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From:	Presidency
To:	Permanent Representatives Committee/Council
Subject:	External dimension of migration – returns to Syria - Discussion paper

1. Introduction

Since the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus in December 2024, Syria (Syrian Arab Republic) is undergoing a complete transformation. The Interim President Ahmed Al-Sharaa and the transitional government are publicly committing to **build a new Syria** based on national reconciliation, rule of law, separation of powers, as well as human rights and fundamental freedoms for all Syrians without distinction, safeguarding the diversity of the country.

On **23 June 2025**, **Council conclusions on Syria** were adopted¹ in which it was stated that the fall of the Assad regime had created an immense hope to return home among millions of Syrian refugees, including in EU Member States, and among internally displaced persons. However, it was also recalled that according to UNHCR, conditions in Syria currently do not allow for large-scale returns to Syria, given the humanitarian, economic, and security situation.

¹ See 10688/25.

The conclusions also contain the EU's commitment to help create the conditions for safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable returns to Syria and that the EU stands ready to support those who voluntarily wish to return. Furthermore, the conclusions recall that it is key to ensure that the asylum space for refugees is maintained and the principle of non-refoulement is respected and reaffirm the commitment to maintain EU support to refugees and host communities so that their resilience is strengthened. Meanwhile, several Member States have initiated outreach to the transitional government to lay the grounds for cooperation on return of those with no right to stay in the EU, particularly focusing on forced returns of convicted criminals without legal right to stay in the EU.

The aim of this Presidency paper is to assess how Member States currently see the developments in Syria “on the ground” with a focus on the **possibility of conducting returns to Syria**, both voluntary and forced.

It is important to distinguish between on one hand, Syrians who are holders of a valid residence permit in Europe and decide to repatriate and, on the other hand, voluntary and forced returns of Syrian nationals, who have been issued return decisions and therefore have an obligation to leave the EU. The aim of the discussion is to focus on this second group of Syrians who have been issued a return decision and therefore do not have a right to stay in EU Member States.

2. Background

a. Developments and situation in the country

The **current security situation** in the country remains **fragile**. The most recent events indicate that ensuring security in several parts of the country remains challenging. Syrian authorities keep reassuring their commitment to a responsible, inclusive, and peaceful Syrian-led process, but on several occasions, violence has erupted, including large-scale killings of civilians, further destabilising the already fragile situation. Reconstruction, in particular of the public infrastructure is ongoing but the needs are immense. The EU, Türkiye and the Gulf States are engaged with investment in large scale infrastructure projects.

Despite this very fragile security and the difficult socio-economic situation, many refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are going back home. Syrian transitional authorities welcome the return of Syrians from abroad, but they also claim they need time to stabilise the situation to make returns sustainable and note that large scale returns at the moments might have further destabilising effect.

b. Figures on returns from the region

Following the collapse of the Assad government in early December 2024, many among the **5.5 million Syrian refugees** in Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt have expressed cautious hope about the prospect of returning to their homes.

As of 26 September 2025, **UNHCR** estimates that **1,027,887** Syrians have gone **back to** Syria via neighbouring countries since 8 December 2024, the majority from Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan, and smaller numbers from Iraq and Egypt. They estimate that **by the end of 2025** up to **1.5 million** Syrians could voluntarily return back to their country.

At the same time, according to UNHCR, **internal returns** continue, with **1,833,243 IDPs** having returned to their places of origin in Syria since late November 2024, including 949,582 individuals who departed from IDP sites in the north of the country. UNHCR continues to not promote returns but facilitates them wherever possible.

While large-scale organised returns are not currently being conducted and both the UNHCR and the Syrian transitional authorities caution against them, **IOM** stands ready to **support voluntary returns** on a case-by-case basis, working closely with UNHCR and other partners to ensure that all movements are safe, dignified, and informed. At the same time, IOM is scaling up its humanitarian and recovery support in Syria and strengthening its engagement with States and the EU to design appropriate measures for new circumstances.

c. Figures on returns from the EU

According to UNHCR, there are an estimated **1.37 million** Syrian asylum-seekers and refugees in Europe, including some **1.2 million in EU Member States**.

UNHCR has little data about actual returns from the EU. They estimate that the number of Syrians planning to go back to Syria from the EU is considerably lower than in neighbouring countries because of their more favourable situation in the EU².

IOM on its side, in the framework of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programmes, has since 8 December 2024 facilitated 3 returns from Luxembourg, 3 from the Netherlands and 3 from Portugal.

On the **EU side**³, 12 365 **return decisions** were issued to Syrian nationals in the period January-June 2025, which represents a 12% increase compared to the same period in 2024. In the same period, **3 135 Syrians returned** to Syria following a return decision, which is a three-fold increase compared to the same period one year before (1 025). During January-June 2025, **voluntary returns** significantly increased (2 905 vs 240).

Given the interest expressed by Member States, following the change of the regime, to restart returns of Syrian nationals issued return decisions, **Frontex** resumed its **support to Member States on voluntary returns** to Syria as of 17 March 2025 (Frontex currently does not support forced returns to Syria). Frontex' reintegration programme for voluntary returnees to Syria was launched in June 2025 with two implementing partners. In the **period between 17 March and 15 September 2025**, **3 398 voluntary returns** were carried out to Syria with Frontex support⁴.

² Based on report by UNHCR on 10 September 2025 at EMWP, on their relevant operations and factual humanitarian actions in Syria and in neighbouring countries.

³ Statistics based on ESTAT figures. See 13141/25, p.21.

⁴ Top 3 Member States are: Cyprus (1840), Germany (735) and Denmark (305).

3. Improving returns

Based on UNHCR's assessment of the current situation in Syria, the conditions for safe, dignified and sustainable large-scale returns for both IDPs and refugees are not yet in place and many obstacles for returns remain (including protection and safety concerns, destructions, unexploded ordnance, and other humanitarian and economic).

Improving conditions inside Syria, addressing security concerns and ensuring inclusive transition remains the EU's priority. **The Commission and the EEAS** have responded to these priorities through meetings related to the region and countries concerned as well as in the framework of the implementation of the **EU Action plan for the Eastern Mediterranean route**.

In that context, in June 2025, the EU announced **€175 million** to **support social and economic recovery** of the country. This financial support and the cooperation with our UN partners should help to improve the conditions for safe and dignified returns. Furthermore, **financial support by Member States** is also key for a sustainable transition in Syria and in neighbouring countries.

According to **UNHCR**, 2% of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon) expressed an **intention to go back home** before the fall of the Al-Assad regime, 28% immediately after the fall of the regime and 18% according to the latest figures of August 2025.

As regards Syrian beneficiaries of international protection in the EU, in practical terms, the possibility of **"Go-and-see" visits** to Syria is important for creating the conditions of reassurance for those planning to return. Therefore, the Commission is developing an informal guidance through questions and answers on these "go-and-see" visits to Syria for beneficiaries of international protection residing in the EU Member States, which each Member State could use as appropriate, taking into account existing national practices and available resources, within the limits of EU law.

It is also important to maintain **direct dialogue with the Syrian authorities** with a view to a fruitful cooperation on migration aspects. Furthermore, there is also interest in **further internal EU coordination and knowledge-sharing** on dialogue with Syrian authorities on the topic of returns. On returns from the EU of those having no right to stay, the **support of Frontex** is of course of paramount importance, albeit only regarding voluntary returns.

Due to the changed political situation in Syria, some Member States now assess that conditions allow for forced returns and have taken active steps to be able to proceed with forced returns of certain groups, i.e. those posing a security risk and convicted criminals.

Against this background, the Presidency invites delegations to discuss the following questions:

- 1) Do you currently engage (or intend to) in direct dialogue with the Syrian authorities on migration cooperation, including in the area of voluntary and forced returns of those who have no right to stay and have been issued a return decision? What is your experience? Do you envisage a continued dialogue in that area?*
- 2) What is your opinion on forced returns of those who have no right to stay and have been issued a return decision to Syria in the near future and what do you see as the main obstacles to be tackled to be able to effectuate such returns? What specific considerations and challenges would you identify when it comes to the forced return to Syria of those posing a serious threat to public policy, public order and national security and of convicted criminals?*
