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Research study

Titled:

"European Union Countries' Policies Toward the Return of Syrian Refugees After the Fall of the Assad Regime: A Study of Challenges and Trends"

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Executive Summary

Following the fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, after less than two weeks of continuous fighting across the northwestern region of Syria, the group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham managed to seize the capital, Damascus. This development forced former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad into a sudden escape to Moscow, leading to the collapse of the Assad regime and the emergence of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and its operations commander, Ahmad al-Shara (Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), as the de facto ruler of the country.

Based on this, the study highlights the policies of European Union (EU) countries regarding the return of Syrian refugees following the fall of the Assad regime. The collapse of the regime was seen as an opportunity by European countries, particularly right-wing parties, to push for the return of Syrian refugees. As a result of the 2011 civil war, millions of Syrians had fled to Europe.

Accordingly, after the Assad regime's collapse, European countries considered the reasons for asylum claims to have ended. Consequently, many countries suspended asylum applications just one day after the regime's downfall. This response serves as a key driver for understanding and analyzing the Syrian crisis, its impact on the flow of Syrian refugees into Europe, and how European countries responded to the fall of the Assad regime—whether by reviewing and assessing the EU's strategies and policies to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees or by examining the challenges associated with their return to Syria.

The study is divided into five key sections. The first section, titled **“Introduction to the Syrian Crisis and Its Implications for EU Countries,”** provides an overview of the Syrian crisis, including its causes—ranging from political repression to economic and social deterioration. It also outlines the chain of events leading to the regime's downfall. The war resulted in a refugee crisis that, after 14 years, has become one of the largest displacement crises in the world, with 16.7 million people in need of humanitarian aid and protection. This section also discusses the crisis's impact on European countries, including disputes over refugee resettlement across the EU, the potential dismantling of the Schengen open-border system, and the role of the refugee crisis in fueling the rise of far-right, anti-immigration parties. Additionally, it examines security threats, particularly given that between 5,000 and 6,000 Europeans joined ISIS.

The second section, titled **“EU Responses to Syrian Refugees Before the Fall of the Assad Regime,”** analyzes how EU countries responded to the Syrian refugee crisis, varying between acceptance, rejection, and selective admission. However, overall, Syrian refugees were among the primary beneficiaries of the EU's protection framework. The refugee crisis exposed the weaknesses of the EU's common asylum policy. European responses included providing humanitarian aid, imposing sanctions on the Assad regime, and later attempting to normalize relations with the regime before its collapse to facilitate refugee repatriation.

The third section, titled **“European Responses to the Syrian Crisis After the Fall of the Assad Regime,”** outlines EU and European state strategies following the fall of the authoritarian Assad regime. At the EU level, the European Council convened on December 19, 2024, issuing conclusions on the situation in Syria. The Council emphasized the historic opportunity to reunite the country and repatriate its people while stressing the need for an inclusive, Syrian-led political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The Council also underscored the importance of respecting Syria’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within secure borders in accordance with international law.

At the national level, right-wing parties in many European countries called for a general plan to deport refugees. Several European countries suspended asylum processing for Syrian refugees within their territories just one day after the regime’s collapse. These countries include Germany, Austria, Sweden, Greece, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark, as well as non-EU countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom. This move faced widespread criticism, particularly due to the lack of suitable conditions for the safe return of refugees. Thus, suspending asylum applications marked a significant departure from the humanitarian stance adopted by European countries during the 2015 migration crisis.

The fourth section, titled **“Challenges to the Return of Syrian Refugees After the Fall of the Assad Regime,”** analyzes the obstacles to refugee repatriation. The collapse of the Assad regime does not equate to stability in Syria. The country remains highly volatile and far from secure. Many Syrian refugees have returned spontaneously from Turkey and Lebanon, with smaller numbers returning from Jordan. Since the regime’s collapse, approximately 125,000 Syrian refugees have returned to the country. However, more than 90% of the population still requires humanitarian assistance to survive. Syrians, both inside and outside the country, continue to need protection and support due to deteriorating economic conditions and widespread infrastructure destruction. Additionally, the post-Assad political landscape in Syria remains uncertain, further complicating the situation.

The fifth section, titled **“The European Demographic Crisis and the Challenges of Syrian Refugee Return from a European Perspective,”** addresses Europe’s demographic challenges, particularly declining fertility rates and an aging population. The section explores how this demographic crisis impacts the European economy and how EU countries have relied on migrants to fill labor shortages. The return of Syrian refugees could negatively affect the economies of certain European countries, particularly those struggling with labor shortages due to demographic decline. For example, nearly two-thirds of Syrians in Germany work in critical sectors such as healthcare and logistics. The section concludes that despite efforts by some European countries to suspend asylum applications and promote refugee return following Assad’s

fall, the reality remains that large-scale repatriation is unlikely, given the EU's economic dependence on these refugees.

The sixth section, titled “**EU Policy Directions Towards Syrian Refugees After the Fall of the Assad Regime,**” examines the future of Syrians, both within Syria and in Europe, after the suspension of asylum applications. The future remains uncertain due to the unclear fate of Syrian armed factions. If conflicts arise among these factions over power distribution, Syria could descend into renewed internal strife, exacerbating the crisis. Moreover, the rising influence of far-right parties in Europe has led to increased pressure to halt residence permits for refugees and freeze asylum applications for Syrians, potentially placing them in a new crisis. The situation could worsen as European countries and Turkey close their borders to Syrians, preventing them from re-entering.

To prevent this crisis, the EU and European states have taken steps to support Syria's transitional process and avoid another refugee crisis. One such measure includes the EU's allocation of €500 million in aid for renewable energy projects in northern Syria.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes with multiple recommendations.

- **At the Syrian national level,** the recommendations include establishing programs to rebuild Syria's destroyed infrastructure, ensuring the safety and security of returnees, and protecting property rights.
- **At the EU level,** the recommendations emphasize the need to enhance cooperation with international organizations and local Syrian groups to ensure sustainable development and provide essential services.
- **At the European state level,** the study advises against rushing to repatriate Syrians, as doing so could lead to a new refugee crisis with negative repercussions for Europe. It also recommends conducting thorough studies to assess the impact of Syrian refugee return on European labor markets.

Introduction

The Syrian refugee crisis is one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges. Since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011, millions of Syrians have fled their homes in search of safety. Many were forced to seek refuge in neighboring countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. However, as the number of refugees increased and pressure mounted on these countries, many refugees migrated to Europe. On the other hand, the arrival of large numbers of Syrian migrants in Europe has created a major crisis for the European Union. The threats posed by migration to European countries include demographic changes and the challenge of integrating migrants into

societies, as the influx of migrants could lead to issues of identity and cultural disparities.

In this context, EU countries have responded to the Syrian refugee crisis in various ways, ranging from acceptance to rejection and selective admission. Responses also included providing humanitarian aid and imposing sanctions on the Assad regime. Following the collapse of the Assad regime, European countries announced the suspension of asylum applications, and right-wing parties even called for the return of Syrians who had already been integrated. However, despite these calls, the European reality confirms the difficulty of repatriating Syrians and the negative impact such a return would have on European countries, especially given the reliance on refugees to fill demographic gaps and their impact on the labor market.

On the other hand, the European Union has emphasized the necessity of ensuring a safe return for refugees, particularly as the current situation in Syria indicates significant challenges to repatriation, which, if not carefully managed, could lead to a recurrence of the crisis.

Based on the above, the study is divided into several sections. The first section provides an introduction to the Syrian crisis and its implications for EU countries. The second section examines EU policies toward Syrian refugees before the fall of the Assad regime. The third section discusses European responses to the Syrian crisis after the fall of Assad. The fourth section analyzes the challenges facing the return of Syrian refugees after the regime's collapse. The fifth section focuses on the European demographic crisis and the challenges of Syrian refugee repatriation from a European perspective. Finally, the sixth and last section explores the policy directions of the European Union regarding Syrian refugees following the fall of the Assad regime.

Problem Statement:

The Syrian refugee crisis remains one of the most critical humanitarian challenges. The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, resulted in the displacement of millions of Syrians, leading to a refugee crisis within the European Union. Disputes over how to resettle refugees across the EU have posed a serious challenge to the bloc. After the fall of the Assad regime, the situation has become even more complex, particularly with increasing pressure from right-wing parties in Europe to suspend asylum applications submitted by Syrian citizens. Some European countries rushed to implement these measures. However, the return of Syrians to Syria at this stage could lead to another refugee crisis—one even more severe than the first.

Research Questions:

This study revolves around a key question: **What are the policies of European countries regarding the return of Syrian refugees after the fall of the Assad regime?**

Several sub-questions stem from this main inquiry:

1. What are the causes of the Syrian civil war and its implications for both Syrians and the European Union?
2. How did the European Union and European countries respond to the Syrian refugee crisis before the collapse of the previous regime?
3. To what extent do the challenges facing Syria affect the return of refugees?
4. Could some European countries face challenges as a result of the return of refugees?
5. How did European countries respond to the fall of the Assad regime in Syria?
6. What are the policy directions of the European Union regarding refugees? Would the return of refugees lead to another crisis for European countries?

Objectives:

This study aims to:

1. Analyze the Syrian crisis and its impact on European Union countries.
2. Focus on the responses of the European Union and European countries to the Syrian refugee crisis.
3. Identify the challenges facing the return of Syrians after the collapse of the Assad regime.
4. Analyze the impact of Syrian refugee repatriation on the European economy in light of the demographic crisis.
5. Assess the strategies and policies of the European Union to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees.

Research Methodology

This study relies on desk research to collect the necessary data. It also employs a comparative approach to analyze the collected data, derive expectations, and formulate recommendations regarding the future of Syrian refugees after the fall of the Assad regime.

The First Section: Introduction to the Syrian Crisis and Its Implications for EU Countries

The Syrian civil war began in 2011 following anti-government protests and subsequent civil unrest, which the Syrian government violently suppressed. This led to the formation of the Syrian Liberation Army, created by defectors from the Syrian military. Additionally, several non-state armed groups emerged, including extremist Islamist factions, most notably the Islamic State (ISIS)⁽¹⁾. This section will address the following key points:

1. The Syrian Crisis: Analyzing the Evolution of Events

Although the Syrian crisis officially erupted in March 2011, its roots run much deeper, stemming from a combination of political repression and economic instability. Environmental factors also played a role, as severe droughts between 2006 and 2010 devastated Syrian agriculture, forcing many rural families to migrate to urban areas. The resulting economic pressure and population congestion exacerbated tensions, paving the way for widespread unrest and conflict.

Furthermore, authoritarian rule was a major factor in the outbreak of the crisis. It is important to note that the Assad family's rule began in 1970 when Hafez al-Assad seized power. After his death in 2000, Bashar al-Assad assumed the presidency unopposed. He dismantled socialism, broke up state monopolies, and pushed for privatization. However, the removal of subsidies led to economic and social deterioration, fostering widespread discontent⁽²⁾.

In a related context, the wave of protests across the Middle East and North Africa, which resulted in the ousting of rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, significantly influenced the Syrian people. The Syrian protests initially began when fifteen young boys in Daraa, southwestern Syria, wrote the slogan "**The people want the fall of the regime**" on a school wall. They were arrested and tortured, sparking demonstrations demanding their release. At that stage, the protesters were not calling for regime change; rather, they sought the release of political prisoners, an end to the state of emergency that had lasted for half a century, greater freedoms, and an end to corruption.

The anti-regime protests soon spread from Daraa to major cities such as Damascus, Hama, and Homs. In response, the Syrian military fired on unarmed protesters and carried out mass arrests targeting dissidents. Both Assad's forces and rebel factions regularly targeted civilians in opposition-held areas. Approximately 1,400

(¹) Martin Stanek, **The humanitarian crisis and civil war in Syria: Its Impact and influence on the migration crisis in Europe**, Science Direct, 2017, Available at : <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1212411717300636>

(²) **RefugePoint**, The Syrian Refugee Crisis, Explained, 2024, Available at : <https://www.refugepoint.org/the-syrian-refugee-crisis-explained>

civilians were killed due to chemical weapons used by the Assad regime in the summer of 2013, most notably in the **Ghouta attack of 2013**. Additionally, the regime deployed barrel bombs, causing massive destruction and thousands of civilian deaths since 2012. Basic services, including healthcare, education, and access to clean water, became scarce, and the regime frequently used siege tactics and aerial bombardment.

In this context, it is essential to highlight the regime's primary objectives behind these tactics. The regime aimed to increase the cost of resistance for civilians, pressuring them to coerce the rebels into surrendering. Moreover, it sought to prevent local committees from presenting a viable alternative to regime governance.

By 2018, the United Nations Humanitarian Agency reported that over **one million people** were trapped in besieged areas without access to humanitarian aid. While Assad allowed UN convoys to distribute food and medicine in government-controlled areas, access was strictly denied to rebel-held territories. In 2020, Russia, Syria's ally, **vetoed a UN Security Council resolution** to limit UN aid deliveries to just **one border crossing** in the rebel-held north, a reduction from four crossings in 2019⁽³⁾.

After 14 years of crisis, Syria remains one of the largest displacement emergencies in the world. The Syrian population continues to suffer from extreme poverty, with **16.7 million people** in need of humanitarian aid and protection⁽⁴⁾.

2. The Implications of the Syrian Crisis on European Countries

A – The Influx and Resettlement of Syrian Refugees in European Countries

Due to the deteriorating security, political, and economic conditions in Syria, Syrians were forced to flee. By 2024, more than 12 million Syrians had been displaced, with over 5 million seeking refuge in other countries and 7 million displaced internally. Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, more than half of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million has been displaced, marking the largest forced migration crisis in the world after Sudan. Approximately 7 million people have been displaced internally, while a similar number has fled abroad.

Neighboring countries bore the heaviest burden:

- Lebanon hosts approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees
- Jordan hosts more than half a million
- Turkey hosts more than 3 million

These numbers have placed enormous pressure on government resources. With limited job opportunities and education access in these host countries, over one million

⁽³⁾ **COUNCIL Foreign Relations**, Syria's Civil War: The Descent Into Horror, 2024, Available at : <https://www.cfr.org/article/Syria's-Civil-War>

⁽⁴⁾ **UNHCR**, Syria Global Appeal 2025 situation Overview, 2025,P 2

asylum seekers and refugees eventually traveled to Europe, contributing to what the United Nations described as the largest migrant and refugee crisis since World War II. By 2024, the number of registered Syrian refugees in the EU region had reached 4.9 million.

At the same time, disagreements over how to resettle refugees across the EU posed a serious challenge to the bloc, threatening to dismantle the Schengen system of open borders. The crisis also fueled the rise of far-right, anti-immigration parties. In an attempt to curb the impact of this crisis, the EU signed an agreement with Turkey in 2016 to halt the northward migration of refugees. However, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan periodically threatened to allow hundreds of thousands of migrants to cross into Europe.

This agreement followed a year in which Europe faced high migration waves. The year 2015 witnessed one of the largest surges in irregular migration, with approximately 464,000 migrants crossing into Europe by sea in the first nine months alone. Syrians fleeing the ongoing civil war constituted 39% of these migrants⁽⁵⁾, making them the largest group. The situation continued to deteriorate, and by 2018, several European countries, including Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Greece, and Austria, had received more than 96,000 Syrian refugees.

Furthermore, the arrival of large numbers of Syrian migrants created a major crisis for the European Union. The threats posed by migration to European countries include demographic shifts and the challenges of integrating migrants into societies. The influx of migrants has also led to identity-related tensions and cultural disparities.

Additionally, irregular migration has become a security concern for European states. For example, it has affected the free movement of EU citizens. Under the Schengen Agreement and the Amsterdam Treaty, internal borders within the EU must remain open, while external borders must be strong. However, due to the massive and unregulated influx of migrants, governments have been forced to impose stricter border controls. The migration crisis has also had a negative impact on EU cooperation in asylum and migration policies.

B – The Rise of Terrorist Activities

The rise of ISIS in Syria and Iraq posed not only a regional security threat but also significant threats to European countries. This became evident through terrorist attacks in France, Britain, Germany, Italy, and other European nations. Additionally, between 5,000 and 6,000 Europeans joined ISIS. Most of these recruits were from the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Belgium.

This has created a major challenge for European states: the return of terrorists. As the crisis in Syria escalated, ISIS threats in Europe also increased. The head of

⁽⁵⁾ **Council on Foreign Relations**, Europe's Migration Crisis, 2015, Available at : <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/europes-migration-crisis>

Europol (the EU's law enforcement agency) even declared that terrorist threats in Europe had reached their highest level⁽⁶⁾.

Consequently, the spread of terrorist organizations like ISIS in Syria represents a threat not only to European countries but to the international community as a whole. In March 2015, the European Union adopted a regional strategy for Syria and Iraq to counter the threats arising from these crises, particularly those posed by ISIS. The core objectives of this strategy included:

- Supporting international coalition efforts to combat ISIS
- Curbing the flow of foreign fighters, funds, and weapons to ISIS
- Preventing regional spillover effects
- Strengthening border security
- Providing humanitarian aid and international protection to affected populations

The EU's approach underscores the far-reaching consequences of the Syrian crisis beyond Syria itself, particularly in the realms of migration, security, and political stability in Europe⁽⁷⁾.

The Second Section: European Union Responses to Syrian Refugees Before the Fall of the Assad Regime

The responses of EU countries to the Syrian refugee crisis varied between acceptance, rejection, and selective admission. The responses also included providing humanitarian aid, imposing sanctions on the Assad regime, and later attempting to normalize relations with the regime before its collapse to contain the refugee influx and facilitate their return to Syria. This section will cover the following aspects:

1. European Responses to Asylum Applications

A – European Responses to the Influx of Syrian Refugees

Syrians were among the most benefited groups from international protection status in the EU. In 2015, Syrian nationals accounted for 50% of all individuals granted protection status in EU member states. Since then, asylum applications from Syrians have become a permanent reality. In 2019, EU countries granted protection to 295,800 asylum seekers, with Syrians accounting for 27% of these applications. By 2020, the recognition rate for Syrian asylum seekers had reached 84%.

⁽⁶⁾ Ali Najat, *Repercussions of the Syrian Crisis at the Local, Regional and International Levels*, Al Bayan Center for Studies and Planning, 2022, pp. 20-22

⁽⁷⁾ **European Council**, *EU strategy on Syria*, 2024, Available at : <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/syria/#strategy>

European responses ranged from open acceptance to selective admission and outright rejection. For example, Germany, Sweden, and Austria welcomed Syrian refugees and facilitated their integration. Between 2012 and 2018, Germany received 584,461 Syrian asylum applications and granted asylum to 532,065 refugees. By the end of 2020, Germany hosted the largest number of Syrian refugees, reaching 605,338. By the end of 2023, over 160,000 Syrians had obtained German citizenship⁽⁸⁾.

However, in contrast, the United Kingdom, Denmark, and France took a restricted and selective approach. Both the French and British governments faced pressure from political activists, which led to France accepting 8,991 Syrian refugees and the UK taking in 9,728 refugees in 2016. On the other hand, some EU member states refused to accept Syrian refugees altogether, including Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Poland, Slovakia, and the Czech Republic imposed a condition that only Christian refugees would be accepted.

The political landscape has changed with the rise of the far right in Europe in 2014, as a political actor whose influence in shaping European public opinion has increased. Right-wing parties have led several European countries, including Hungary, France, Greece, and Slovakia. These right-wing parties have also adopted an extremist discourse about hostility towards Syrian refugees, considering them to belong to the Islamic identity. These forces have activated Islamophobia and terrorism in the individual and collective consciousness of Europe. The political landscape has changed with the rise of the far right in Europe in 2014, as a political actor whose influence in shaping European public opinion has increased. Right-wing parties have led several European countries, including Hungary, France, Greece, and Slovakia. These right-wing parties have also adopted an extremist discourse about hostility towards Syrian refugees, considering them to belong to the Islamic identity. These forces have activated Islamophobia and terrorism in the individual and collective consciousness of Europe⁽⁹⁾.

Moreover, as part of the European countries' attempt to return refugees to Syria before the collapse of the Assad regime, some countries have moved towards normalization with the Assad regime. The foreign ministers of Italy, Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Greece, Slovenia and Slovakia have expressed their readiness to open channels of communication with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The eight countries have also proposed appointing a special European envoy to Syria who will be tasked with re-establishing contact with the Syrian ambassador in Brussels with the aim of establishing so-called "safe zones" within the territories under the control

(⁸) Ralf Bosen, **Germany's Syrian community — facts and figures**, DW, 2024, Available at : <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-syrian-community/a-71007863>

(⁹) Saadawi Mariam, Baouni Hamida, *The Diversity of European Policies Towards Syrian Refugees: A Comparative Study between Germany and Hungary*, World Politics Journal, Volume 8, Issue 1, 2024, pp. 423, 424

of the Syrian government in preparation for the return of Syrian refugees in Europe to Syria⁽¹⁰⁾.

B- The Rise of the Far Right and Its Impact on European Refugee Policies

The political landscape in Europe shifted with the rise of far-right parties in 2014, increasing their influence on public opinion and policymaking. Far-right parties led governments in Hungary, France, Greece, and Slovakia and adopted extreme anti-refugee rhetoric, portraying Syrian refugees as a threat due to their Islamic identity. These parties exploited Islamophobia and terrorism fears to shape both individual and collective perceptions of refugees.

In an effort to repatriate refugees before the collapse of the Assad regime, some European countries sought to normalize ties with Assad's government. Foreign ministers from Italy, Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Cyprus, Greece, Slovenia, and Slovakia expressed their willingness to reopen communication channels with Bashar al-Assad. The eight countries proposed appointing a special EU envoy to Syria to re-establish contact with the Syrian ambassador in Brussels. The goal was to create so-called "safe zones" in government-controlled areas to facilitate the return of Syrian refugees from Europe to Syria.

The Syrian refugee crisis exposed significant flaws in the Dublin Regulation, which dictates that the EU country of first entry is responsible for processing asylum applications. At the peak of the migrant crisis, this regulation placed a disproportionate burden on frontline countries like Greece and Italy, which received the highest number of asylum seekers.

Additionally, the influx of refugees highlighted the weaknesses of the EU's common asylum policy, revealing a lack of unified European response. This led to internal disputes among EU member states regarding refugee distribution. Other security concerns emerged, such as irregular migration and human trafficking, which weakened the effectiveness of both the Schengen Agreement and the Dublin Regulation.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán warned that if the EU failed to respond effectively to the refugee crisis, "Schengen would collapse."

The Dublin Regulation also failed to alleviate pressures on EU states, as it placed the responsibility for refugee registration on first-entry countries like Greece, Italy, Hungary, and Bulgaria—countries that were already economically strained. As a

(¹⁰) **The New Arab**, EU member states seek normalisation with Syria's Assad Eight EU , 2024, Available at:
<https://www.newarab.com/news/eu-member-states-seek-normalisation-syrias-assad>

result, these states advocated for a review of the Dublin system while simultaneously tightening their external borders.

However, if the Dublin Regulation had been fully enforced, Germany, Sweden, and other “destination countries” would have been forced to return refugees to the first-entry states, worsening conditions. In response, Germany suspended Dublin regulations in 2015, allowing Syrian refugees to apply for asylum directly in Germany, rather than in the first EU country they entered. The Czech Republic took a similar step that year.

Conversely, some EU states, like Austria, resisted these measures by limiting the number of refugees entering their territory and temporarily closing their borders⁽¹¹⁾.

To curb irregular migration, the EU signed an agreement with Turkey in 2016 to prevent migrants from crossing into Europe. Under this agreement⁽¹²⁾:

- Irregular migrants arriving on Greek islands were to be deported to Turkey.
- In exchange, the EU agreed to ease visa restrictions for Turkish citizens, update the customs union, and revitalize Turkey’s EU accession process.
- The EU also pledged €6 billion in financial aid to support refugee needs in Turkey.

2. Providing Humanitarian Aid

The EU’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis included both humanitarian aid to Syrians and support for host countries. The EU and its member states contributed over €17 billion in humanitarian aid for Syrians both inside and outside Syria.

In 2014, the EU established the Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis (Madad Fund), which raised €2.38 billion. Although the fund officially ended in December 2021, its projects will continue until June 2025. It was later replaced by the Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI – Global Europe), which defines EU cooperation with Syrians from 2021 to 2027.

Additionally, the EU launched the Regional Development and Protection Programme to support refugees and host communities in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.

A series of international conferences have been held since 2017 to mobilize humanitarian aid for Syrians. The Brussels V Conference (2021) pledged €5.3 billion for Syria and host countries, with the majority of funding coming from Europe⁽¹³⁾.

⁽¹¹⁾ **Insight** , Common Asylum and Migration Policy of the EU, 2016, Available at : <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/the-uncertain-role-of-the-eu-countries-in-the-syrian-refugee-crisis>

⁽¹²⁾ **European Parliament** ,EU-TURKEY STATEMENT & ACTION Plan, 2016, Available at : <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/legislative-train/theme-towards-a-new-policy-on-migration/file-eu-turkey-statement-action-plan>

Since 2011, EU humanitarian aid to the Syrian crisis has reached €1.65 billion, including €753.6 million for emergency response in Syria across sectors such as food, healthcare, and shelter. In 2015, the EU created the Facility for Refugees in Turkey, with a €3 billion budget for 2016–2017 to support refugee communities. This fund backed 72 projects focused on humanitarian aid, education, migration management, health, and refugee infrastructure⁽¹⁴⁾.

After the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria on February 6, 2023, the European Commission organized the “Together for the People of Turkey and Syria” international conference, pledging €911 million in grants for Syria. The European Commission also allocated €108 million for humanitarian and early recovery assistance for Syrians.

3. Supporting the Syrian State and Imposing Sanctions on the Assad Regime

The EU’s vision for resolving the Syrian crisis is rooted in the belief that a political solution is the only guarantee of Syria’s stability and future. Syria is considered an important partner to the EU, having signed a Cooperation Agreement in 1977 and engaged in the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership since 1995.

The EU has supported UN-led negotiations in Geneva as the only pathway toward a lasting political resolution. The EU engages with regional and international partners, as well as Syrian civil society, to support the Geneva Process⁽¹⁵⁾.

Since 2011, the EU has imposed targeted sanctions on the Assad regime to pressure Damascus into a political settlement in line with UN Security Council Resolution 2254⁽¹⁶⁾. Before the fall of the regime, the EU sanctioned three Syrian government officials, including the Minister of Internal Trade⁽¹⁷⁾, the Minister of Oil, and the Minister of State for their roles in suppressing civilians.

⁽¹³⁾ Evanthia Balla, **The European Union’s Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis**, E-INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, 2023, Available at : <https://www.e-ir.info/2023/04/22/The-European-Union’s-Response-to-the-Syrian-Refugee-Crisis>

⁽¹⁴⁾ **European Union**, The Diplomatic Service of the European Union, 2018, Available at : https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/43037_en

⁽¹⁵⁾ **European Union**, The EU And The Syrian crisis, 2023, p 2,3

⁽¹⁶⁾ **European Union**, The EU and the crisis in Syria, 2020, Available at : https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-and-crisis-syria-0_en

⁽¹⁷⁾ **MINISTERO DE L'EUROPE ET DES AFFAIRES ETRANGERES**, European sanctions: an instrument for fighting repression in Syria, Available at : <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files/syria/European-sanctions-an-instrument-for-fighting-repression-in-Syria>

By 2024, EU sanctions on Syria targeted 318 individuals and 86 entities, freezing their assets and banning their entry into the EU. Additionally, the EU prohibited financial transactions with sanctioned individuals and entities⁽¹⁸⁾.

The Third Section: European Responses to the Syrian Crisis After the Fall of the Assad Regime

The Assad regime fell on December 8, 2024, after less than two weeks of continuous fighting across northwestern Syria. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham managed to seize the capital, Damascus, prompting former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to flee unexpectedly to Moscow.

1. The European Union's Response After the Fall of the Assad Regime

Following the fall of the authoritarian Assad regime, the European Council convened on December 19, 2024, to discuss the situation in Syria. The Council adopted conclusions regarding Syria's future, emphasizing the historic opportunity to reunify the country and repatriate its people. It highlighted the importance of a Syrian-led inclusive political process that meets the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people, in accordance with the principles of UN Security Council Resolution 2254. The Council also stressed the necessity of respecting Syria's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within fully secure borders, in line with international law.

Additionally, the Council underscored the importance of upholding human rights, including women's rights, non-sectarian governance, and the protection of religious and ethnic minorities. It also emphasized the preservation of Syria's cultural heritage, national unity, and the protection of all civilians, while ensuring the provision of public services.

Regarding the return of refugees, the Council affirmed the need to establish conditions for an inclusive and peaceful political transition, ensuring the safe, voluntary, and dignified return of Syrian refugees. Moreover, it stressed the importance of counterterrorism efforts, preventing the resurgence of terrorist groups, and dismantling Syria's remaining chemical weapons stockpiles⁽¹⁹⁾.

2. European Countries' Responses to the Fall of the Assad Regime

After the collapse of the Assad regime, right-wing parties across Europe called for mass deportation plans for Syrian refugees. Several European countries halted the processing of asylum applications for Syrian refugees just one day after the regime's

⁽¹⁸⁾ **European Council**, Syria: Council adds three Individuals to sanctions list for continued repression and human rights violations, 2024, Available at :

<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2024/11/25/Syria-Council-adds-three-individuals-to-sanctions-list-for-continued-repression-and-human-rights-violations>

⁽¹⁹⁾ **Council of the European Union**, European Council Meeting 19 December 2024 , 2024, p 6

fall. These countries include Germany, Austria, Sweden, Greece, Belgium, Finland, Ireland, France, the Netherlands, and Denmark, along with non-EU countries such as Norway and the United Kingdom⁽²⁰⁾. Below are some key country-specific responses:

A - Austria

Austria hosts approximately 95,000 Syrian refugees, most of whom arrived during the 2015–2016 migrant crisis. Following the fall of the Assad regime, Austria suspended all asylum applications from Syrian refugees and later announced preparations for a deportation program.

According to Austria's Ministry of Interior, the government began reassessing the legal status of around 40,000 Syrians who had obtained residency over the past five years⁽²¹⁾. Additionally, Austria introduced a financial incentive, offering €1,000 to each Syrian refugee willing to return voluntarily to Syria⁽²²⁾.

B - Belgium

Over the past decade, Belgium has granted protection to approximately 35,000 Syrians. By 2024, Syrians constituted the largest nationality among asylum seekers, with 4,725 applications filed by the end of October.

One day after the collapse of the Assad regime, Belgium's Commissioner-General for Refugees and Stateless Persons announced the temporary suspension of asylum applications from Syrian nationals, pending a clearer picture of the situation in Syria. However, Syrians in Belgium retained their right to reception services.

For Syrians already integrated into Belgian society—such as those with employment, Dutch language proficiency, and school-aged children—Belgium confirmed that their residency status would not be revoked⁽²³⁾.

⁽²⁰⁾ **Syria Justice And Accountability Center**, Europe's Reaction to the Fall of Assad and the Impact on Syrian Refugees, 2024, Available at : <https://syriaaccountability.org/political-and-policy-shifts-the-european-unions-reaction-to-the-fall-of-assad-and-the-impact-on-syrian-refugees/>

⁽²¹⁾ Jerry Fisayo-Bambi, **Austrian government prepares deportation plan for Syrian Migrants**, Euro News, 2024, Available at : <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/10/Austrian-government-prepares-deportation-plan-for-Syrian-Migrants>

⁽²²⁾ Cairo News, What is the European position on the post-Assad phase?, 2024, the following link: <https://alqaheranews.net/news/109080>

⁽²³⁾ **Belga news Agency**, Belgium temporarily suspends processing of Syrian asylum applications, 2024, Available at : <https://www.belganewsagency.eu/Belgium-temporarily-suspends-processing-of-Syrian-asylum-applications>

C - Bulgaria

According to Bulgaria's Ministry of Interior, from January to November 2024, a total of 1,298 Syrian nationals were apprehended upon entering Bulgarian borders, accounting for 53.7% of irregular arrivals. During the same period, 1,491 Syrians were detained attempting to exit Bulgaria, while 4,403 individuals were arrested for illegal residence, with 62.7% being Syrians and 21.5% Afghans.

After the fall of Assad, Bulgarian Foreign Minister Kondov announced that Bulgaria would not suspend asylum applications for Syrian refugees, citing the continued instability in Syria. He reiterated Bulgaria's support for Syria's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity^{(24)v}.

D - Germany

Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) halted asylum applications from Syria one day after the regime's fall. This affected 47,270 pending applications, although previously approved cases remained unaffected.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz confirmed that well-integrated Syrian refugees would not be deported, even after Assad's downfall. German Health Minister emphasized that over 6,000 Syrian doctors were fully integrated into Germany's healthcare system and were indispensable.

Germany's business associations and labor unions justified the continued residence of Syrian refugees by citing severe labor shortages in the German economy. Meanwhile, the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party called for an immediate freeze on Syrian asylum applications and proposed forced repatriation measures. Similarly, Andrea Lindholz, deputy head of the Christian Social Union (CSU) parliamentary bloc, argued that Germany had exceeded its humanitarian obligations, stating that the reasons for granting protection to Syrians no longer existed and that they should no longer qualify for residence permits⁽²⁵⁾.

Germany's stance on Syrian refugees is particularly significant, given its leading role in the 2015 migration crisis. Under Chancellor Angela Merkel's leadership, Germany pursued a refugee-friendly policy, welcoming over one million Syrian refugees. Merkel's "open-door policy" was widely praised for its humanitarian leadership and emphasis on integration, positioning Germany as a European symbol of refugee

⁽²⁴⁾ **BULGARIAN NEWS Agency**, Bulgaria has not Decided Yet Whether to Stop Asylum Process for Migrants from Syria, 2024, Available at : <https://www.bta.bg/en/news/bulgaria/798221-bulgaria-has-not-decided-yet-whether-to-stop-asylum-process-for-migrants-from-sy>

⁽²⁵⁾ **INFO Migrants**, Germany: Syrians between hope and fear, 2024, Available at : <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/61617/Germany-Syrians-between-hope-and-fear>

protection. The government also actively integrated refugees into the workforce to help address demographic challenges⁽²⁶⁾.

E - Italy

After the fall of the Assad regime, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni convened a cabinet meeting to discuss Syria's situation. Following the meeting, Italy aligned itself with other European partners by suspending asylum applications from Syrian nationals⁽²⁷⁾.

F - Greece

Following Assad's collapse, Greece halted the processing of asylum applications from Syrian refugees, affecting nearly 9,000 applicants⁽²⁸⁾.

G - The United Kingdom

Between 2011 and 2021, the UK granted asylum to more than 30,000 Syrians. Most Syrian refugees were resettled through humanitarian programs overseen by the Home Office, following their arrival from Turkey and Lebanon.

According to Home Office statistics, Syrians accounted for the fifth-largest group of asylum applicants in 2024. After the fall of the Assad regime, the UK adopted a similar approach to other European nations, with Prime Minister Keir Starmer welcoming Assad's removal and calling for stability in Syria. The UK suspended decision-making on Syrian asylum applications until further assessment of conditions in Syria⁽²⁹⁾.

3.Evaluation of the European Countries' Stance on the Suspension of Asylum Applications

The decision by European countries to suspend Syrian asylum applications has faced widespread criticism. Michael O'Flaherty, Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe, criticized the suspension of asylum processing for Syrian applicants in several countries. He emphasized that, according to the principle of non-refoulement, no individual should be returned to a situation where they face a real risk of harm.

⁽²⁶⁾ **EuroNews**, Germany and Austria freeze Syrian asylum applications, Local media report, 2024, Available at : <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2024/12/09/Germany-and-Austria-freeze-Syrian-asylum-applications-local-media-report>

⁽²⁷⁾ **Reuters**, Italy pauses asylum applications from Syria, 2024, Available at : <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/italy-pauses-asylum-applications-syria-2024-12-09>

⁽²⁸⁾ **Ekathimerini**, Greece freezes Syrian asylum applications amid Assad regime collapse, 2024, Available at : <https://www.ekathimerini.com/politics/foreign-policy/1255791/Greece-freezes-Syrian-asylum-applications-amid-Assad-regime-collapse>

⁽²⁹⁾ **BBC**, UK pauses decisions on Syrian asylum claims, 2024, Available at : <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c36e0d0xw1ro>

Based on this, the rapidly changing conditions in Syria require careful and evidence-based decision-making.

O'Flaherty also pointed out that, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), revoking refugee status under the 1951 Refugee Convention requires fundamental and lasting changes in the country of origin. This principle should also be applied to individuals benefiting from subsidiary protection under EU law.

Additionally, under the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) and the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights, no member state may return an individual to a place where they face a real risk to their life, torture, or inhumane or degrading treatment. European countries must also consider how repatriation could impact family and private life, especially for Syrians who have lived in host countries for extended periods. Any decision to revoke asylum should be accompanied by effective legal remedies.

Accordingly, before taking any steps that could lead to repatriation, EU member states must carefully assess the evolving and complex situation in Syria. Decisions should be evidence-based and not rushed, and no change to Syrians' protection status should be implemented without a comprehensive assessment of ongoing human rights risks for specific groups and individuals. For Syrians who wish to return to their country of origin, EU member states must ensure that they can do so in an informed and genuinely voluntary manner⁽³⁰⁾.

Yves Geyer, Director of the European Institutions Office at Amnesty International, echoed this stance, urging caution in repatriating Syrians. She emphasized that Syria remains highly volatile, particularly given the current instability, and thus, countries should avoid placing Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in even more uncertain situations. She stressed that the safety of asylum seekers and their ability to make decisions freely must be central to the policy-making process, rather than sacrificing them through asylum suspension policies. Similarly⁽³¹⁾, Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, called for "patience and vigilance" regarding the situation.

Moreover, the decision to suspend asylum applications raises serious legal and humanitarian concerns. Notably, the 1951 Refugee Convention includes a clause allowing for the revocation of refugee status when the circumstances that led to protection no longer exist. The Convention states that refugee status may be withdrawn

⁽³⁰⁾ **Commissioner for Human Rights**, As Syria shifts, Council of Europe member states must avoid hasty returns of Refugees, 2024, Available at : <https://www.coe.int/en/web/commissioner/-/as-syria-shifts-council-of-europe-member-states-must-avoid-hasty-returns-of-refugees>

⁽³¹⁾ **Amnesty**, Europe: Safety of Syrians in Europe must not be sacrificed to political interests, 2024, Available at : <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2024/12/europe-safety-of-syrians-in-europe-must-not-be-sacrificed-to-political-interests/>

if there is a fundamental change in the political system of the country of origin, particularly when such a change results in the establishment of democracy.

On the other hand, these policies appear premature, given the continued instability in Syria. Furthermore, the suspension of asylum applications for Syrians requires a thorough evaluation of conditions in Syria. While the regime may have changed, the country remains far from stable, particularly with the emergence of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham as the ruling force, leaving Syria's political future highly uncertain. So far, there are no clear indicators of a radical or democratic transformation in Syria. Consequently, the conditions necessary for a safe return are far from guaranteed.

Based on the above, the suspension of asylum applications for Syrians by European countries represents a significant deviation from their humanitarian stance during the 2015 migration crisis⁽³²⁾.

The Fourth Section: Challenges of Refugee Return After the Fall of the Assad Regime

The fall of the Assad regime does not mean that stability has been restored in Syria, as the situation in the country remains highly volatile and far from stable. Many Syrian refugees have returned spontaneously from Turkey and Lebanon, with a smaller number from Jordan. Since the collapse of the regime, approximately 125,000 Syrian refugees have returned to Syria⁽³³⁾.

However, it is important to note that more than 90% of the population requires humanitarian aid to survive. Syrians inside and outside the country still need protection and support.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), despite the reduction in protection risks previously linked to persecution by the former regime⁽³⁴⁾, challenges to return remain ongoing. The destruction caused by years of conflict has devastated a significant portion of Syria's infrastructure, complicating recovery efforts. The return of Syrian refugees marks a turning point in the ongoing

⁽³²⁾ Morgiane Noel, **Syria: how the fall of Assad has affected the asylum debate in Europe**, The Conversation, 2025, Available at : <https://theconversation.com/syria-how-the-fall-of-assad-has-affected-the-asylum-debate-in-europe-246689>

⁽³³⁾ **United Nations**, Over 115,000 Syrians have returned home since end of Assad dictatorship, 2025, Available at : <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/01/1158706>

⁽³⁴⁾ **UNHCR**, UNHCR urges continued protection and support for Syrians inside and outside the Country, 2024, Available at : <https://www.unhcr.org/in/news/briefing-notes/unhcr-urges-continued-protection-and-support-syrians-inside-and-outside-country#:~:text=We%20have%20also%20made%20significant,presence%20at%20border%20crossing%20points>

crisis, underscoring the need for comprehensive humanitarian support and reconstruction efforts⁽³⁵⁾.

1. Infrastructure Destruction

The Syrian civil war, ongoing since 2011, has severely damaged the country's infrastructure, particularly with the collapse of basic services such as clean water, electricity, and housing. Many homes have been destroyed by war, and property ownership disputes have emerged. Even in cases where homes were not destroyed, many are now occupied by other people. Additionally, many refugees lack documents proving ownership of their properties.

Furthermore, the new government may struggle to resolve property disputes, particularly given the immense pressure it faces, as the majority of the population requires aid. UNHCR reports that 90% of Syrians rely on humanitarian assistance.

Compounding the issue is the timing of the regime's fall and the return of refugees, which occurred in December, the beginning of winter. This has increased the need for shelter, food, and water.

2. Economic and Social Conditions

The Syrian economy faces numerous challenges, the most critical being high inflation. According to the Syrian Central Bank, inflation stood at 122% in April 2024. Additionally, many schools have been destroyed, leaving countless children without access to education.

At the same time, job opportunities remain scarce, making employment another major obstacle for returning Syrians.

In this context:

- 16.7 million people require humanitarian assistance within Syria.
- More than half of the population lacks access to a stable water source.
- Syria ranks as the fourth most food-insecure country in the world, with 12.9 million people in need of food aid⁽³⁶⁾.

A major factor behind Syria's economic deterioration during Assad's rule was the international sanctions imposed on the regime due to its human rights violations, which further crippled the country's economy.

⁽³⁵⁾ **JURISTnews**, UN refugee agency notes humanitarian challenges in Syria with post-Assad return of displaced Population, 2025, Available at : <https://www.jurist.org/news/2025/01/humanitarian-challenges-reported-in-syria-amidst-return-of-displaced-population>

⁽³⁶⁾ **European Council**, Syria, 2024, Available at : <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/syria>

However, Syria's current leader, Ahmad al-Shara, has called for the lifting of sanctions, arguing that Syria no longer poses a threat to the rest of the world as it did under Assad.

3. Political Conditions After the Fall of the Assad Regime

Although many Syrians celebrated the end of Assad's oppressive regime, Syria's future remains uncertain⁽³⁷⁾.

The country is now ruled by Ahmad al-Shara, the leader of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the dominant faction in the rebel coalition that defeated Assad. However, both the United States and the United Nations classify HTS as a terrorist organization. The group was previously affiliated with Al-Qaeda, raising concerns about whether the new leadership will bring peace to Syria.

Additionally, many host countries are pushing to repatriate Syrian refugees. However, the simultaneous return of a large number of people could create new problems, as the new government is already facing significant challenges.

Difficulties persist both inside and outside Syria. In northern Syria, Turkish-backed groups are clashing with Kurdish-led forces, raising fears of further violence.

Moreover, many Syrians doubt that HTS will lead Syria to a peaceful future, given its history of authoritarian rule in northwest Syria⁽³⁸⁾.

4. An Uncertain Future

Syria's political future remains unclear, with power struggles expected to emerge, particularly given the presence of multiple political factions.

Key concerns include:

- Turkish-backed forces fighting Kurdish-led groups in northern Syria.
- The return of exiled political leaders.
- HTS attempting to consolidate its power.

Additionally, many Syrians fear what HTS rule may bring. While HTS has sought to reassure minorities that they will not be targeted, many Syrians remain skeptical, due to the group's past ties to Al-Qaeda and its history of authoritarian governance in northwest Syria.

At the same time, Syria's changing geopolitical balance may lead to further violence, as global powers compete to shape the country's post-Assad future.

⁽³⁷⁾ **Federal Foreign Office**, A difficult new beginning – Syria amid hope and Challenges, 2024, Available at : <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/syria-2690600>

⁽³⁸⁾ **THE BORGEN Project**, The Fall of Assad's Regime and Challenges Facing Syrians, 2025, Available at : <https://borgenproject.org/The-Fall-of-Assad's-Regime>

- Iran has lost its influence in Syria.
- Russia has withdrawn most of its forces.
- Turkey has become more dominant in the region.
- The future of the U.S. presence in Syria is uncertain, particularly after President-elect Donald Trump stated that the U.S. “should not intervene in Syria.”

These factors contribute to a deeply unpredictable future for Syria, with no clear path toward stability or democratic transformation⁽³⁹⁾.

The Fifth Section: The European Demographic Crisis and Challenges of Syrian Refugee Return for Europe

1. The Demographic Crisis and Its Impact on the European Economy

European countries are facing a demographic crisis, with its impact and severity varying across different nations and even within the same country. As of early February 2025, the population of Europe stood at 719,759,938, with an annual growth rate of -0.129%⁽⁴⁰⁾.

It is projected that population decline will continue until 2030 in several European countries, including Bulgaria, Greece, Croatia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, and Romania. Meanwhile, some other countries, such as Denmark, Ireland, Cyprus, Luxembourg, Malta, and Sweden, are expected to experience population growth during the same period.

Overall, Europe’s share of the global population has significantly declined and is expected to continue decreasing. In 1960, Europeans accounted for 12% of the global population, but by 2022, this figure had dropped to 6%, and projections indicate that it will fall below 4% by 2070⁽⁴¹⁾.

The demographic crisis in Europe is primarily driven by two key factors:

- Declining fertility rates: Fertility rates across Europe have been falling since 1950 and are expected to continue declining until 2050. For example, the fertility rate in 2022 was 1.48⁽⁴²⁾, and in 2023, it reached 1.44 in England and Wales⁽⁴³⁾,

⁽³⁹⁾ Will Todman, **Don’t Rush Syrian Refugees’ Return, Crisis**, 2024, Available at : <https://www.csis.org/analysis/Don't-Rush-Syrian-Refugees-return>

⁽⁴⁰⁾ **Population today**, Europe Population, 2024, Available at : https://search.app?link=https%3A%2F%2Fpopulationtoday.com%2Fcontinents%2Furope%2F&utm_campaign=aga&utm_source=agsadl2%2Csh%2Fx%2Fgs%2Fm2%2F4

⁽⁴¹⁾ EU Population Increases Again in 2024 – Eurostat, **ec.europa.eu**, 2024, Available at : <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/w/ddn-20240711-1>

⁽⁴²⁾ Servet Yanatma, “Europe’s Fertility Crisis: Which Countries Are Having Fewer Babies?,” **euronews** (Euronews.com, September 28, 2024), Available at:

marking the lowest level ever recorded. This decline is attributed to individualistic lifestyles, increased female participation in the workforce, and economic factors.

- Increasing life expectancy: The average lifespan of Europeans currently ranges between 80 and 85 years. By 2050, this is expected to increase to 85–95 years, largely due to advancements in healthcare systems.

As a result, a declining population leads to a shrinking workforce, which in turn increases the dependency ratio in the EU. Over the past few years:

- In 2015, the working-age population accounted for 65.5% of the total population.
- By 2023, this proportion had declined to 63.8%.
- Simultaneously, the elderly dependency ratio (the proportion of retirees relative to the working population) rose from 29% in 2015 to 33% in 2022⁽⁴⁴⁾.

Based on these trends, Europe's population crisis could reduce GDP by 4% by 2040.

Countries such as Italy, Spain, and Germany are among those most affected by the demographic crisis. This explains Europe's reliance on migration to fill labor shortages and sustain economic growth. Given the high number of Syrian migrants in these European countries, Syrians have become an integral part of the labor force. Consequently, their return to Syria would pose significant challenges to economic stability⁽⁴⁵⁾.

2. Challenges of Syrian Refugee Return for European Countries

Many European countries depend on migration and refugees to mitigate the effects of their demographic crisis. The return of Syrian refugees could impact several European economies, especially given the long duration of their stay and their full integration into host societies.

<https://www.euronews.com/health/2024/09/28/europes-fertility-crisis-which-european-country-is-having-the-fewest-babies>

⁽⁴³⁾ Geoff Riley, **From High Costs to Late Parenthood: Unpacking the UK's Record-Low Birth Rate**, tutor2u, 2024, Available at :

https://search.app?link=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.tutor2u.net%2Feconomics%2Fblog%2Ffrom-high-costs-to-late-parenthood-unpacking-the-uks-record-low-birth-rate&utm_campaign=aga&utm_source=agsadl2%2Csh%2Ffx%2Fgs%2Fm2%2F4

⁽⁴⁴⁾ **EuroStat**, "Population Projections In the EU – Statistics Explained," Europa.eu, 2023, Available at:

https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Population_projections_in_the_EU#Age_dependency_ratio

⁽⁴⁵⁾ Allianz, **European labor markets: Migration matters**, 2024, Available at :

https://search.app?link=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.allianz.com%2Fen%2Feconomic_research%2Finsights%2Fpublications%2Fspecials_fmo%2F2024_02_14_European-Labour-Markets.html&utm_campaign=aga&utm_source=agsadl2%2Csh%2Ffx%2Fgs%2Fm2%2F4

For instance:

- Approximately two-thirds of Syrians in Germany work in critical sectors such as healthcare, transportation, logistics, and food production—all industries experiencing severe labor shortages⁽⁴⁶⁾.
- In 2024, around 287,000 Syrians were employed in Germany⁽⁴⁷⁾.
- According to the German Economic Institute, 80,000 Syrians work in professions facing labor shortages, including automotive engineering, medicine, dentistry, and climate-related fields such as heating and air conditioning.
- More than 4,000 Syrian engineers specialize in automotive technology.
- By the end of 2024, over 6,000 Syrian doctors were working in Germany's healthcare system.

If Syrians were to return to Syria, the German healthcare system would face severe labor shortages. The German Health Minister confirmed this concern, emphasizing that Syrian doctors are fully integrated and indispensable in Germany's healthcare system.

Labor unions, business associations, and industrial federations justify the need for Syrian workers, arguing that Germany is facing an acute labor shortage. The impact extends beyond healthcare:

- Around 2,100 Syrians work in climate-related sectors such as electrical engineering.
- Approximately 1,570 Syrians work in health, heating, and air conditioning industries⁽⁴⁸⁾.

Similarly, in Italy, around 2.3 million foreign workers contribute to vital sectors such as:

- Agriculture (18% of total workforce)
- Construction (15.5%)
- Hospitality and restaurant industries (15.3%)⁽⁴⁹⁾

⁽⁴⁶⁾ Samuel Davidoff-Gore, Susan Fratzke, **The Complicated Reality of Syrians' Return**, MPI, 2024, Available at : <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/post-Assad-return-Syria>

⁽⁴⁷⁾ Nik Martin, **As Europe needs workers, Syrians face push to return**, DW, 2024, Available at : <https://www.dw.com/en/as-europe-needs-workers-syrians-face-push-to-return/a-71046852>

⁽⁴⁸⁾ Al Jazeera, Study: German Economy Faces Negative Impacts from Returning Syrian Refugees, 2024, next link: <https://www.ajnet.me/news/2024/12/18/>

⁽⁴⁹⁾ **Integrazionemigranti**, 12th Annual Report on Foreigners In the Labor Market in Italy, Available at : <https://Integrazionemigranti.gov.it/en-gb/Dettaglio-approfondimento/id/46/12th-Annual-Report-on-Foreigners-in-the-Labor-Market-in-Italy>

Recognizing the importance of Syrian workers, some European nations, including Belgium, have stated that they will not revoke residency permits for Syrians who are already integrated into the workforce.

Conclusion: The Practical Challenges of Repatriating Syrian Refugees

Although many European governments have publicly promoted the idea of returning Syrian refugees after the fall of the Assad regime, real-world economic and social factors indicate that such repatriation efforts would be difficult to implement. The return of Syrians could have severe economic repercussions, particularly for sectors already struggling with labor shortages.

Additionally, governments may be unable to repatriate Syrians due to a range of factors, including:

- Ongoing conflicts in Syria
- Extreme poverty in the country
- The destruction of critical infrastructure

These factors suggest that many Syrians who lose their refugee status may still qualify for subsidiary protection or alternative legal status.

Moreover, family reunification laws—as protected under the European Convention on Human Rights—could prevent the forced return of some Syrians. For example, if one family member has long-term residency or citizenship but others do not, deportation may not be legally feasible.

In light of these challenges, European countries will likely struggle to implement large-scale returns of Syrian refugees, despite the political rhetoric advocating for their repatriation.

Axis Six: European Union Policies Towards Syrian Refugees After the Fall of the Assad Regime

The future of Syrians, both inside Syria and as refugees in Europe, is at risk following the suspension of asylum applications. This is especially true given the uncertainty surrounding the future of Syrian military factions and whether disputes over power distribution could lead to internal conflict, exacerbating the situation and potentially triggering another civil war.

Moreover, the situation for Syrians may become even more critical due to their inability to return to Europe, following the rise of far-right parties across European countries. These parties have exerted pressure to halt residence permits for refugees and freeze asylum applications for Syrians, which could push them into a new crisis. However, this crisis would be even more severe if European countries and Turkey close their doors to Syrians attempting to re-enter.

Regarding the Syrian stance, the newly appointed Syrian interim Prime Minister, Mohammad Al-Bashir, stated that his top priorities for the upcoming period include restoring security and stability, addressing poverty, and providing basic services to rebuild the country. Additionally, he aims to facilitate the return of refugees, meaning the reintegration of Syrian "human capital and expertise" in the form of Syrian refugee students and highly skilled professionals to contribute to rebuilding the nation.

On the European side, as previously mentioned, several countries have suspended asylum applications from Syrians after the fall of the Assad regime. These countries include Austria, Belgium, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, and the United Kingdom. This means that Syrian asylum applications—whether new or pending—are currently not being processed, leaving thousands of asylum seekers in a prolonged state of uncertainty. Furthermore, conservative politicians across Europe are taking an even stricter approach, announcing plans to repatriate Syrians who have already been granted residency, not just those who applied for asylum.

In this context, amid uncertainty and the challenges mentioned above, premature refugee repatriation could have serious consequences. If refugees return and face the political, security, economic, and social conditions in Syria, it would cause anxiety among other Syrian refugees in Europe about their potential return. This could escalate into a security crisis. Additionally, a large influx of returning Syrians would strain already overstretched public services, increase social tensions, and undermine the fragile transition process in Syria.

It is important to note that the repercussions of this situation would not be confined to Syria alone. A complete state collapse in Syria would force Syrians to flee again, increasing pressure on neighboring countries. These countries may allow refugees to travel to Europe, particularly if Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) fails to unify Syria and establish promised peace and stability. Other groups could attempt to seize power, leading to widespread armed conflict. This would, in turn, force more Syrian civilians to flee, adding to the millions who have already been displaced.

Additionally, geopolitical developments in the region contribute to the uncertainty surrounding Syria. Events such as the war in Gaza and Lebanon, the situation in Iran, the potential return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency, and the long-term impact of the Ukraine war on Russia all add to the complexity of the Syrian crisis.

Ironically, the European decision to suspend Syrian asylum applications, based on the claim that Syria is now safe for return and that Syrians no longer require international protection after Assad's departure, comes after many European countries had previously attempted to normalize relations with the Assad regime. Their goal was to explore the possibility of repatriating Syrians while Assad was still in power.

In response, the European Union (EU) and European countries have taken steps to support Syria's transitional process and prevent a refugee crisis. To avoid a new

refugee wave, the EU decided on December 16, 2024, to allocate an additional €1 billion to Turkey before the end of the year. This funding aims to create favorable conditions for the voluntary return of Syrian refugees to their homeland and prevent any potential irregular migration to Europe in the coming period. European concerns about another refugee crisis are particularly heightened by fears that HTS could adopt repressive measures against its local opponents or govern with an ideological mindset, which could lead to another wave of violence against civil movements⁽⁵⁰⁾.

Furthermore, the EU has outlined specific reform conditions for political engagement with Damascus. The EU has been cautious in its dealings with HTS leader Abu Mohammad al-Jolani. Despite concerns over his extremist affiliations, the EU has taken measured steps to engage with him as part of the new leadership. These steps include indirect meetings through mediators, aimed at assessing his political intentions and ensuring his commitment to protecting minorities and respecting human rights. The EU has linked any political or economic support to tangible reforms, particularly in preventing terrorism and securing stability in opposition-controlled areas.

Additionally, European initiatives have been launched to support Syria's transitional process post-Assad under the principles of democracy and the rule of law. For example:

- France organized a workshop bringing together international and Syrian experts to draft a proposed new Syrian constitution, focusing on the rights of minorities and women's empowerment.
- Germany pledged €10 million in grants to support Syrian civil society organizations, enabling them to participate in the political transition.
- The UK backed a UN-led initiative to hold a conference in Geneva, bringing together all Syrian opposition factions and the new leadership to outline a roadmap for free elections within three years.

European support has also extended to Syria's reconstruction efforts post-Assad, with strict conditions ensuring support is limited to sustainable development and economic revitalization projects. For instance:

- Italy pledged funding for a project to rebuild schools in Aleppo and Deir ez-Zor, aiming to provide education for over 20,000 children.
- The EU allocated €500 million in aid for renewable energy projects in northern Syria to enhance electricity supplies.
- The EU called for a Syria Reconstruction Summit in Brussels, similar to the last such conference held there in 2017.

⁽⁵⁰⁾ **Reliefweb**, How the collapse of Assad's regime will Impact Syria's mixed migration DYNAMICS, 2024, Available at : <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/how-collapse-assads-regime-will-impact-syrias-mixed-migration-dynamics>

Ultimately, the main condition for future European normalization with the new Syrian regime is ensuring a safe environment for returning refugees. European nations have linked their engagement with the new Syrian authorities to guarantees of returnees' safety and the provision of adequate living conditions, including housing, education, and healthcare. For instance:

- Norway pledged support for reconstruction projects in areas controlled by HTS, but only under the condition that refugees return voluntarily without coercion or discrimination.
- France proposed forming local committees to monitor returnees' conditions and ensure their rights are respected, preventing any political or social violations.

Thus, European policies towards Syrian refugees after the fall of the Assad regime are shaped by a complex interplay of political, security, and humanitarian considerations. The EU's cautious approach seeks to balance migration control, geopolitical stability, and human rights concerns, while preparing for potential new crises in the Syrian context⁽⁵¹⁾.

Conclusion:

Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham successfully took control of the capital, Damascus, after less than two weeks of continuous fighting across northwestern Syria, leading to the collapse of the Assad regime following the unexpected flight of former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to Moscow. In the wake of this collapse, European countries rushed to suspend asylum applications from Syrian refugees, considering the fall of the regime as the end of the reasons for seeking asylum. Some even proposed the repatriation of integrated refugees. However, this could negatively impact European countries, especially if large numbers of Syrians return under the current political and security conditions in Syria. The destruction of infrastructure, property disputes, and Syria's uncertain future during this transitional period add further complexity to the situation. Returning refugees under these circumstances could trigger a new refugee crisis.

Recommendations:

At the Level of the Syrian State:

1. Establish programs to rebuild Syria's destroyed infrastructure and create employment opportunities for returning Syrians.
2. Ensure the safety and security of returnees and protect them from threats and violations.

⁽⁵¹⁾Farah Benghazi, Features of European Interaction with Developments after the Fall of the Assad Regime in Syria, Libyan Media Center for Strategic Studies and Consultations, 2024, next link: <https://lcss.gov.ly/articles/blog/post-727>

3. Provide social support for returning Syrians to help them adapt to their new lives.
4. Offer high-quality medical and educational services for returnees and their families.
5. Encourage cooperation between the government, civil society, and international organizations to ensure the success of the return process and meet essential needs.
6. Promote private and public investments in Syria to create economic opportunities for returnees.
7. Guarantee the property rights of refugees and migrants, ensuring their right to return to their homes and recover their assets.
8. Provide financial and logistical support to international and local organizations working on Syria's reconstruction and development.
9. Implement vocational training and development programs for returning Syrians to enhance employment prospects and improve income levels.

At the Level of the European Union (EU):

1. Enhance cooperation among EU member states to provide joint support for Syria's reconstruction and create favorable conditions for the safe and dignified return of refugees.
2. Strengthen partnerships with international and local organizations in Syria to ensure sustainable development and basic services for the population.
3. Provide financial and technical support to strengthen the capabilities of the Syrian transitional government in managing voluntary returns and achieving stability.

At the Level of European Countries:

1. Improve coordination between European and Syrian governments to develop clear and organized plans for the safe and structured return of Syrian refugees.
2. Offer financial and logistical assistance to returning Syrians to help them rebuild their lives and reintegrate into Syrian society.
3. Avoid rushing the repatriation process, as it may have negative consequences for European countries, including the risk of a new refugee crisis. Ensure the safety and security of returnees and protect them from threats and violations in Syria.
4. Protect the rights of returning Syrian refugees, preventing any discrimination based on nationality or religion.

5. Enhance cooperation between European governments, Syria, and international organizations to ensure a successful and sustainable refugee return process.
6. Strengthen communication with Syrian communities in Europe to provide information and support for those interested in returning to Syria in an organized manner.
7. Implement financial and social aid programs for returning Syrians to help them rebuild their lives and establish themselves sustainably in Syria.
8. Support small and medium-sized businesses in Syria, which could contribute to job creation and economic growth for returnees.
9. Develop precise policies for managing refugee returns from Europe, considering the need for a qualified workforce in European labor markets.
10. Conduct comprehensive studies to assess the impact of Syrian refugee returns on European labor markets and determine the necessary policies and measures to mitigate any negative effects.