

*Evaluation Article***Syria in Transition: Political Promises, Economic Challenges,
and the Protection Gap in Refugee Returns¹****Umutcan Yüksel²****Abstract**

This policy commentary analyzes Syria's political transition following the Assad regime's fall in December 2024, critically examining the implications for refugee protection frameworks, economic reconstruction policies, and transitional justice mechanisms. Drawing on developments through April 2025, it evaluates the interim government's governance approach under Ahmed al-Sharaa, assesses international donor engagement strategies, and scrutinizes the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR)'s policy shift toward facilitating refugee returns. The analysis identifies a significant policy contradiction between the UNHCR's established protection thresholds and its operational pivot despite unmet safety conditions. While refugee return intentions have increased substantially, the commentary argues that current policies prioritize political expediency over protection principles, potentially undermining sustainable reintegration. It recommends that international stakeholders maintain principled engagement in Syria's reconstruction, ensuring return policies align with genuine improvements in conditions rather than political timetables. This commentary concludes that effective policy interventions during this critical transition period require balancing immediate humanitarian needs with long-term stability considerations.

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Değerlendirme Makalesi

Geçiş Sürecindeki Suriye: Siyasal Vaatler, Ekonomik Zorluklar ve Mülteci Geri Dönüşlerinde Koruma Açığı

Öz

Bu politika değerlendirmesi, Aralık 2024'te Esad rejiminin düşüşünü takiben Suriye'deki siyasi geçiş sürecini inceleyerek, mülteci koruma çerçevesi, ekonomik yeniden yapılanma politikaları ve geçiş dönemi adalet mekanizmaları üzerindeki etkilerini eleştirel bir bakış açısıyla ele almaktadır. Nisan 2025'e kadar olan gelişmeleri değerlendiren çalışma, Ahmed el-Şara liderliğindeki geçici hükümetin yönetim yaklaşımını, uluslararası bağışçıların katılım stratejilerini ve Birleşmiş Milletler Mülteciler Yüksek Komiserliği'nin (BMMYK) büyük ölçekli mülteci dönüşlerini kolaylaştırmaya yönelik politika değişimini incelemektedir. Analiz, BMMYK'nın belirlenmiş koruma eşikleri ile karşılanmamış güvenlik koşullarına rağmen operasyonel değişimi arasında önemli bir politika çelişkisi tespit etmektedir. Mültecilerin geri dönüş niyetlerindeki önemli artışa rağmen, bu değerlendirme, mevcut politikaların koruma ilkelerinden ziyade siyasi çıkarları önceliğini ve sürdürülebilir yeniden entegrasyonu tehlikeye atabileceğini savunmaktadır. Uluslararası paydaşların Suriye'nin yeniden yapılanmasında etkili katılımı sürdürmeleri ve dönüş politikalarının siyasi takvimlerden ziyade koşullardaki gerçek iyileşmelerle uyumlu olmasını sağlamaları önerilmektedir. Bu değerlendirme, kritik geçiş dönemindeki etkili politika müdahalelerinin, acil insani ihtiyaçlar ile uzun vadeli istikrar değerlendirmeleri arasında denge kurulmasını gerektirdiği sonucuna varmaktadır.

Introduction

The Syrian regime under Bashar al-Assad fell following a swift rebel offensive, ending over five decades of Assad family rule. Ahmed al-Sharaa, previously the leader of the Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), was named interim president on 29 January 2025 and has committed to issuing a “constitutional declaration” and forming a temporary legislative council until a new constitution is approved (BBC, 2025). The fall of the Syrian regime represents a seismic shift in the political and humanitarian situation, with implications for durable solutions for Syrians, particularly in return and reintegration, infrastructure reconstruction, rule of law, economic recovery, and peace-building. This policy commentary synthesizes current research, international statements, and regional analyses to provide a detailed overview of recent events.

Fourteen years of the Syrian conflict have caused one of the largest displacement and humanitarian crisis in modern history. As of March 2025, 4.6 million Syrian refugees are primarily hosted in the neighbouring countries of Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt (UNHCR Operational Data Portal, 2025), and 7.4 million individuals remain internally displaced, residing both within the communities and 1,736 Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) sites, primarily in Northwest Syria. Recent events since 27 November 2024 also have triggered further displacement, with 673,038 new IDPs recorded. At the same time, IDP returns continue, with 926,242 individuals reported to have returned home since 27 November 2024 (UNHCR, 2025c). From neighbouring countries, the United Nations High Commissioners for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 372,550 Syrians have crossed back into Syria since 8 December 2024 (UNHCR, 2025d).

Transitional Justice, Rule of Law and Safety

Syria's future stability hinges on dealing justly with the past. Decades of dictatorship and years of brutal war left deep wounds. The new authorities face twin imperatives: restoring basic law and order (policing, courts, dispute resolution) and addressing the crimes and grievances from the war. After the fall of Bashar al-'Assad's regime on 8 December 2024, a transitional caretaker administration was established under the leadership of Mohammed al-Bashir, appointed by Ahmed al-Sharaa (also known as Abu Mohammed al-Jolani), the de facto leader of (HTS). On 29 January 2025, al-Sharaa was appointed interim president during the Syrian Revolution Victory Conference in Damascus (France24, 2025), signalling a shift toward a formalized transitional structure. The transitional government has begun restructuring state institutions, dissolving the 2012 Constitution, the former parliament, and the Ba'ath Party on January 29, 2025 (The Washington Institute, 2025). Between 24-25 February 2025, the transitional authorities hosted a National Dialogue Conference in Damascus to lay the groundwork for this constitution (Al Jazeera, 2025). The Conference and its outcomes were critical to the new Syrian government, which needed to show, outwardly at least, commitment to participatory governance in the

country's transition, as promised by Ahmed al-Sharaa on taking power. Nonetheless, it was beset by criticism over its organization and preparations for the event. Political leaders and human rights activists criticized the preparatory committee for its allegedly bias approach to selecting participants based on the new 'government's supporters, which negatively affected the fair representation of Syrian society.

Another significant milestone occurred on 13 March 2025, when al-Sharaa signed a temporary constitutional declaration to guide Syria for the next five years (Constitution Net, 2025). The document includes references to fundamental human rights and general provisions on transitional justice. The Declaration states that 'all rights and freedoms set out in international human rights treaties, covenants and agreements that the Syrian Arab Republic has ratified will form an inseparable part of the Constitutional declaration'. Despite these statements, "much will depend on how these provisions of the constitutional text are implemented and respected across the country" (OHCHR, 2025).

Despite fears of chaos following Assad's ouster, Syria has experienced a surprising degree of civil peace in the initial months of the transition. The caretaker government has prioritized unifying armed factions under the Ministry of Defence, with several groups agreeing to disband and integrate by early 2025. On 10 March 2025, the Syrian government reached an agreement with the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to integrate their military and civil institutions into state structures. This deal aimed to consolidate control over northeastern regions and address longstanding ethnic tensions. The integration is expected to be completed by the end of 2025 (Financial Times, 2025).

In early March 2025, clashes erupted between the transitional government forces and loyalists of former President Bashar al-Assad, particularly in the coastal areas of Hama, Homs, Latakia and Tartous governorates, resulting in the killing of more than 1,000 civilians. Initial reports also indicate that the violence has displaced an estimated 51,000 civilians (UNFPA, 2025). According to the UNHCR Lebanon Flash Update, the hostilities in the Tartous, Latakia, Homs, and Hama Governorates of Syria caused the displacement of 12,798 individuals into the North and Akkar Governorates of north Lebanon (UNHCR, 2025b). The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Committee (OHCHR) found in its investigation of the events that a large amount of incendiary and hateful speech is circulating online in relation to the recent violence, which risks fuelling further tensions and violence (OHCHR, 2025). Urgent steps were taken by the authorities, including the establishment of an independent inquiry into the recent events. Therefore, guarantees of non-repetition of such incidents and accountability are significant to ensure the momentum of attaining the rights and freedom of the Syrian people. The situation in South Syria also remains volatile, with increased attacks and incursions carried out by the Israeli Defence Force since 9 December, extending well beyond the lines agreed to in the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement (Syria Direct, 2025).

"Economic Recovery and Reconstruction

Syria's economic revitalization is a multifaceted endeavour involving international aid, policy reforms, infrastructure reconstruction, and regional cooperation. According to the UNDP's recent report on preliminary socio-economic impact assessment, 14 years of conflict in Syria have undone nearly 55 years of economic, social and human capital progress (UNDP, 2025). According to the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the "volume of destruction in physical capital and its sectoral distribution" has been estimated at more than \$388 billion (The Arab News, 2018). Unemployment, job losses, and lack of services remain significant barriers to meeting basic needs. Many households rely on unsustainable coping strategies, including borrowing money, selling productive assets, or engaging in high-risk or degrading jobs, which compromise long-term resilience. High supplier costs and market price increases hinder vendors' ability to restock essential goods, particularly in view of newly accessed areas. Stock shortages and reduced credit availability from vendors prevent them from meeting consumer demand, worsening financial strain for consumers reliant on credit. Traders also avoid accepting the Syrian Pound (SYP) due to exchange rate instability, further disrupting market operations (UN OCHA, 2025).

In the wake of Assad's fall, the question of who will fund Syria's vast reconstruction also needs to loom large. Before the regime's collapse, Western and regional donors maintained a strict 'no normalization, lifting of sanctions or reconstruction until a political transition' policy – refusing to finance Assad's Syria (European Parliament, 2023). With a transition now underway, major donors are cautiously reassessing. A joint international conference in Paris with Western and Arab states welcomed the new transitional government and noted the importance of swiftly setting up a coordination framework for assistance and reconstruction in Syria (France Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2025). On 24 February, the Council of the European Union (EU) decided to suspend a number of restrictive measures in view of the situation in Syria. With this decision, the EU aims to facilitate engagement with Syria, its people, and businesses in key areas of energy and transport, as well as to facilitate financial and banking transactions associated with such sectors and those needed for humanitarian and reconstruction purposes (Council of European Union, 2025). On 17 March, international donors pledged \$6.5 billion in aid for Syria. The European Commission said that \$4.6 billion was offered in the form of grants and \$1.7 billion in low-interest loans. Some of the money was pledged over multiple years, making it difficult to calculate an amount for 2025. Germany said it would pledge around \$326 million, and the United Kingdom (UK) said that it was pledging up to \$208 million, while the United States (US) did not announce any pledge of money (AP, 2025).

Regional actors will also be instrumental in rebuilding Syria's economy. Türkiye is poised to be both a beneficiary and benefactor – a stable Syria opens trade for Turkish businesses and an outlet for construction and consumer goods exports. Notably, Turkish exports to the neighbouring country rose 20% in December 2024, when Sharaa's forces ousted former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and jumped by more than 38% in January (Reuters, 2025). Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan's office said it would discuss "possible joint measures to rebuild the country's economy" with al-Sharaa (Middle East Monitor, 2025). Gulf countries (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) could provide capital injections. Saudi Arabia, in particular, having re-engaged with Syria diplomatically, might fund large reconstruction projects as part of its regional diplomacy. The Gulf's involvement is also seen as a way to ensure Syria doesn't become dependent on any single patron (like Iran or Türkiye) – instead, a broad base of support would keep the new government balanced (Atlantic Council, 2025).

Return of Syrian Refugees

With the fall of the Assad regime, public and political debate has increasingly focused on the return of Syrian refugees, not only in the neighbouring countries but also within the EU. However, the questions around the safety and sustainability of returns, factors influencing the decision of Syrian refugees and the role and responsibility of the international community in facilitating returns require a more nuanced approach, given the persisting security and safety concerns, uncertainties of the situation, challenges around infrastructure, housing and basic services. The UNHCR, in its position on returns to Syria, also acknowledges that "other risks may persist or become more pronounced, despite risks related to persecution by the former government have ceased" (UNHCR, 2024b). Therefore, "The UNHCR does not consider that the requirements for cessation of refugee status for beneficiaries of international protection originating from Syria have currently been met" (Ibid.).

Meanwhile, on 6 February 2025, the UNHCR published its "Flash Regional Survey on Syrian 'Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria (PRIS)" (UNHCR, 2025a), covering Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. According to the survey results:

52% of respondents stated that the fall of the Assad government influenced their decision to return. Among those who expressed an intention to return, many noted that the 8 December developments increased the likelihood of them returning to Syria. They viewed the situation with optimism, citing improvements in safety and security, including exemptions from military service, renewed hope for reuniting with family, and a strong desire to contribute to rebuilding their homeland. Conversely, others indicated a reluctance to return at this time, preferring to wait for further stabilization of the country. Some voiced concerns about the new authorities and uncertainties regarding how the situation might unfold.

80% of refugees hope to return to Syria one day. Only two months after the fall of the Assad government, this represents a major shift in refugee return intentions compared to the previous PRIS conducted in June 2024 (UNHCR, 2024a), when only 57% of refugees expressed hope to return one day.

Similarly, the intention to return in the short-term shows a sharp increase, with 27% of Syrian refugees now expressing an intention to return in the next 12 months compared to 1.7% in the previous PRIS. The medium-term aspiration to return for those not intending to or undecided about returning in the next 12 months also increased to 53% from 37% since the last survey.

Key barriers to return include concerns over available housing and the status of 'refugees' own properties, safety and security, economic challenges inside Syria and concerns about available basic services.

On the same day of publishing PRIS, the UNHCR also released its new "Operational Framework for Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and IDPs" (UNHCR, 2025e), which projected up to 1.5 million Syrians to return in 2025. Based on the number of Syrians returning home and explicit requests from refugees in host countries, the Operational Framework indicated that the UNHCR is shifting to a mode of facilitation of voluntary return. Therefore, it seeks \$370.9 million to facilitate the spontaneous and organized voluntary return of up to 1.5 million Syrians from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye in 2025, based on best-case scenario planning figures (UNHCR, 2025f). The financial requirement aims to focus on key areas of i) preparatory activities, ii) the return process, and iii) protection and reintegration programs inside Syria.

The UNHCR's apparent shift toward facilitating returns represents a concerning departure from its own established protection framework. According to the UNHCR's 2018 Protection Thresholds (UNHCR, 2018), a transition to Phase 2 (facilitated returns) from Phase 1 requires four critical criteria, none of which appear to be fully satisfied in Syria's current context. Despite the fall of Assad's regime, Syria still experiences significant armed violence, as evidenced by the clashes in coastal areas, Israeli attacks in the south and increasing ISIL activities in central and eastern Syria, continued hostilities between Syrian National Army forces and SDF, despite the agreement in March 2025. This directly contradicts the threshold requiring a 'significant and durable reduction of hostilities.' The legal framework criterion remains equally problematic. While a constitutional declaration was signed in March 2025, this nascent document has yet to demonstrate effective implementation of returnee protections. The declaration's human rights provisions, while promising on paper, face substantial implementation challenges across fragmented territories with competing authorities. As the OHCHR notes, "much will depend on how these provisions of the constitutional text are implemented and respected across the country" (OHCHR, 2025).

Without established mechanisms addressing housing, land and property issues—especially critical given Syria’s estimated \$388 billion in physical destruction (The New Arab, 2018)—the UNHCR’s facilitation of large-scale returns appears premature.

Most notably, the UNHCR’s own position published in December 2024 acknowledges that “other risks may persist or become more pronounced” and explicitly states that “the UNHCR does not consider that the requirements for cessation of refugee status for beneficiaries of international protection originating from Syria have currently been met.” This admission directly contradicts the organization’s operational pivot toward facilitating returns of up to 1.5 million Syrians in 2025. The fact that 73% of surveyed refugees still do not intend to return within the next 12 months -citing persistent concerns about housing, security, economic challenges, and basic services - further demonstrates the gap between the UNHCR’s protection standards and current operational decisions. Of particular concern is the absence of a systematic ‘360 approach’ to monitoring returnees - a coordinated system between the UNHCR offices in host countries and Syria that would track protection outcomes before, during, and after return. This comprehensive monitoring mechanism is essential for identifying protection risks, ensuring accountability, and verifying whether returns meet international standards of safety and dignity. Without such monitoring infrastructure firmly established and operationally present, the UNHCR lacks the means to fulfil one of its core protection threshold requirements: ‘free and unhindered access to all refugees and returnees to monitor the conditions of reception and reintegration.’ The absence of this critical safeguard further demonstrates the premature nature of the UNHCR’s shift toward facilitating large-scale returns.

This contradiction raises serious questions about whether political pressures from host countries and donors are influencing the UNHCR’s operational stance at the expense of refugee protection principles. By prematurely shifting toward return facilitation without meeting its own established thresholds, the UNHCR risks legitimizing potentially unsafe and unsustainable returns. This approach not only undermines the agency’s credibility as a guardian of refugee rights but could expose vulnerable Syrians to significant protection risks. International actors should urgently address this policy contradiction to ensure that any facilitated returns genuinely meet the standards of safety, dignity, and sustainability that the UNHCR itself has established.

Conclusion

The fall of the Assad regime marks a watershed moment in Syria’s history, presenting both opportunities and immense challenges. While the transition offers hope for millions of displaced Syrians, the road to sustainable peace and recovery remains fraught with obstacles. The emerging political landscape shows signs of progress through constitutional declarations and national dialogue yet continues to be marred by violence, contested

authority, and fragmented territorial control. Syria's decimated infrastructure and economy will require massive investment and international support, with initial pledges representing only a fraction of the estimated \$388 billion needed for reconstruction.

For displaced Syrians, the fundamental question of return has taken on new urgency, yet the apparent contradiction between established protection principles and operational realities raises serious concerns. The UNHCR's premature pivot toward facilitating large-scale returns, despite conditions that fail to meet its own protection thresholds, risks prioritizing political expedience over refugee safety and dignity. Without adequate monitoring mechanisms, legal frameworks, security guarantees, and economic opportunities, risks may become unsustainable or even harmful to those who have already endured tremendous suffering.

As Syria enters this critical transition period, the international community must remain vigilant against hasty solutions that undermine long-term stability and protection. A genuinely sustainable approach requires patience, principled engagement, and unwavering commitment to international standards—even when political pressures push for accelerated returns. Syria's future and the well-being of millions of displaced Syrians depend on ensuring that the pace of returns aligns with genuine improvements in conditions on the ground rather than political timetables. Only by maintaining this principled approach can Syria hope to break the cycle of displacement and conflict that has defined its recent history.

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