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NOTE

From:	Presidency
To:	Strategic Committee on Immigration, Frontiers and Asylum (SCIFA)
Subject:	Impact of the current situation in Syria on asylum case management practices and implications for returns - Discussion paper

1. Introduction

Since the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus in December 2024, Syria (Syrian Arab Republic) is undergoing a transformation.

The **Council conclusions of 23 June 2025 on Syria**[1] contain the EU's commitment to help create the conditions for safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable returns to Syria and also state 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.

[1] See 10688/25.

It is important to distinguish between on one hand, Syrians who are holders of a valid residence permit in Europe and decide to go back 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.

Further to the ministerial exchange of views at the Council on 14 October 2025, which focused on the issue of return for Syrians who have been issued return decisions the **aim of the discussion** in SCIFA is broader. The aim is for Member States to assess the situation in Syria with a view to discussing the impact **on the asylum case management practices for Syrian applications in the EU** as well as discussing **returns to Syria** both for Syrians with legal right to stay who wish to go back as well as for those who have been issued a return decision where either voluntary or forced return is relevant.

2. Asylum applications

Since the beginning of the year, the number of asylum applications is **significantly lower** than in previous years. As of 12 October, 33,369 applications are registered, a 71 % decrease compared to the same period last year.

Given the unclear situation in Syria, Member States (fully or partially) suspended the processing of Syrian asylum applications. Some Member States resumed processing after some months. Currently the processing is still suspended/paused in 7 Member States (BE, HR, CZ, DE, IE, IT, LU).

3. Going back home by Syrians with legal stay

Immediately after the fall of the Assad regime and with the new authorities advocating for stability and reconstruction, many displaced Syrians have become more hopeful about going back to rebuild their communities. However, ten months later, the 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 repeating 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.

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 moment might have further destabilising effect.

As of 16 October 2025, UNHCR estimates that roughly 1.1 million 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 1approximately 1.9 million IDPs having returned to their places of origin in Syria since 8 December 2024. UNHCR continues to not promote returns but facilitates them wherever possible.

While large-scale organised returns are not currently being conducted and both 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.

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.

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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 EU[2]. 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.

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. A recent **survey by EUAA on return intentions** of Syrians from the EU, learned that just over 1 in 3 Syrians is planning to return to Syria in the long-term but only 6% in the short term. The main **concerns** are security, lack of basic services and the lack of economic opportunities. Moreover, ethnic and religious minorities mention security as very precarious.

As regards Syrian beneficiaries of international protection in the EU, in practical terms, the possibility of **'go-and-see' visits** to Syria is important to determine the viability of possible permanent repatriation. Therefore, the Commission has developed an informal guidance for Member States through questions and answers[3] 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.

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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.

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4. Returns for Syrians with a return decision

On the **EU side**[4], 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 support[5].

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. At the JHA Council on 14 October a majority of Member States agreed that forced returns of Syrians posing a security risk and convicted criminals should be a priority.

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4 Statistics based on ESTAT figures. See 13141/25, p.21.
5 Top 3 Member States are: Cyprus (1840), Germany (735) and Denmark (305).

5. Dialogue with Syrian authorities

It is of paramount importance 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.

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QUESTIONS

1. What is the current practice for Syrian international protection applicants? Is case processing still suspended or has it been resumed? Is subsidiary protection status under Article 15(c) of the Qualification Directive[6] granted for Syrians? Has withdrawal of international protection for (certain) groups of Syrians been initiated?

2. Syrians with legal stay: Based on the assessment of the situation in Syria and for the coming months what are the current policies with regard to supporting Syrian refugees to return home. Will a framework for 'go-and-see' visits for Syrian beneficiaries of international protection residing in your Member State be set up?

3. Syrians issued a return decision: What are your current plans for Syrians issued with a return decision? What categories of returnees are you prioritising? Have you carried out forced returns?

4. Have Member States been involved in recent visits to Syria and engaged in direct dialogue with Syrian authorities on this topic? Would you see benefits in more coordinated outreach towards the Syrian authorities?

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[6] Article 15(c) Directive 2011/95/EU, Serious harm consists of: (c), serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict.