

Syrian Refugees Post-Assad: Türkiye's Leadership and the International Response

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Introduction

The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011, has had profound economic, political, and social impacts not only on the Middle East but also on the entire world, primarily due to the massive refugee crisis it has generated. With the recent fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, Syrian refugees—the largest refugee group in recent history—have once again become a focal point of global discussions. Countries like the UK have suspended asylum procedures, Germany has proposed plans for refugee returns, and Austria has instructed authorities to prepare deportation plans. Against this backdrop, the policies implemented by Türkiye and other major host countries and their future decisions have become critical issues. This research aims to outline the current situation of Syrian refugees and compare the differing approaches and attitudes of various countries toward this ongoing crisis.

By December 2024, a coalition of opposition forces, supported by regional and international allies, successfully captured key regime strongholds, leading to the collapse of the Assad regime. This marked a turning point in the 13-year conflict, with President Bashar al-Assad reportedly defecting to Russia. However, the fall of the regime has not immediately resolved the crisis, as Syria now faces significant challenges in rebuilding and reconciliation amid deep societal divisions.

The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in 2010, inspired widespread protests in Syria in 2011 against the authoritarian rule of President Bashar

al-Assad. Fuelled by demands for political reform, economic opportunity, and an end to corruption, these protests were met with a brutal crackdown by the regime. This escalation led to a full-scale civil war, drawing in regional and global powers and fragmenting the country. Over time, a combination of internal and external factors—including persistent opposition from rebel groups, economic collapse due to sanctions and war, and shifting international dynamics—weakened Assad's grip on power, ultimately leading to his regime's downfall.

The Syrian Civil War has created one of the largest and most complex refugee crises in modern history. As violence escalated and the conflict engulfed the country, millions of Syrians were forced to flee their homes, seeking safety both within Syria and across international borders. This mass displacement has placed immense strain on neighbouring countries like Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan while triggering a significant migration wave toward Europe. The refugee crisis has not only highlighted the humanitarian toll of the war but also exposed the challenges of international cooperation, integration, and the long-term needs of displaced populations.

This research seeks to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding the current circumstances of Syrian refugees, while comparing the policies and attitudes of different countries. By analysing the responses of host nations and the international community, this info-pack aims to illuminate the complexities of the refugee crisis and support informed discussions on sustainable solutions.

Timeline of the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian Civil War, which has lasted for nearly 14 years, began in March 2011 when a group of children were detained and tortured after [writing](#) "your turn will come, doctor" on a wall in a reference to President Bashar al-Assad. Protests erupted, demanding their release, but the regime [responded](#) with brutal violence. Over the following months, the government escalated its crackdown, using disproportionate force against civilians, including surrounding mosques with tanks and detaining thousands. These actions fuelled widespread anger and resistance, leading to the formation of the Free Syrian Army in July 2011, marking the [official start of the civil war](#).

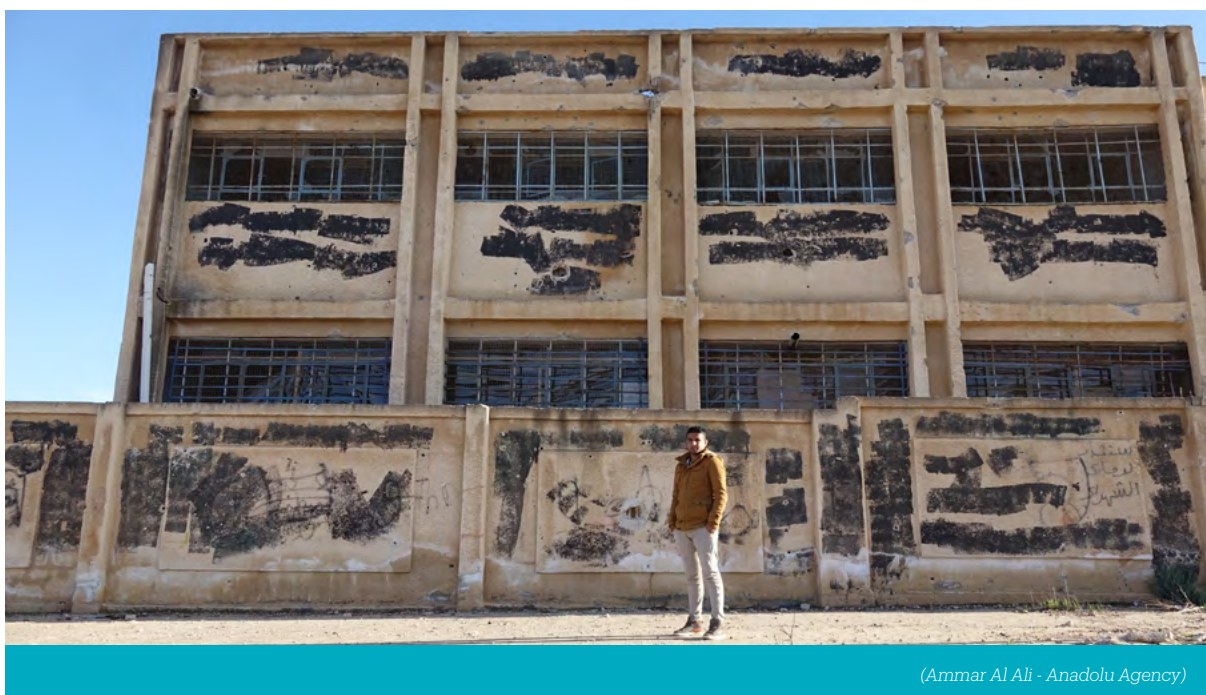
The conflict quickly spiralled into a devastating war, characterised by international initiatives like the [Geneva Talks](#), calls for Assad to step down, and the displacement of millions of Syrians—both internally and externally. Hundreds of thousands of civilians [were killed](#), and countless others faced severe torture and destruction in military prisons. Despite [international efforts](#) and [economic sanctions](#), the war and violence continued to escalate.

Syria's geopolitical significance also made it a battleground for foreign powers and extremist groups. Terrorist organisations such as Daesh, the YPG, the PKK, and Hezbollah [emerged](#), seizing control of key regions. In 2015, Russia's military [intervention in support](#) of Assad

further intensified the conflict, turning Syria into a proxy war where foreign powers competed for influence. Türkiye launched [cross-border operations](#) to secure its borders, while Russia and Iran backed the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the United States [conducted airstrikes](#) against some terrorist groups while supporting others, further complicating the situation.

The Assad regime's tactics, which included mass murder, extrajudicial killings, kidnapping, [illegal arrests and denials of holding detainees](#), and systematic torture, made life unbearable for civilians. This led to one of the largest refugee crises in human history. Millions fled Syria, risking their lives on perilous [journeys](#) across the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas. Many drowned, while others faced [pushbacks at borders](#) like Hungary and Poland or [inhumane treatment](#) by Greek authorities. Global media have frequently documented these tragedies over the past decade.

Still, shortly after the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, European countries [suspended](#) asylum applications and began discussing plans for the return of Syrian refugees to their home country. This shift has sparked new debates about the future of displaced Syrians and the international community's responsibility toward them.

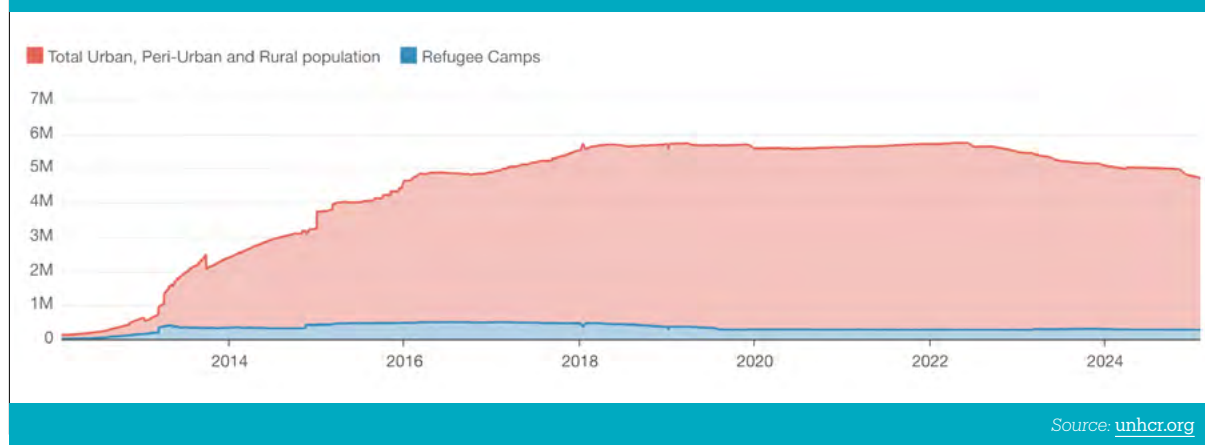


Number of Refugees and their Journey to Date

According to official [UNHCR data](#), since the start of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, over 4.7 million Syrians have been registered as refugees, forced to flee their homeland. Initially, most sought refuge in neighbouring countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, settling in temporary shelters like tent camps. However, as violence, insecurity, and terrorism escalated over the 13-year conflict, Syrians began migrating to all corners

of the world. The reliability of official data is sometimes debated, as some regions remain inaccessible due to ongoing insecurity, and many refugees flee through illegal means without proper documentation. Nevertheless, Türkiye leads globally in hosting Syrian refugees, with 2.8 million registered individuals (as of Jan 2025), followed by Lebanon, Germany, and Jordan.

Trend of Registered Syrian Refugees



Key Host Countries and Refugee Distribution

- Türkiye hosts 2.88 million refugees, accounting for 60% of the global Syrian refugee population.
- Despite its small size, Lebanon hosts 1.5 million refugees, the highest number relative to its population.
- Jordan is home to 1.3 million refugees, with significant camps like Zaatari and Azraq.
- Iraq hosts around 250,000 refugees, mostly in the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) area.
- Egypt shelters approximately 150,000 refugees.
- In Europe, Germany hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees at 712,000, followed by smaller populations in the UK (30,000), the US (23,000), and Canada (73,000).

For more detailed statistics, refer to the UNHCR data portal: [UNHCR Syria Situation](#).

Europe's Response

The first major wave of migration from Syria occurred between 2011 and 2012, when the conflict began, driving refugees primarily to neighbouring countries like Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan. However, as the war intensified between 2013 and 2015, a larger wave of migration toward Europe began. During this period, countless refugees attempted perilous journeys across the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas, often in overcrowded and unsafe boats. Tragically, these journeys were marked by numerous accidents and deaths, with tragic images like that of [Aylan Kurdi](#) seared into global consciousness.

While this tragedy prompted a temporary shift in Europe's attitudes toward refugees, pushback policies persisted. These policies not only exacerbated the dangers faced by refugees but also transformed the Syrian refugee crisis into an urgent international issue, highlighting the need for a more humane and coordinated global response.

The crisis reshaped global migration patterns as millions sought safety under the principle of "first country of entry," which requires refugees to apply for asylum in the first European country they reach. This policy placed immense pressure on frontline countries like Türkiye, Greece, and Italy, leading to overcrowding and strained resources.

The infographic below highlights the migration routes shaped by this principle and the challenges Greece faced during the 2015 migration wave, particularly its conflicts with the European Union and the United Nations over the pushback of refugees. The risks faced by refugees—ranging from pushback practices to deaths in the Aegean Sea—were even brought before the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR). The court found Greece guilty of violating the right to life of migrants and ordered it to [pay compensation](#), underscoring the dire consequences of these policies and the urgent need for systemic change.



(Ayhan Mehmet - Anadolu Agency)

EU, UN Watch as Greece Violates Human Rights Law

Greece's use of excessive force against asylum seekers at its borders violates international and EU laws



UN LAW

According to the UNHCR, a guarantor of the 1951 Geneva Convention and its 1967 Protocol, the protection of refugees is a primary responsibility of states.

All people who feel unsafe or leave their country due to war and similar fears have the right to seek asylum in another country.

These people have the right to apply for asylum and seek to attain refugee status in the country of arrival.

Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 14, states "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution."

EU LAW

Greece is also violating EU law

According to the Common European Asylum System "Asylum is granted to people fleeing persecution or serious harm in their own country and therefore in need of international protection."

EU law indicates that states should provide "humane material reception conditions (such as housing)" and respect "the fundamental rights of the concerned persons."

According to the Common European Asylum System, the asylum process must be "fair, and impervious to abuse."

GREECE MUST ACCEPT EVERY APPLICATION

Greece ratified both the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol.

As a party to the convention, Greece must accept the asylum application of each person who fled their country of origin because of war, and it also must complete this process as quickly as possible

(Anadolu Agency)

The Türkiye-Balkan Route and EU-Türkiye Agreement

Between 2015 and 2016, a significant wave of migration occurred as refugees attempted to reach Europe via the Türkiye-Balkan route. However, migration to Europe decreased significantly after the EU-Türkiye agreement

in 2016. Despite this, the number of refugees in Türkiye, Lebanon, and Jordan remained very high, as these countries continued to bear the brunt of the crisis.

Contrasting Attitudes Towards Syrian Refugees Post-Assad

With the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 and the establishment of an interim government, the dynamics of the Syrian refugee crisis have changed dramatically. This critical moment has led to a reassessment of refugee policies in various countries, especially in Europe. While many Western countries grapple with how to respond to the influx of refugees and the evolving situation in Syria, Türkiye has adopted a more humanitarian approach focused on facilitating a gradual and safe return for refugees. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [has emphasised](#) that no Syrian will be forced to return, reflecting his commitment to maintaining a supportive environment for those who wish to remain in Türkiye.

In contrast, neighbouring countries and Western nations face different challenges and considerations regarding refugee policies. As we delve deeper into this comparison, it will become clear how these different approaches reflect broader geopolitical interests, humanitarian obligations, and domestic pressures. The following sections will examine these dynamics under different headings, highlighting the contrasts between Türkiye's policies and those of Syria's other neighbouring countries and their Western counterparts.

European Countries: Restricting Refuge

Immediately after the collapse of the Assad regime, many European countries [declared](#) that conditions in Syria had improved enough to justify ending asylum for Syrians. Countries such as Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden and Switzerland have [announced](#) that new asylum applications will be suspended or will not be granted for the time being, arguing that refugees should now return to their home countries. This is a significant departure from their previous policies, which emphasised humanitarian responsibility during the height of the crisis and a shift towards restriction.

European countries [have begun implementing return programs](#) to encourage Syrian refugees to return to Syria. However, these programs have been criticised for being premature as the interim government in Syria struggles to maintain stability and security. Many refugees fear returning to a country still struggling with economic collapse, political uncertainty and the presence of armed groups.

In addition to security threats in the region, access to basic humanitarian goods remains limited after years of civil war and economic devastation. [The European Commission's 2024 report said](#): 16.7 million people still need assistance. More than half of the population in Syria lacks access to a stable water source. More than 2 million internally

displaced people live in camps and informal settlements, 85% of whom [are reported](#) to be unable to meet their basic needs, while more than 12.9 million people are food insecure. 2.4 million children are out of school, and 15.3 million need protection services. An [estimated](#) 560,000 people crossed from Lebanon to Syria between the end of September and November 27, 2024, when the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah came into effect.

In addition, European countries [have also reduced](#) financial support for Syrian refugees, both within their own borders and in host countries such as Türkiye and Lebanon. This decision was motivated by the belief that the refugee crisis was no longer urgent. However, it has placed an additional burden on host countries and left many refugees in precarious situations. This reduced support has led countries such as Lebanon, which has borne a heavy burden of the refugee crisis by hosting large numbers of refugees, [to call on the United Nations to plan for their return](#).

Türkiye: An Approach Rooted in Compassion and Solidarity

Unlike European countries, Türkiye has taken a more compassionate and pragmatic approach. Recognising that Syria's recovery will take time, Türkiye has emphasised a gradual and voluntary return process for refugees. In coordination with the interim Syrian government and international organisations, the Turkish government has developed plans to ensure that returns are safe, dignified and sustainable. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has [instructed](#) ministers to work in Syria to meet the needs in their areas of responsibility.

In this context, each ministry in Türkiye will support Syria in its own area to ensure that public institutions and organisations in Syria become operational again and to re-establish the state system. The government continued its commitment to providing access to education, healthcare and employment for refugees who choose to stay in Türkiye. Türkiye also [continued to advocate](#) for international support, emphasising that the refugee crisis remains a global responsibility. In addition, Türkiye [called](#) for the lifting of sanctions on Syria after Assad.

Various Initiatives to Support the New Syrian Administration

Türkiye has launched several initiatives to support returnees, including the following:

Migration Administration Offices: Migration Administration offices will be opened in the embassies and consulates in Damascus and Aleppo. These offices will share Syrians' records, identity information and other official documents in Türkiye with the relevant units in Syria when needed.

After establishing the Ministry of Interior in Syria, Turkey will provide support for basic needs such as population census, security, and passport printing. Türkiye will also assist with issues such as technical equipment and information sharing.

Reconstruction Assistance: Providing financial and logistical support to rebuild homes, schools and infrastructure in Syria.

Economic Incentives: Providing grants and loans to Syrian entrepreneurs and businesses to encourage economic recovery.

Security Measures: Working with the interim Syrian government to provide safe havens for returnees, free from violence and exploitation.

Leading Migrant Project: Starting on January 1, the "leading migrant" application will be launched so that Syrians who want to return to their country can make the necessary preparations. Within this scope, one person from each family will be allowed to enter and exit three times in 6 months.

Customs Facilitation: A "Facilitated Exit Form" will be prepared for the exit of vehicles with local license plates acquired by Syrian citizens in Türkiye.

Procedures regarding the transfer of businesses established by Syrians in Türkiye will be completed by preparing a Verbal Declaration Form in accordance with the Customs Regulation.

If Syrian citizens take with them valuable metals and stones that belong to them, and are not made for commercial purposes, the requirement that these items be declared upon entry or that they be purchased in Türkiye will not be required until December 31, 2025.



There are also other forms of Support provided by Türkiye to the new Syrian administration:

Transportation and Infrastructure: Turkish Ministries are providing support for operating Damascus Airport, building a railway to Damascus, repairing highways and bridges, eliminating communication deficiencies, and printing Syria's own currency.

Military Cooperation: If requested by Syria, the new administration will be able to provide the necessary support for military training and cooperation. In addition, cooperation will be carried out with the new administration in Syria regarding the fight against terrorism. Thus, support will be provided to prevent the region from becoming a target for terrorist organisations again and to create an environment of trust so that Syrian refugees can return to their homes.

Education: The Turkish Ministry of National Education, with the support of humanitarian organisations operating in Syria, is planning to support the new Syrian government in issues such as repairing damaged schools, constructing new school buildings, equipping classrooms, creating educational curricula, and preparing and printing textbooks.

The ministry will contribute to updating educational curricula in line with scientific and technological developments, student needs, and the demands of the Syrian people, preparing new textbooks, developing vocational education for economic development and improving living standards, and opening vocational schools.

In addition, the Ministry of National Education plans to cooperate extensively in the professional development studies of teachers and administrators and aims to provide psychosocial support to families and children to eliminate the difficulties that may be experienced in returning to school.

Health: rehabilitation of the health system, procurement of medical devices, and medical support will be provided. In this context, the Turkish Red Crescent Damascus Delegation was opened at the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) Headquarters in the capital, Damascus. Moreover, the Ministry of Family and Social Services will provide psychosocial support for women and children.

Energy: The Ministry of Energy and Natural Resources will also examine Syria's energy and electricity infrastructure and conduct work on electricity flow.

Countries' Refugee Policies and Approaches

Many European countries, the United States, and Russia—key players in the Syrian conflict—have accepted only a fraction of Syrian refugees compared to nations with fewer resources. European countries, citing capacity concerns, have enforced restrictive asylum policies and border controls. The U.S. has resettled fewer than 23,000 Syrian refugees since the war began, while Russia, despite its deep military involvement in Syria, hosts only 10,000 to 15,000 refugees, prioritising geopolitical influence over humanitarian responsibility.

This stark imbalance places the greatest burden on countries with limited resources, such as Türkiye, Jordan, and Lebanon, while wealthier nations and those actively involved in the conflict contribute far less. Türkiye alone hosts over 2.8 million Syrian refugees (as

of 31 Jan 2025), while Jordan and Lebanon, despite their smaller populations and economic challenges, shelter approximately 590,000 and 755,000, respectively. These disparities underscore the need for a more equitable and collaborative global response to the Syrian refugee crisis.

Since the fall of the Assad regime, approximately [115,000 Syrian refugees](#) have returned to their homes. According to UNHCR data from the Turkish government, 35,000 have [returned from Türkiye](#). Jordan has reported that 22,000 Syrians have entered Syria from its territory, though only 3,100 are registered refugees, suggesting the true numbers are much higher. Notably, most returnees are women and children, while many men remain behind to work and save money before reuniting with their families.

Support for Refugees in Türkiye Continues

As Western countries scaled back financial support for host nations in the post-Assad period, uncertainties surrounding refugee repatriation grew. In contrast, Türkiye maintained its open-door policy throughout the civil war and beyond, continuing to prioritise humanitarian principles. While European countries adopted restrictive policies and pushed for early repatriation, Türkiye took a leadership role in ensuring a gradual and safe return process. This divergence underscores the complexities of managing displacement and highlights the ongoing need for international cooperation in rebuilding Syria and supporting refugees.

As a model of solidarity, Türkiye has been one of the most committed nations in providing refuge and assistance to displaced Syrians since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. In 2023, the country hosted approximately 3.6 million Syrian refugees—making it the world's largest refugee-hosting country. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), this accounts for nearly 60% of all Syrian refugees worldwide. Türkiye's [open-door policy](#) and commitment to humanitarian principles have set an example for the international community, even as many European countries have turned a blind eye to the crisis.

Türkiye Continues to be Top Refugee-Hosting Country

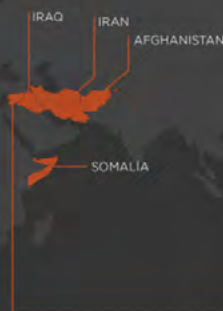
While the world is witnessing the highest number of forced displacement since World War II, Turkey continues to remain the leading country in hosting refugees

3.9
MILLION
NUMBER OF REFUGEES
HOSTED BY TURKEY
(AS OF MAY 2019, UNHCR)



WORLDWIDE FORCIBLY
DISPLACED PEOPLE

70.8 MILLION



Refugees living in Turkey by nationality

Syrians	3.6 million
Afghans	164.351
Iraqis	142.576
Iranians	37.732
Somalis	5.518
Others	11.515

Syrians make up the largest number of refugees in Turkey. **96.51%** of those live in cities -- mainly in Istanbul, Sanliurfa, Hatay, Gaziantep, Mersin and Adana -- while **3.49%** live at refugee camps. So far Turkey spent more than **\$30 billion** on caring for them since the start of the Syrian crisis

(Anadolu Agency)

Türkiye [has spent more than \\$40 billion](#) on Syrian refugees since 2011, according to official Turkish government reports. This includes spending on housing, education, health and social services. The Turkish government [has partnered](#) with international organisations such as the UNHCR and the EU to establish refugee camps and temporary accommodation centres that provide shelter, food, and medical care to hundreds of thousands of Syrians. Türkiye has also integrated Syrian children into the education system, with more than 1 million Syrian children enrolled in schools by 2023.

Consequently, Türkiye's financial burden remains enormous. The country has repeatedly called for more international support, stressing that the refugee crisis is a global responsibility. In 2016, the EU and Türkiye [signed a €6 billion agreement](#) to support refugee efforts in Türkiye, but Turkish officials have argued that this amount falls short of the actual costs. Moreover, the EU's failure to fully fulfil its commitments has strained relations and highlighted the inequality in burden sharing.

Beyond providing emergency humanitarian aid, Türkiye has taken significant steps to integrate Syrian refugees into its society. The Turkish government has granted Syrians temporary protection status, ensuring their access to public services and the right to work. More than 200,000 Syrian refugees have been employed in various

sectors, contributing to the Turkish economy. Türkiye has also [launched programs](#) to teach refugees the Turkish language and vocational skills, helping them adapt to their new environment.

However, challenges remain as growing anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye, fueled by economic hardship and social tensions, has led to calls for tougher immigration policies. Despite this pressure, Türkiye has continued to fulfil its humanitarian commitments, demonstrating resilience and compassion in the face of a protracted crisis.

Lebanon

With a population of 5 million, Lebanon is one of the countries [hosting](#) the largest number of refugees relative to its size. The UN reports 850,000 registered Syrian refugees, while the Lebanese government estimates the total number to be 1.5 million, meaning refugees make up around 30% of the population. Despite its limited resources, Lebanon has provided refuge to Syrians fleeing the civil war. However, economic hardship, lack of legal frameworks and rising social tensions have made the situation increasingly difficult.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon have temporary protection status but lack official documentation and are unable to access basic rights such as employment, education



(Mohammad Abushama - Anadolu Agency)

and healthcare. Most work informally in low-wage jobs k work, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. According to UNHCR, [Lebanon's economic crisis](#), which began in 2019, has worsened conditions, pushing more than 80% of refugees into extreme poverty. Many live in overcrowded, unsanitary conditions and have limited access to basic services.

The economic crisis has fuelled anti-refugee sentiment, with some blaming Syrians for the country's problems. Refugees face harassment, evictions and violence, further exacerbating social tensions. The Lebanese government has imposed stricter policies, including curfews and a controversial repatriation policy that aims to send refugees back to Syria. The government claims these returns are voluntary, but human rights groups warn of the risks given the ongoing conflict in Syria.

Jordan

Jordan hosts around 650,000 registered Syrian refugees and offers them temporary protection status, which gives them access to healthcare, education and social assistance. In partnership with UNHCR, Jordan provides [free schooling for refugee](#) children, with more than 140,000 registered Syrian children. The government is also helping refugees become economically self-sufficient by providing work permits in specific sectors while addressing labour shortages.

Despite these efforts, Jordan faces challenges due to limited resources and economic hardship. Competition for jobs and services has, at times, led to tensions between refugees and host communities. However, Jordan is committed to supporting refugees until they can return home safely and stresses the need for international assistance to share the burden.

The United Kingdom

Since the beginning of the civil war, the UK [has hosted around 30,000 Syrian refugees](#) with asylum grant rates as high as 99%. Through the [Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme \(VPRS\)](#), launched in partnership with UNHCR, the UK has provided safe haven to 20,000 vulnerable Syrians. Local authorities have helped refugees rebuild their lives by providing them with rent relief, access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities.

The UK has also committed significant financial resources to humanitarian aid in Syria and neighbouring countries, providing displaced people food, healthcare and shelter. However, over 13 years, the total number of Syrian refugees in the UK has reached only 47,000, with around 30,000

seeking asylum and legal rights. While the UK has joined international efforts and supported organisations such as UNHCR, the overall acceptance of Syrian refugees remains limited compared to countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan.

Germany

Germany hosts around [973,000 Syrian refugees](#) as of January 2025. This is part of a total of 3.48 million registered refugees, representing around 4% of the country's population. Syrian refugees with temporary protection status benefit from access to social support, education and employment opportunities, but those without legal status face significant barriers. Limited access to jobs, education and integration programs prevents many refugees from fully participating in society and perpetuates cycles of poverty and social exclusion. This lack of integration not only hinders refugees' ability to rebuild their lives but also fuels misunderstandings and resentment among segments of the German population, [increasing anti-refugee sentiment](#).

To address these challenges, Germany has [implemented](#) initiatives to support refugee integration, including language courses and vocational training programs. These efforts aim to help refugees rebuild their lives and contribute to society. However, challenges remain, especially for refugees with uncertain legal status who have difficulty accessing these support systems. In addition, Germany's [deportation policies have drawn criticism](#) from human rights organisations, highlighting the tension between humanitarian obligations and immigration enforcement.

While Germany remains a leader in European refugee resettlement, its policies continue to evolve amid domestic and international pressures. Balancing integration efforts, enforcement measures, and public sentiment remains a complex task, highlighting the need for both compassionate and pragmatic policies to ensure long-term social cohesion.

Austria

Austria has been a major destination for Syrian refugees, especially during the height of the European refugee crisis in 2015-2016. [According to the United Nations](#), Austria hosts around 58,000 Syrian refugees. While the country has implemented policies to integrate refugees into society, its approach has been marked by both supportive measures and controversial restrictions and has drawn criticism from human rights organisations and the international community. Austria has launched programs



to help refugees integrate into Austrian culture, values, and social etiquette. For example, refugees are required to fulfil certain social obligations, such as working in retirement homes, libraries, and fire departments. In addition, refugees who attend language courses receive a €155 aid bonus that encourages language learning as an important step toward integration.

The government also provides social assistance to refugees, including access to healthcare, education, and housing. However, this assistance is often conditional and requires refugees to meet certain criteria, such as participating in integration programs or demonstrating progress in language acquisition. Despite these efforts, Austria's refugee policies have faced significant criticism. One of the most controversial issues is the disparity in social assistance between Austrian citizens and refugees. While citizens receive €889 in assistance, refugees receive only €522, including a language course bonus. This disparity has been criticised for violating the principle of equality and increasing social tensions.

In recent years, the government has also tightened asylum laws, making it harder for refugees to obtain permanent residence. For example, a 2016 amendment to the Asylum Act introduced stricter criteria for granting asylum and reduced assistance for those with subsidiary protection. This has left many Syrian refugees in limbo, with limited access to long-term housing and employment opportunities. Austria has also been criticised for its harsh rhetoric and restrictive policies. Politicians have frequently made public statements supporting harsh measures against refugees, such as deportations and reduced assistance. For example, the "Dublin Regulation," which requires refugees to apply for asylum in the first EU country they enter, has sparked legal and ethical debate because it places a disproportionate burden on border countries like Austria.

Moreover, the government's emphasis on implementing integration through obligations has been seen by some as punitive, especially when refugees face limited access to long-term employment and housing. According to a 2023 report by the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), these challenges have led to a situation where 50% of refugees choose to move further into Europe rather than stay in Austria. Austria's response to the Syrian refugee crisis reflects a complex balance between integration efforts and restrictive policies. While the country has taken steps to support refugees through language programs and social obligations, its unequal treatment of refugees and its harsh political rhetoric have drawn widespread criticism.

Russia

In September 2015, Russia launched a military intervention in Syria, providing air support and troops to support the Assad regime. This intervention changed the dynamics of the war and allowed the Assad regime to retake lost territory. Russia's intervention also drew criticism from Western countries, who accused Assad of targeting civilians and opposition groups and prolonging the civil war. However, despite this role in changing the civil war, Russia hosts relatively few Syrian refugees compared to other countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 10,000 to 15,000 Syrian refugees are estimated to live in Russia in 2023. This number is strikingly low, especially considering Russia's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict and its geopolitical influence in the region.

Most Syrians in Russia are not officially recognised as refugees but instead seek temporary asylum or other forms of legal refugee status. This limits their access to social services, employment, and long-term residence rights. Many Syrians in Russia face challenges such as language barriers, discrimination, and limited integration support.

Canada

Canada has been one of the most welcoming countries for Syrian refugees. As of 2023, Canada [has resettled approximately 73,000](#) Syrian refugees since 2015. This effort was part of a special initiative launched by the Canadian government in response to the Syrian civil war. Most of these refugees were accepted through government-sponsored and privately supported refugee programs.

Canada's refugee policies are among the most progressive in the world. The country operates a variety of programs to resettle refugees, including:

- [Government Assisted Refugees \(GARs\)](#), guided by UNHCR, receive financial and logistical support from the Canadian government in their early years, are one of Canada's refugee programs.
- [Private Sponsored Refugees \(PSRs\)](#), sponsored by private groups or individuals who provide financial and social support during their early years, are another refugee support project.
- The [Hybrid Visa Office Referral \(BVOR\) Program](#), which is the latest in a series of projects supporting Syrians. It began as a partnership between the government and private sponsors to share resettlement costs.

Syrian refugees in Canada are granted permanent residency upon arrival, which gives them access to health care, education and employment opportunities. The government also provides language training and integration support to help refugees integrate into Canadian society. Canada's approach has been widely praised for its efficiency and compassion. However, the system faces challenges, including long processing times and the strain on social services in some communities.

The United States

The United States [has resettled approximately 23,000](#) Syrian refugees since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. This number is significantly lower than Canada's, reflecting the stricter refugee policies implemented recently, particularly under the Trump administration. The US refugee and asylum system has undergone significant changes in recent years that have affected Syrian refugees. The United States traditionally resettles refugees referred by UNHCR, but the annual cap on refugee admissions has been significantly reduced. For example, the cap for fiscal year 2021 was set at 15,000, the lowest in the program's history. Syrians who come to the United States and apply for asylum face a long and complicated process. Asylum

seekers must prove they were persecuted in their home country, and a backlog of cases has led to long waits. The Trump administration's travel bans targeting many Muslim-majority countries, including Syria, have significantly reduced the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the United States. Although the Biden administration has lifted those bans, the refugee admissions process remains slow. Syrian refugees resettled in the United States receive support from government and nonprofit organisations, including housing assistance, language training, and employment services. However, the overall number of Syrian refugees admitted to the United States remains low compared to other countries.

European Countries Commonly Adopted Restrictive Policies

While Türkiye has shouldered a significant share of the refugee crisis, many European countries have adopted restrictive policies and closed their borders to Syrian refugees. Hungary, for example, has [built a border fence](#) to keep them out, and countries such as Poland and Austria [have refused to accept](#) the refugee quota offered by the EU. The UK's controversial Rwanda refugee plan and Greece's pushback operations in the Aegean Sea have further highlighted Europe's reluctance to share the burden.

[According to UNHCR data](#), European countries have resettled only a fraction of Syrian refugees compared to Türkiye. For example, Germany often praised for its refugee policies, has taken in around 800,000 Syrians since 2011, less than a quarter of the number hosted by Türkiye. Meanwhile, countries such as France and the UK have taken in even fewer refugees, numbering in the tens of thousands. This striking contrast highlights the unequal distribution of responsibility and the lack of solidarity among European countries.

Türkiye's response to the Syrian refugee crisis stands in sharp contrast to the reluctance of many European countries to share the burden. By hosting millions of refugees and spending billions of dollars on their care, Türkiye has set a benchmark for humanitarian action. However, the international community must do more to support Türkiye and address the root causes of the crisis. As the war in Syria continues, the world cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the plight of millions of displaced people.

Syrian Refugees Spread to 127 Countries in 6 Continents

The Assad regime crackdown on public protests in 2011 led to a mass exodus of Syrians over the next eight years, spreading globally to **127 countries in six continents**.



SYRIAN REFUGEES IN NUMBERS

13
Million

Displaced Syrian refugees

6.18
Million

Internally displaced Syrian refugees

6.65
Million

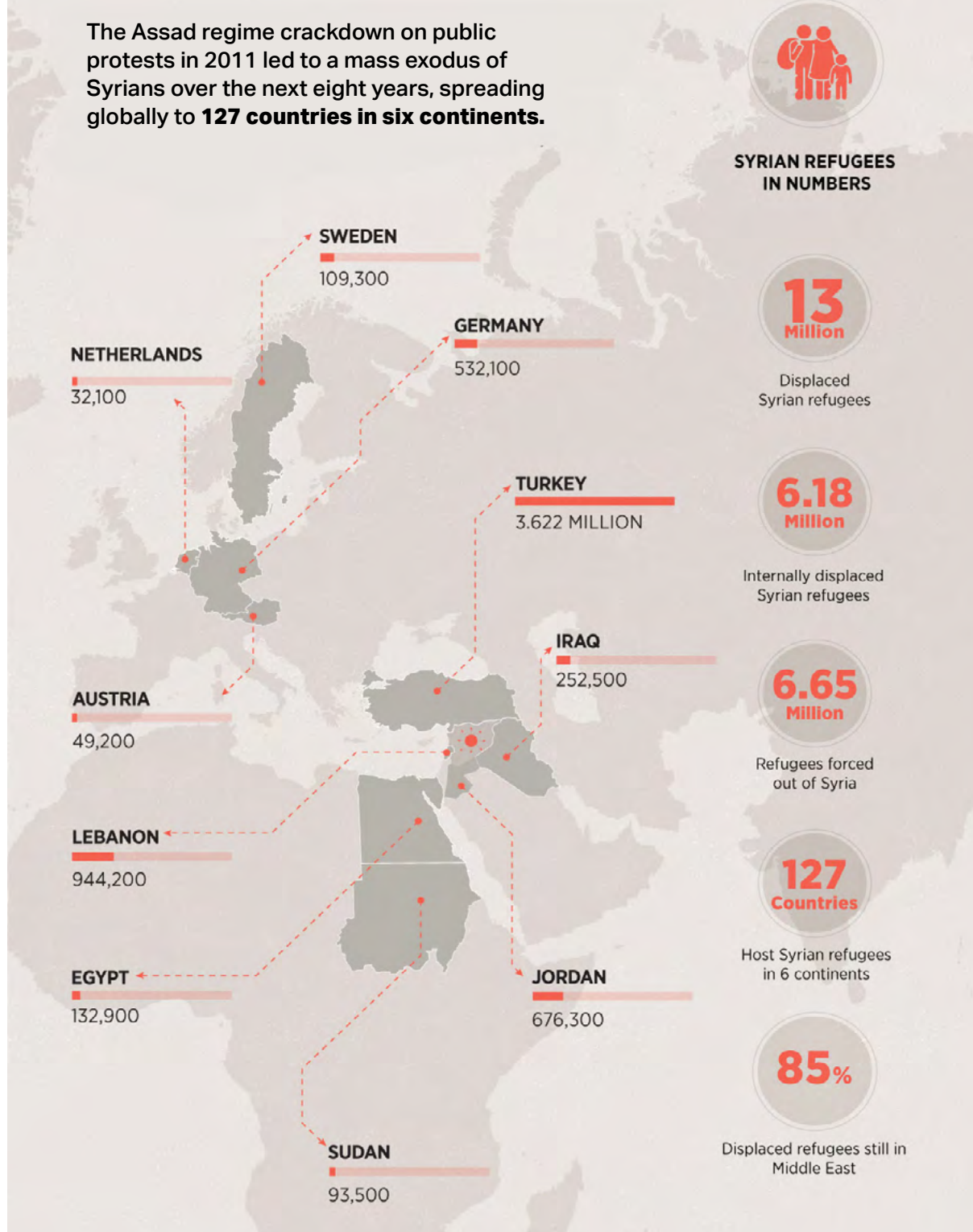
Refugees forced out of Syria

127
Countries

Host Syrian refugees in 6 continents

85%

Displaced refugees still in Middle East



(Anadolu Agency)

The Role of the International Organisations

International organisations have played a critical role during the Syrian Civil War, providing humanitarian aid, documenting human rights violations, and supporting peace efforts. Their involvement has been essential in addressing the mass displacement, widespread destruction, and severe humanitarian crises caused by the conflict.

Humanitarian Aid and Relief

The United Nations (UN) has been at the forefront of humanitarian efforts, with agencies like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Food Programme (WFP), and UNICEF delivering food, water, medical supplies, and shelter to millions of displaced Syrians in refugee camps across Syria and neighbouring countries.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC), has provided emergency medical care, evacuated civilians from conflict zones, and distributed essential supplies. The Turkish Red Crescent (Kızılay) has been particularly active, offering comprehensive support to Syrian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Türkiye and northern Syria. Their efforts include food and clothing distribution, temporary shelters, psychosocial support, and cross-border aid delivery.

Civil society organisations have also been instrumental. Groups like Doctors Without Borders (MSF) and Save the Children have provided medical care, education, and psychological support. Turkish NGOs, such as the IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation and Doctors Worldwide, have operated in high-risk areas, delivering food, medical supplies, and emergency aid. IHH has established hospitals, clinics, and schools, while Doctors Worldwide has set up field hospitals, mobile clinics, and mental health support centres, training local health workers to ensure sustainable care.

The Turkish government has complemented these efforts through agencies like AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) and TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency). AFAD has managed refugee camps with high standards in terms of shelter, education,

and healthcare, while TİKA has focused on rebuilding infrastructure, restoring water and electricity supplies, and supporting local economies in northern Syria.

These collective efforts have saved countless lives and alleviated suffering in a context where local infrastructure has been destroyed, and access to basic services like water, food, healthcare, and shelter remains severely restricted.

Peacebuilding and Mediation

The UN Special Representatives, including Kofi Annan, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Staffan de Mistura, faced significant challenges mediating peace talks. These included deep divisions between the Syrian government and opposition groups, conflicting regional and international interests, and the lack of a unified opposition front. Additionally, the absence of enforceable mechanisms to ensure compliance with agreements further complicated their efforts. Despite these obstacles, their work kept diplomatic channels open and laid the groundwork for subsequent negotiations.

The Geneva and Astana Processes built upon this groundwork. While the UN-facilitated peace talks in Geneva took place, Russia, Türkiye, and Iran led parallel negotiations in Astana (now Nur-Sultan). These processes aimed to establish ceasefires, create safe zones, and negotiate political transitions. Although they did not achieve a permanent solution, they provided a framework for dialogue, temporarily reduced violence in certain areas, and led to periodic ceasefires and limits on the use of chemical weapons.

Refugee Support

UNHCR: UNHCR played a central role in coordinating the international response to the Syrian refugee crisis, which has forced more than 5.6 million people to flee to neighbouring countries such as Türkiye, Lebanon and Jordan. The agency provided registration, shelter and resettlement assistance.

International Organisation for Migration (IOM): IOM supported refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) through transportation, resettlement and reintegration programs. These organisations helped to reduce some of the regional and global impact of

the refugee crisis, even as the scale of displacement overwhelmed resources and host countries.

Monitoring Chemical Weapons

Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW): The OPCW, in cooperation with the UN, was tasked with overseeing the destruction of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile following the 2013 agreement. Despite this, chemical attacks continued, and the OPCW documented their use.

The OPCW's work has highlighted the continued use of banned weapons and contributed to international pressure on the Syrian government. Since these pressures have cornered the Syrian government economically, the use of chemical weapons has been limited, if not eliminated altogether. The OPCW played a significant role in this limitation and the destruction of chemical weapons.

Accountability and Justice

International Criminal Court (ICC): Although Syria is not a party to the ICC, international organisations [have advocated](#) for accountability through mechanisms such as the International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism (IIIM), established by the UN General Assembly to collect evidence of war crimes.

Universal Jurisdiction Cases: Some countries, such as Germany, [have used universal jurisdiction](#) to try Syrian officials for crimes against humanity. These efforts aim to ensure that perpetrators of war crimes are held accountable, even if justice is delayed. The reason why the violence on the streets has not escalated so much these days due to revenge since the overthrow of the Assad regime is that Syrians believe that those responsible will be held accountable and prosecuted.

Challenges Facing International Organisations

Access Restrictions: The Syrian government and other armed groups have often restricted access to conflict zones, hampering aid distribution and investigations. This has also limited the use of chemical weapons, allegations of torture in military prisons, and the ability to keep accurate records of Syrians. All of this has also affected the transparency and credibility of aid access to its sources.

Political Divisions: Geopolitical rivalries among global powers such as the United States, Russia, Iran, and China have significantly complicated efforts to reach a consensus on Syria within the UN Security Council. The United States has supported opposition groups and called for the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, framing the conflict as a fight for democracy and human rights. In contrast, Russia has been a staunch ally of the Assad regime, providing military and political support to maintain its influence in the region and secure its strategic interests, including access to the Mediterranean. Iran, another key supporter of the Syrian government, has backed Assad to preserve its regional influence and maintain a corridor of support to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Meanwhile, China has generally aligned with Russia and Syria, opposing foreign intervention and emphasising state sovereignty while also seeking to protect its economic interests in the region. These conflicting agendas have created a deadlock in the Security Council, preventing unified action and prolonging the crisis.

Funding Shortages: Humanitarian operations have often been underfunded, limiting their ability to meet the needs of affected populations.

International organisations have been crucial in addressing the humanitarian, political, and legal dimensions of the Syrian Civil War. While their efforts have often been hindered by the complexities of the conflict, they have provided essential support to millions of Syrians and engaged the international community in the search for a solution.

In addition, Turkish organisations have been able to respond quickly because of their geographical proximity and cultural understanding of the region. Although Turkish organisations have often faced funding constraints as the crisis drags on and international attention wanes, they have filled the gaps left by international organisations, especially in hard-to-reach areas of northern Syria. They have been involved in the crisis for years, providing emergency aid and long-term support for reconstruction and development.



(Anadolu Agency)

Conclusion

The Syrian refugee crisis remains one of the most complex and enduring challenges of our time, shaped by shifting political landscapes, humanitarian imperatives, and the lingering scars of a 13-year civil war. As the Assad regime's fall ushers in a new phase of uncertainty, the global response to the crisis has been marked by stark contrasts. While some nations have moved to suspend asylum procedures or advocate for refugee returns, organisations like the UNHCR have warned against premature decisions, emphasising the need for continued legal pathways for protection.

The rise of nationalism and populist rhetoric, fuelled by economic stagnation and the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, has further complicated the situation. Politicians in many countries have exploited fears about migration, turning the refugee crisis into a tool for electoral gain. This trend threatens to erode the principles of international solidarity and human rights, even as the world grapples with the immense scale of displacement.

Efforts to stabilise Syria and facilitate refugee returns face significant obstacles. The proposed national dialogue conference and preparatory committee offer a glimmer of hope, but the process is fraught with challenges. As

noted by UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen, pushing this transition risks undermining its legitimacy. Syrian refugees themselves remain cautious, wary of returning to a country still grappling with destroyed infrastructure, deep ethnic and religious divisions, and the presence of armed groups.

Türkiye's measured approach, providing time and space for refugees, contrasts with the swift and often restrictive policies of European nations. This disparity highlights the need for a unified, compassionate, and sustainable response. The international community must prioritise a gradual, safe, and well-supported return process, ensuring that refugees are not forced back into instability or danger.

Ultimately, the Syrian refugee crisis is a global responsibility that demands collective action. The decisions made today will shape the lives of millions of displaced Syrians and determine whether the world can move toward a just and lasting resolution. As Syria navigates its fragile transition, the international community must remain steadfast in its commitment to rebuilding the country and supporting its people. Only through sustained cooperation and a focus on long-term stability can we avoid repeating past mistakes and pave the way for a more hopeful future.



(Hüseyin Nasır - Anadolu Agency)

