situation on the ground and their settlement in Turkey for more than ten years, both of which somewhat cloud the horizon of such a prospect.

1. The human and humanitarian tragedy of the Syrian war

The bloody repression of the Syrian revolution by Bashar al-Assad's barbaric regime has led to the greatest humanitarian crisis since World War II. Estimates agree that there are more than 13 million displaced persons and refugees inside and outside the country, representing half of the pre-war population. In December 2024, there were approximately 3 million Syrian refugees in Turkey, 2 million in Lebanon, nearly 650,000 in Jordan, several hundred thousand in other countries in the region (such as Iraq and Egypt), and 1 million in Europe, particularly in Germany. The hope of just a temporary exile favoured refuge close by in a neighbouring country, but the prolongation and intensity of the war has put an end to any prospect of a short-term return.

However, the unexpected fall of Assad's criminal regime in December 2024 offered new opportunities to return home. For the new Syrian government, it is a question of demonstrating that living conditions are safe and dignified in order to ensure the return of refugees, an essential element in the reconstruction of the country. On the side of the host countries in the region, the authorities are impatient to "unload this burden," as the Syrian population is a vulnerable scapegoat and a convenient target for taking the blame for the economic and social crisis. According to official figures, more than one million Syrians have returned to their country since the fall of the regime. However, this analysis shows that the return process for Syrians from Turkey, far from being simple and inevitable, faces knotty conditions and realities.

2. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan: three different approaches where geopolitics complicate the picture

Due to divergent national interests and specific geostrategic positions, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon have adopted different positions and attitudes towards the war in Syria and the reception of Syrian refugees on their respective territories. Lebanon, historically linked to neighbouring Syria, has been affected by the spillover of the conflict on its doorstep. Without being officially involved in the war, the country has been under intense pressure, on the one hand from the Lebanese Hezbollah, a major supporter of Bashar al-Assad throughout the conflict between 2011 and 2024, and, on the other hand, by demographic pressure (a population increase of more than 25%) caused by the arrival of one million refugees in a country that was already politically unstable as well as being socially and economically fragile. In Jordan, the 1.3 million Syrian refugees represented 12% of the total population in 2024. Often confined to precarious jobs, they remain one of the most marginalised groups, with 49% of them living below the absolute poverty line.

Ankara has also distinguished itself by welcoming exiles, victims of this brutal war waged by a renegade state against its own population. In the early years, for logistics reasons, Turkey allowed the Syrian population to settle in large urban centres (Istanbul, Gaziantep, Hatay, etc.) and quickly put an end to accommodation in camps. This was neither possible nor conceivable in Jordan or Lebanon, where the majority of refugees were assigned to tent camps. Paradoxically, these basic conditions have led Syrians to integrate better into the urban fabric in Turkey than in these two Arab countries, with whom they share a common language and culture.

The arrival and settlement of these communities of exiles outside Syria's borders therefore have had different effects on the societies that have welcomed them, and in turn these societies influence the possible terms of return in equally different ways.

3. Conditions for return: when pragmatism prevails

The fall of Bashar al-Assad has significantly slowed the exodus to neighbouring countries, and also to Europe, where the examination of asylum applications has been suspended. As for the refugees, they welcomed the news with as much joy as concern and uncertainty. Let us now focus on the case of Turkey. Despite growing anti-Syrian xenophobia and the political exploitation of their plight as a bargaining chip with the European Union (EU), the vast majority of Syrian refugees seem to want to stay in Turkey.

To understand the Turkish population's reaction and perception of Syrians, we must look back to the context of their arrival and consider the place they occupy in Turkish domestic and foreign policy debates. First, it should be noted that the presence of Syrians in Turkey is largely the result of Turkey's policy of interference in Syria. When in 2011 Ankara thought it could convince its ally in Damascus to carry out the reforms demanded by popular protests, the disproportionate repression of the peaceful movement and the determination of the Syrian regime's hardliners forced Turkey to face a different political reality. Uncompromising,

inflexible, and unwilling to listen to compromise, Assad responded to pacifism with the most brutal violence. As authoritarian regimes once thought stable and widely backed began to collapse across the Arab world, Ankara reversed its stance and threw its support behind the Syrian uprising. Convinced that the Assad regime was coming to an end, the Turks joined the fight to depose the "butcher of Damascus." Although once close to his Syrian counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan believed in the Syrian revolution and the rapid rise of a political movement centred on the Muslim Brotherhood, ideologically close to his Justice and Development Party (AKP). It was for this reason that Turkey adopted a de facto open-door policy towards the Syrian population but also because it was difficult to prevent hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Bashar al-Assad's bombings from arriving at the shared border, nearly 800 km long.

The speed of the first Arab Springs had led to the belief that the transition in Damascus would be just as rapid. This was not the case. For complex reasons, linked both to the polarisation of Syrian society and to the regional and international context, which was skilfully exploited by the regime, the calculation that the satrap of Damascus would fall quickly failed. With the Libyan experience dissuading Western powers from further intervention, Bashar al-Assad crossed the red lines one by one and received military support from his Russian and Iranian sponsors in the region, while the Syrian revolution found itself orphaned[1] and exposed to the regime's killing machine. Internally, Bashar al-Assad played on ethnic and religious divisions to consolidate his power, just as he played on the international stage on the rivalries between the timid "friends of Syria" (Turkey, Qatar, and Western countries, including the United States and France) and the staunch supporters of Iran, Russia, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The emergence of the Islamic State organization in the summer of 2014 greatly contributed to fuelling the regime's strategy, which can be summed up as "Me or chaos." It thus maintained these divisions for 14 years, in a context of permanent violation of international law, until the balance of power in the entire region was upset. In a context of war, the civilian population is a political issue and a strategic tool for the countries concerned.

The weakening of the status quo came first from the weakening of Russian and Iranian support. Russia had been bogged down since 2022 in a war in Ukraine that it had not imagined would last so long and was forced to refocus its forces on the European front at the expense of its presence in Syria alongside its ally. As for its two other supporters, Iran and Hezbollah, they have been considerably weakened by the war waged against them by Israel in the aftermath of the 7 October 2023 attacks carried out by Hamas. Without the coordinated support of its three sponsors, Moscow, Tehran, and Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad's power could not hold out for long. At the same time, the rebellion in the country, namely the military force of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib and that of the Syrian National Army, both supported by Turkey, made considerable progress in coordinating their efforts against the Damascus regime. Abandoned by his allies, challenged since 2011 by the Syrian revolution, and weakened by numerous economic and security problems, Bashar al-Assad's regime finally fell on 8 December 2024, opening a new chapter in Syria's history.

The regime change legitimately raises the question of the return of refugees after nearly 14 years of armed conflict. In Turkey, public opinion has changed significantly towards the Syrian

[1] Ziad Majed, *Syrie, La révolution orpheline*, Actes Sud, Arles, 2014.

population. In addition to the prolonged conflict in Syria and the worsening economic situation, there is the authoritarian drift of President Erdoğan, who is considered to be solely responsible for the prolonged presence of Syrians in the country. All of this fuels growing anti-Syrian sentiment, which is politically exploited by opposition parties. Urban legends about Syrians portray them as economically and socially privileged "guests" ("*misafir*"), casting them as scapegoats for the growing precarity of everyday life amid economic recession.

Their arrival has contributed to increased competition for places in urban areas, both in the labour market and in access to housing and public services. The argument has been taken up by the political elite and has become an electoral issue against President Erdoğan. Contrary to the traditional European model and despite becoming increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic, it is the AKP that is presenting itself as the benevolent force towards Syrian refugees, who are portrayed as Sunni Muslim victims of an oppressive Alawite regime. On the other hand, the opposition to Erdoğan, whether secular, social-democratic (such as the main opposition party, the Republican People's Party – CHP) or belonging to the most nationalist and xenophobic fringes (such as Umit Özdağ's Victory Party), has gradually adopted a discourse that is highly hostile to Syrian exiles in order to position itself in the political arena. This phenomenon was particularly evident during the 2023 legislative and presidential elections, when the promise to send refugees home comprised a central part of the electoral strategy of the opposition to Erdoğan.

However, despite being rejected by part of Turkish public opinion and despite their exploitation by the government and opposition parties, it appears that these Syrians wish to remain in Turkey, at least in the medium term, and that they are postponing any prospect of returning to their country to a more distant future. This paradox deserves an explanation.

Despite all the difficulties and the feelings of rejection experienced by Syrians in Turkey, analysis of the facts shows that a process of integration into Turkish society is underway. As mentioned above, very early on in the crisis, the reception of this refugee population was part of a strategy of social integration, particularly for logistical reasons, unlike in Jordan and Lebanon. Camps were abandoned in favour of "freedom of settlement": unlike other nationalities migrating to Turkey, Syrians were able to choose their place of residence, even if they were then subject to a ban on movement without authorization. As a result, the majority of Syrians settled in the country's major cities, particularly Istanbul, which enabled them to better integrate into the local urban fabric, both economically and socially.

The turning point in Turkey's policy on welcoming Syrians can be traced back to 2015. The entry of the Russian army into Syria to save Bashar al-Assad made any change of regime unlikely, heralding instead a resurgence of violence on the part of the state. Consequently, while the turning point in the conflict prompted new arrivals, the prospect of a rapid return of Syrians to their country receded even further. In the Turkish president's speech, Syrians, who had been presented as "guests," were called upon in 2016 to opt for naturalisation. The open-door policy came to an end, but internally, the focus was on integration and social harmony ("sosyal uyumu"). In this context, as Turkish researcher Semih Tümen points out in his work, Syrians benefited from integration efforts on several levels, including education, health, and employment.

During their initial field surveys in Gaziantep in 2014 and 2015, Turkish, Syrian, and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs), supported and accompanied by the Turkish state, carried out significant educational and school activities, almost exclusively in Arabic, for Syrian children. Then, gradually, as exile became permanent, specific Arabic-language schooling was abandoned in favour of Turkish-language schooling in Turkish public schools, with the result that today, the school enrolment rate for Syrian children is 65%, which is significant for a refugee population. As a result, a whole new generation, born in exile or arriving at a young age, is fluent in Turkish, often better than Arabic, which they speak but cannot read or write, as their schooling is in Latin characters rather than the Arabic alphabet.

Access to employment is generally the other factor that allows us to measure how well an exiled community has taken root in its host country. Here too, although Turkey limits the scope of the 1951 Geneva Convention and refuses to grant Syrians international refugee status, they nevertheless enjoy a status that gives them relative protection and several rights. Indeed, since 2014 Syrians welcomed as *misafir*, have benefited from temporary protection status, which guarantees them the right to health care and education, among other things. Although they were initially prohibited from working, starting in 2016 work permits were granted in order to integrate this important labour force into the Turkish economy. It should be remembered that nearly a third of the Turkish labour market is based on the informal sector; in other words, even without official permission to work, many Syrians have been able to find jobs. Admittedly, the corresponding wages are generally low, but they still allow Syrian workers to meet their basic needs and integrate into the local urban fabric.

Thus, what politicians of all stripes have presented as a burden can also be presented as an investment and an opportunity for the revival of the Turkish economy. The government has been quick to point this out. Throughout the informal sector, the textile industry, construction sites, and also in the agricultural fields in the south, Syrians are embodying a new proletariat: a flexible and cheap labour force, an economic advantage that satisfies both employers and the government.

Far from rhetorical posturing, part of the opposition cannot pretend to ignore this. Erdoğan has relied on the supposed migration crisis in 2015 and the rise of xenophobic rhetoric in European public opinion, focused on the “fear of being overwhelmed,” to make the Syrian population an adjustment variable. Turkey has thus established itself as a state that uses immigration as a source of income and the threat of expulsion of this population as a diplomatic tool. Indeed, at the height of the migration crisis between Turkey and the EU in 2016, Erdoğan used Syrians as a weapon of blackmail when he found himself facing difficulties in domestic and foreign policy and was heavily criticized by his European allies for his authoritarian drift and military interference in Syria. By brandishing the threat of opening the Turkish-Greek and Turkish-Bulgarian borders, he made significant political gains: European funds to finance part of the costs of caring for the Syrian population, a promise to modernize the customs union between his country and the EU, but also—and perhaps most importantly—a complicit silence on his authoritarian drift.

However, the public stigmatization of Syrian refugees as a “problem” is contradicted by the realities on the ground. Although fewer than 10% of Syrians have been naturalized, they have, willingly or unwillingly, found a place in the socio-economic and urban fabric of the country’s

cities. As election campaigns unfold, however, the issue is coming up in debates and is being exploited for political gain, both domestically and regionally. The refugees are sometimes used as a scare tactic by opposition parties, and sometimes as a bargaining chip by those in power during negotiations with the EU and the Syrian regime. Erdoğan tried for a time, unsuccessfully, to use them as a means of exerting pressure on Bashar al-Assad's regime. With Assad now deposed, the Syrians who have been welcomed into Turkey are being used as leverage to involve Turkey in the reconstruction of Syria.

Thus, although stigmatized and exploited, Syrians seem destined to remain in Turkey in the medium and long term. Furthermore, and this is a key point, the situation prevailing in Ahmed al-Charaa's new Syria does little to inspire confidence and encourage return.

4. A return thwarted by the new political, economic, and social situation in Syria

The new regime that emerged from the ranks of the HTC group led by Ahmed al-Charaa (also known as Mohammad al-Jolani) was surprised by the speed with which it seized power in Damascus. It is now finding it extremely difficult to stabilise the country and create the conditions necessary for internally displaced persons and refugees living abroad to return home.

Due to his past as a radical Islamist, Ahmed al-Charaa is struggling to reassure all segments of Syrian society, many of whom are wary of any form of Islamism. Even among Sunni Muslims in Syria, he is far from being unanimously acclaimed. The new regime has been relatively well-received by the population, not because it embodies an ideal model of power, but because it overthrew Bashar al-Assad's regime. Above all, the population has been worn down by too many years of conflict, massacres, and massive destruction. However, while the arrival of a new government has brought some joy to Syrians, it is among ethnic and religious minorities that the new authorities are viewed with the greatest mistrust.

Firstly, the Alawites, the community from which the Assad clan originated, fear summary executions and reprisals from this new power, which has its roots in jihadism, is fundamentally Sunni, and is perceived as anti-Alawite. Consequently, they remain on the defensive. Many of their military leaders, including some high-ranking officers and war criminals, have refused to surrender their weapons, thereby prolonging the cycle of violence. Attempts to disarm them have resulted in further brutality and clashes with the country's new official forces, causing the deaths of more than 1,100 people, mostly civilians. Fragile, inexperienced, and wary of any unrest and any form of external destabilisation, Ahmad al-Charaa's authority triggers doubt. Such a sequence of events has shocked the entire population of the country, including, and above all, those in exile who were tempted to return.

The same mistrust prevails among the other minority, also of Shiite origin: the Druze community. The arrival in power in Damascus of a former jihadist has exacerbated political tensions within the community. Sheikhs Youssef Jarbou and Hamoud al-Hanawi, who are in favour of dialogue with the new authorities, are opposed by the influential spiritual leader of the Druze in Suwayda, Hikmat al-Hijri, who is hostile to the central government. These deep

divisions have turned into armed clashes, causing the deaths of hundreds of fighters on both sides, but especially among Druze civilians. Once again, instability is not conducive to returns, as all Syrians in exile are closely following events in their country from abroad. The Kurds are also wary of the new regime. In January 2026, while the predominantly Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) still held 30% of Syrian territory, an offensive by Syrian government forces, supported by Turkey, caused them to lose up to 80% of the territories they controlled. This offensive came at a time when the SDF constituted a significant military force that Ahmad al-Sharaa had pledged to integrate into the new national army. The current confrontation between the army of the new Syrian government and the SDF thus highlights the fragility of the guarantees made by the Syrian authorities to the Kurdish minority and does little to reassure those considering returning to the country.

After 14 years of violent and destructive war, involving the army, multiple rebel forces, and foreign interference, a great deal of reconstruction work is needed to get the country back on its feet and allow displaced persons and refugees to return. Roads, buildings, hospitals, schools, and entire cities need to be rebuilt, as does the will of all Syrians to live together again in a reunified Syria. However, resources are lacking, the state is exhausted, and allied countries are not rushing to take action.

Socioeconomic difficulties and political fragility are failing to provide the guarantees of safety and security that exiles need to return home. Without these guarantees, the efforts made in exile to survive and rebuild elsewhere now weigh heavily in the decision not to return. They prefer a still precarious situation in Turkey, dependent on a temporary protection status that is not internationally recognised, rather than a return to a new unknown and risk losing what they have built in this neighbouring country.

A study of the reception given to the Syrian population in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan highlights a surprising finding. Paradoxically, it is in a Turkish-speaking country that Syrians seem to be putting down the most lasting roots, rather than in an Arab country where they could be considered close to the local population in many respects. Indeed, Syrians in Arab-speaking countries have not had to break with their culture and language. However, they have not benefited from reception conditions that promote access to healthcare, education, and work. In Lebanon and Jordan, the weight of history, with the reception of the Palestinian population on the one hand and the heavy past of the Syrian regime on the other, has influenced anti-Syrian rhetoric and policies. With their situation remaining extremely precarious, Syrian refugees in these two countries are much more willing to consider returning home.

Turkey is an exception, as the situation there is different in every respect. A large industrial and agricultural country with a population of 85 million, it has greater structural capacity to integrate the Syrians who have been living on its territory for nearly 15 years. Turkey's de facto policy of welcoming them combines significant factors for integration, marking an unprecedented effort in the country's history: it has gone from being a transit country to a host country for Syrian immigrants.

However, the rise of anti-Syrian rhetoric, incidents of lynching, and the tightening of public policies have undermined the conditions for welcoming and hosting Syrians in Turkey. In order

to allow those who want to leave to return home and those who want to stay to live with dignity, the perspective needs to be shifted: Syrians should no longer be seen as "guests" who are granted temporary status, but as full citizens. The political exploitation of their presence (by the government) and their departure (by the opposition) have resulted in the depoliticization of their status, to the benefit of populist, xenophobic, and utilitarian rhetoric that denies them the necessary conditions for peaceful coexistence. Therefore, the concern, both international and local, about the return of Syrians to Syria must be seized upon to highlight the social and political realities of these exiles in the countries that host them. In other words, the question of the return of Syrians to their country must neither obscure nor encourage the hardening of the conditions of their reception in other countries.

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