

When Is Home? Temporality, Closure, and the Continuum of Return After Assad

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Abstract *The December 2024 fall of the Assad regime has been cast as a turning point for Syrian refugee return. Yet refugees stress timing over the act of return itself. Based on narratives from Syrians in Lebanon and Türkiye, this article shows how they view repatriation efforts as premature, politically driven, and disconnected from their complex everyday realities. Return unfolds not as a simple choice, but as provisional, investigative, and circular movement shaped by insecurity on both sides of the border. The “post-Assad” label suggests closure while masking ongoing instability and fractured social ties. Rejecting this narrative of finality, refugees reimagine return as part of an open-ended displacement trajectory. By centering the politics of temporality, the article highlights how return remains a contested, risky, and evolving process—its meanings shaped as much by host-country pressure as by shifting conditions inside Syria itself.*

INTRODUCTION

The fall of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024, has been heralded by international and host-country actors as a decisive turning point for Syria's displaced population. In the weeks that followed, the European Union suspended the assessment of pending asylum applications, while several member states announced accelerated repatriation plans.¹ Such policy shifts rest on a powerful narrative: that political rupture in Syria automatically transforms exile into an obsolete condition and return into an inevitable solution. Yet what these policies gloss over, and what refugees themselves emphasize, is the question of timing. Why should return be pursued now, and under whose authority is this “moment” defined?

These shifts reverberated beyond Europe. For refugees in Lebanon and Türkiye, the urgency with which repatriation is being promoted often feels politically motivated, externally imposed, and disconnected from their lived realities. While governments and international institutions frame the “post-Assad” period as a moment of closure, many refugees experience it as a continuation of

displacement under a new guise. As one Syrian in Lebanon put it, “we are overwhelmed with joy at the fall of the regime, but there is no magic involved in Syria's recovery. Syria is a mess”.² Rather than marking an end, return becomes another precarious passage, and one shaped as much by insecurity in host states as by instability within Syria itself.

Conditions on the ground underscore the limits of premature optimism. As of early 2025, 7.4 million Syrians remained internally displaced, and in the months leading up to Assad's fall, 600,000 people were newly uprooted by violence and political unrest.³ Armed confrontations continue in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria, As-Suwayda, and the Golan Heights.⁴ Humanitarian indicators remain dire, and despite political transition, only 250,000 Syrians across the Middle East and North Africa region had returned by January 2025—a fraction of the estimated 5.5 million still hosted in the region.⁵ Far from an open door to stability, “post-Assad Syria” remains fractured, uncertain, and exclusionary.⁶

This article argues that return should be understood less as a binary of “going back” or “not going back,” and more as a continuum of provisional, investigative, and circular (im)mobilities. The ‘politics of temporality’ of return—who defines it, how it is enforced, and how refugees themselves interpret it—is as consequential as the conditions inside Syria.

By drawing on narratives from Syrians in Lebanon and Türkiye, based on multiple waves of fieldwork carried out by Diab⁷ and Alpes⁸ with Syrian refugees in both contexts, the article interrogates how the

'post-Assad' moment is constructed politically as an endpoint, while lived realities reveal return as an unfolding and contested process. It shows how refugees resist being absorbed into this 'narrative of closure', instead reframing return as one stage in a displacement trajectory that remains uncertain, negotiated, and deeply entangled with both host-country pressures and conditions inside Syria.

PREMATURE CLOSURE AND THE CONTINUUM OF RETURN

The fall of the Assad regime reignited long-standing hopes of return for many Syrians, carrying the emotional weight of reuniting with family, reclaiming disrupted lives, and contributing to reconstruction. One refugee in Lebanon spoke of dreaming of "going back, seeing my family again, rebuilding my home, and making things right after all these years," describing the feeling as finally being able to "take a long-awaited deep breath." Such sentiments highlight how deeply return is tied to emotional and cultural attachments, to the longing for familiarity and belonging eroded by years of displacement.

Yet the euphoria of December 2024 quickly collided with the realities of an unstable and fractured homeland. Refugees themselves frequently frame the central question not as whether to return, but when and under what circumstances. As another refugee man in Lebanon explained:

"Syria will never be the same. How can I go back when I don't know if it will be safe for me or my children? While I am happy for the fall of Assad, you need to understand that this is also a 'new' Syria I am not familiar with—one that I am hesitant to get to know, and one I am hesitant to introduce my children to."

This very hesitation introduces its own temporality: a pause in which decisions are deferred and the meaning of "return" remains unsettled. In this sense, return is not a singular act, but a process

marked by hesitation and suspended decision-making, where optimism clashes with uncertainty.⁹

What emerges from these accounts is a continuum of return that ranges from immediate, emotive departures to Syria, to more cautious, investigative forms of circular mobility. A refugee in Akkar described this hesitation:

"We are overwhelmed with joy at the fall of the regime, but there is no magic involved in Syria's recovery. Syria is a mess. We don't know much about our property, our lives, the country's infrastructure, its realities. While many have returned in a beautiful and emotive moment, many of us need to sit with this decision and need more time to make an informed one. We are still worried about what awaits us there, and whether or not we can live 'normally.' This is everything going through our heads, while everyone around the world that has hosted us for the last 13 years is so 'excited' to get rid of us."

His emphasis on the need to "sit with this decision" and "get the full picture" illustrates how many opt first for short, exploratory visits rather than permanent return, embodying the provisional and circular nature of mobility.

This case helps explain why early return statistics are misleading. Many of those counted as "returnees" are in fact undertaking temporary visits to check on homes, assess conditions, or reconnect with relatives before deciding whether to stay. As Altayli and Al-Masri note, these provisional movements skew data to suggest a large-scale homecoming, when in reality refugees are testing options and resisting being swept into premature closure.¹⁰

This argument complicates state-driven repatriation frameworks that assume a linear and final act of 'going home'. Instead, refugees' movements reflect provisional, circular, and partial engagements with Syria, decisions that are suspended in time as much as shaped by space. This is intensified by the absence of concrete guarantees around safety, transitional justice,

housing, or economic stability.¹¹ One refugee in Lebanon captured this frustration:

"The international community talks about going back, but they don't talk about what happens when we get there. I need to know before I uproot myself and my family again. We've been through a decade of hardship to get to where we are. I am not putting them through any more uncertainty until I have the full picture."

The emphasis on 'the full picture' reflects how refugees resist being swept into calls for a repatriation-as-political-objective framework. For many, return is less about a definitive homecoming than about negotiating a fragile temporality: balancing hopes of stability against the risks of uprooting once more.¹² Return, in this sense, is not closure but a new cycle of waiting and decision-making, a painful trade-off between a fragile present and an uncertain future.

REDEFINING SAFETY: BETWEEN HOST-STATE PRECARIETY AND SYRIA'S UNFINISHED WARS

For displaced Syrians, the meaning of safety is not reducible to political transition or a technical cessation of hostilities. Refugees consistently point out that international actors define safety in narrow, abstract terms: ceasefires, governance structures, the absence of mass violence, while their own sense of what makes life liveable includes dignity, autonomy, and protection from discrimination.¹³ One refugee in Lebanon, reflecting on return in late December 2024, captured this disconnect.

"I will not go back only to be targeted again for what I believe or where I come from. Friends who went ahead of me were called in for questioning and had their homes searched. Until I know my children will not be taken, a ceasefire is not safety",

he explained, underscoring that the international community's narrow equation of peace with a technical ceasefire ignores lived realities. Such testimony shows how the rush to label Syria 'safe'

creates a premature narrative of closure, erasing the social, psychological, and material work of rebuilding life after war.¹⁴

Return decisions also hinge on how profoundly displacement has altered people's sense of home and belonging. As Alpes et al. (2023),¹⁵ Diab and Crawley (2023),¹⁶ and Diab (2023)¹⁷ argue, standards of 'safe return' often erase the personal and localized meanings of safety. A refugee from Idlib, now in Lebanon, asked bluntly:

"Even if I wanted to return, where would I go? My family home is gone. My neighbourhood doesn't exist anymore. They say 'Syria is free now,' but free for whom? For those who still have homes? I have nothing to return to."

Here, 'safety' is not about the end of armed conflict, but about the impossibility of reconstructing life amid destruction, dispossession, and fractured communities.¹⁸

Local geographies further complicate the picture. In areas like Ma'arrat Al-Nu'man, where most homes are destroyed, survival itself becomes the definition of safety.¹⁹ Refugees from contested regions such as the Golan Heights remain suspended in uncertainty as territorial disputes persist beyond Assad's fall.²⁰ Even for those with a house still standing, economic collapse renders livelihoods impossible. With Syria's economy at its worst recorded level, surpassing even wartime poverty and unemployment, return carries the risk of being trapped in a cycle of poverty rather than restored stability.²¹

Host-country dynamics also shape how safety is temporally understood. Refugees often describe their return decision-making as shaped not only by Syria's new political order but also—and at times more urgently—by the continual lack of safety in current places of residence. Syrians in Lebanon face intensifying xenophobia and economic marginalization, while those in Türkiye without citizenship risk deportation. A Syrian man in Ankara explained in January 2025 that although he had built a business and his children were born there,

“every day, people talk about ‘time to go back.’ My residency application was denied, and my neighbours who have lived here for ten years were told their kimlik [temporary protection] would not be renewed. If I have to leave, I want it to be on my terms—not because I have no choice.”

Such testimonies reveal how the politics of time and coercion from host states become as decisive as conditions in Syria.

Refugees’ testimonies underscore that safety is not an abstract endpoint but a shifting horizon, entangled with both host-country hostility and the enduring instability of Syria. One refugee in Lebanon put it bluntly: after surviving years of hardship, he had built “a small sense of stability,” but returning to Syria where “everything could fall apart again” was unbearable, adding, “I’m not sure I can survive that kind of trauma again.” For others, particularly those who have secured new foundations in Europe, return is even less likely. As a refugee in Germany explained, while his brother in Lebanon was considering going back, he refused to uproot his children—who “speak German” and “go to school here”—just because the regime had fallen, concluding, “Syria is still broken. Maybe one day, but not yet.”

Safety, then, cannot be captured by the binary of war or peace, return or exile. It is temporal, relative, and deeply situated. For many Syrians, safety lies less in the fall of Assad than in resisting the imposition of a false ending to their displacement.

TRAUMA, RUINS, AND THE WEIGHT OF PREMATURE RETURN

For many Syrians, the question of return is not about political transition alone but about confronting the temporal weight of trauma, destruction, and economic loss. Years of displacement have forced refugees to carve out new forms of belonging and stability in host countries, however fragile, and returning to Syria risks reopening wounds that many have worked hard to manage. As Kahraman (2022)²² and

Alachkar (2023)²³ show, exile has long-compelled refugees to reconstruct social and economic foundations in spaces that, though hostile, have become meaningful sites of resilience and identity. Against this backdrop, repatriation is rarely a straightforward reintegration; it is often experienced as another rupture in lives already shaped by repeated upheaval.

The psychological cost of return is especially acute for those who carry visible reminders of conflict. Refugees who sustained war-related trauma or disability frequently describe the impossibility of going back to the very sites where their lives were shattered.²⁴ One Syrian participant, observing a street vendor in Ankara who had lost an arm in a shelling attack, questioned the assumptions embedded in repatriation policies: does he really want to return to the place where he lost his arm, or remain in Türkiye, “selling sweets in a country that doesn’t even allow him to leave the city”? For others, the trauma lies in potentially losing the fragile stability they have managed to build in exile. As one refugee in Lebanon put it:

“Leaving behind everything I’ve built here, the friends I’ve made, the stability I’ve found [...], it’s hard to leave when you’ve worked so hard to create something that feels like home.”

Such accounts reveal how return risks destabilizing, rather than restoring, a sense of security.²⁵

Confronting physical destruction compounds this psychological weight. Refugees from cities such as Ma’arrat Al-Nu’man describe returning only to find their homes gone.²⁶ In such contexts, ‘going back’ is less about reclaiming home than about navigating ruins and loss. Some have turned instead toward diaspora initiatives, contributing to reconstruction from abroad. For Syrians abroad, distance from Syria’s physical ruins provides a buffer from the daily confrontation with destruction, though it does not erase the emotional burden of imagining return.

Overlaying these traumas are significant financial barriers. Returning requires resources for

transport, rebuilding homes, and securing livelihoods.²⁷ Yet after years of displacement, many have depleted their savings, taken on debt, or rely on shrinking community support. As one refugee in Lebanon explained “I’ve spent everything I had to survive here. The idea of going back to Syria, with nothing to rebuild my life, is unbearable.” Another, recalling how he sold property before fleeing, reflected:

“We did not have hopes of this happening when we were fleeing for our lives. We were not thinking rationally, obviously. Now, I have nothing to return to, no matter how ‘happy’ I am about the regime’s fall. Our lives are still in shambles.”

Such realities dismantle the assumption that return restores stability. Without income, services, or assets, return risks plunging people into poverty and renewed displacement.²⁸

These narratives underscore that return is not a simple reversal of exile but a confrontation with layered forms of trauma and economic precarity. Refugees weigh the fragile foundations they have built in exile against the risks of returning to ruins, debt, and instability. When return is pushed according to external political timelines rather than refugees’ own capacities and resources, it becomes premature and potentially harmful. For many, the question is not whether Assad has fallen, but whether they can survive the compounded costs—psychological, material, and emotional—of uprooting once again.

COERCION, TIMING, AND RETURN AS RE-DISPLACEMENT

Beyond conditions in Syria, host-state dynamics also impose temporal pressures that accelerate return. Legal uncertainty—such as rumours in Türkiye about revoked residency—spreads fear and reminds refugees of the fragility of their status, while everyday interactions reinforce assumptions of temporariness. A Syrian woman recalled preparing food to mark Assad’s fall, only to have her colleagues abruptly ask: “So, when are you going

back?”. Such dynamics reveal how safety is not only contested inside Syria but also undermined by coercive policies and social expectations in exile.

These forms of everyday coercion remind us that return is never a purely individual decision. It is entangled with kinship and other social networks, gendered roles, and obligations of care.²⁹ A mother of two in Lebanon explained, “I’ve built a life here [...] not an easy one, but a life. If I go back, who will help me? I have no one left there.” For women, exile often provides more autonomy than Syria’s patriarchal legal system. One refugee in Beirut described her fears: “In Syria, I could lose my right to decide for my children. Here, I struggle, but I decide.” In this way, the temporality of return is shaped not only by political developments but also by gendered forms of agency that refugees are reluctant to surrender.

Economic responsibilities also function as temporal constraints, tethering refugees to their host countries. Many continue to send remittances to family members in Syria, making their physical return potentially destabilizing for those who depend on their support. “My mother in Damascus relies on the money I send,” one refugee explained. “If I go back, who will take care of her?”

These narratives demonstrate that what is often portrayed as a “solution” to displacement is, for many, a dismantling of the fragile social and economic foundations painstakingly constructed in exile. Workplaces, friendships, and community networks in Lebanon and Türkiye, while precarious, now embody stability and belonging, even as host states continue to position refugees as temporary “guests” rather than integral members of society. The fear of return, therefore, extends beyond Syria’s instability; it is about the rupture of present lives and connections. For those who have spent more than a decade rebuilding in exile, return is not a journey back to the past but a forced interruption of the present—an imposed displacement cloaked in the language of homecoming.

RETHINKING THE COSTS OF PREMATURE CLOSURE

The fall of the Assad regime is undoubtedly a historical rupture but framing it as the decisive moment for refugee return risks producing a premature and dangerous sense of closure. International and host-country pushes for repatriation overlook not only the instability still unfolding inside Syria, but also the timing of return as experienced by refugees themselves. For many, return is not simply about crossing a border; it is about confronting unresolved trauma, financial precarity, and the risk of dismantling fragile networks of care and belonging constructed in exile. What appears on paper as resolution can, in practice, amount to re-displacement.

Without guarantees of safety, dignity, and access to livelihoods, return remains a profound risk. A fractured Syria—politically unstable, economically devastated, and socially divided—offers little certainty for rebuilding lives. Refugees' testimonies show that what is being promoted as an "end" to displacement is often another cycle of waiting, testing, and negotiating, a continuum of provisional and circular movements rather than a linear return. When host states accelerate return to offload their so-called 'refugee burden', they deny refugees the temporal and material conditions necessary to make informed choices.

By interrogating the politics of time, this article highlights that the 'post-Assad' label imposes a narrative of closure that refugees themselves resist. For them, return is not yet resolution; it is a contested process, inseparable from the coercions of host-country precarity and the unfinished wars inside Syria. Any policy that ignores these realities risks deepening trauma, producing new displacement, and obscuring the ongoing nature of exile.

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