From Exile to Return

Rebuilding Lives and States after Conflict

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April 2026

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Executive Summary

Ongoing conflict in Ukraine and a volatile security situation in Syria make large-scale return of displaced persons to either country unlikely in the immediate term. Still, high-income countries hosting displaced populations have begun planning for the "day after," asking how they should handle status transitions, reconstruction needs, and return. At the same time, many destination-country governments face hospitality fatigue and declining public support for immigration. This places them in a political bind: how to (eventually) wind down status without alienating now longstanding, often well-integrated members of their societies or destabilizing fragile post-conflict situations in displaced individuals' countries of origin.

High-income countries hosting displaced populations have begun planning for the "day after," asking how they should handle status transitions, reconstruction needs, and return.

These broad trade-offs are reflected in everything from frictions within government between interior and integration or development officials, to technical questions about whether and how to renew residence permits for protection beneficiaries whose initial claims were based on persecution by a regime that no longer exists. Policymakers have already made multiple changes. The Norwegian government has restricted applications for temporary protection for Ukrainians to people from conflict-afflicted regions, and Austria has begun returning individuals with criminal convictions to Syria and announced "return bonuses" for Syrians who wish to return on their own. Some of these changes seem more driven by political concerns than by proactive planning around reconstruction and return in Syria and Ukraine. As of yet, there is no EU-wide guidance on how to handle status transitions for Syrians, and the future of the Temporary Protection Directive for Ukrainians beyond 2027 is unclear. This uncertainty and lack of coordination is costly, as it leaves individuals unable to plan for their future and creates the possibility that states may make decisions alone that have ramifications for their neighbors.

Instead, there is a need for governments to think proactively about how to link near-term responses to ongoing displacement with medium- and long-term support for post-conflict reconstruction and, when suitable, return. Key elements of this kind of forward planning include:

- **Avoiding blanket withdrawal of status in the short term**. Rushed, large-scale returns would be destabilizing for both countries of origin and destination. Countries of origin may lack the capacity to absorb large numbers of returnees soon after a conflict ends, and in countries of destination, many refugees have become well-integrated into local communities. Cessation of status also comes with administrative burdens that could be costly. Instead, a transition period during which most people keep their protected status could help prepare for more sustainable returns. For instance, governments should enable refugees to make visits to their country of origin to check conditions, offer predeparture counseling, and when conditions permit, provide incentives for voluntary return while minimizing coerced returns.

- **Adopting a differentiated approach to status transitions that reflects diverse needs**. Some people will never be able to return and will need international protection and long-term solutions outside their country of origin, others may wish to return permanently as soon as it is feasible, and still others may want to move back and forth regularly between countries. Experience from the winding down of protection for Bosnians in the late 1990s, for instance, suggests it can be useful for authorities to triage different case types (such as treating the most recent arrivals differently from those who have become well integrated into the labor market).
- **Coordinating responses with other refugee-hosting countries.** Uncoordinated mass returns to fragile contexts could derail the process of rebuilding, strain scarce resources, or even trigger more instability. Governments should cooperate to avoid unintended consequences that might arise from a patchwork of approaches to reconstruction and return. The international community should also agree on common criteria for determining when Syria is safe for return and which Syrians will need additional protection.
- **Harnessing mobility and diaspora engagement to facilitate reconstruction.** This could involve, for example, helping displaced people build skills that could be valuable whether they stay or return. Programs such as the German-Syria Hospital Partnerships program and the UK-Ukrainian TechBridge show how governments can build human capital and stimulate entrepreneurship across borders.

The economic and humanitarian case for greater flexibility in post-conflict mobility and returns is clear. The ease (and benefits) of circular mobility between the European Union and Ukraine, and during certain periods between Turkey and Syria, show that permanent return is not the only viable model. Indeed, the resilience of Ukraine's tech sector during wartime demonstrates the potential for virtual or hybrid reconstruction that engages members of a country's diaspora without requiring physical return. More broadly, there is a rich history of diasporas supporting development in their countries and regions of origin, offering a more nuanced alternative to binary thinking about whether and when people will return. Greater flexibility and creativity in the use of mobility to support reconstruction will benefit both countries of origin and destination. To create space for this creativity, destination-country governments will need to find ways to clearly communicate these benefits to anxious publics.

1 Introduction

The dramatic fall of Syria's Assad regime in December 2024, after 13 years of civil war, marked a long-awaited development for Syrians and introduced a new challenge for the international community. Governments must now navigate questions about the future of displaced Syrians, including the possibility of large-scale return—something that has long seemed out of reach for those experiencing protracted displacement. Similar conversations are underway for the nearly 7 million displaced Ukrainians, most of whom reside in Europe under a temporary status that has been extended to March 2027.[1] The issue is even

1 Council of the European Union, "EU Member States Agree to Extend Temporary Protection for Refugees from Ukraine" (press release, June 13, 2025); International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Crisis in Ukraine," accessed January 15, 2026.

more immediate for the 259,000 Ukrainians in the United States, many of whom could lose their legal status if the Trump administration terminates their parole, as it has done for other groups.[2]

Strategic, coordinated approaches to adjusting protection and mobility regimes when conflicts end remain limited because few large-scale displacement situations have reached resolution in recent decades. Questions about how to support return and reconstruction, including what metrics would indicate that a country is safe for displaced individuals to return, are relatively novel, leaving governments uncertain how to answer them. After Bashar al-Assad's fall, for example, high-income host states issued a flurry of largely ad hoc policy announcements—some suspended asylum processing for Syrians while others called for their immediate repatriation—with limited further cooperation. Although there has been more cooperation among European states in the context of Ukrainian displacement, governments still lack a strategic vision for what comes next. Nevertheless, just as countries' responses to displacement from Syria and Ukraine have catalyzed many recent international protection reforms (including experiments with temporary protection and complementary pathways, and commitments such as the Global Compact on Refugees), how governments respond as these conflicts wind down could shape the future of the protection system.

How governments respond as these conflicts wind down could shape the future of the protection system.

This report maps the levers available to migration policymakers as they consider phasing out protection statuses and offers guidance on weighing the trade-offs inherent in managing returns. It also outlines options for using mobility and diaspora policy to promote sustainable reconstruction in countries of origin and concludes with lessons from post-conflict policymaking that could inform the protection system more broadly. This analysis focuses on the situation and decisions facing high-income countries hosting displaced Syrians and Ukrainians, while recognizing that conditions and policy options are different in low- and middle-income countries hosting members of these same displaced populations.

2 Managing Protection Status and Return

When a conflict winds down, governments in countries of asylum must determine how to gradually and humanely cease protections for displaced people without exacerbating the difficult task of post-conflict recovery. International law provides important guidance and red lines on how to do this, particularly around access to an asylum process and cessation of status (see Box 1).

2 On January 20, 2025, President Donald Trump issued an executive order to "terminate all categorical parole programs" and on January 28, his administration paused the Uniting for Ukraine program, halting new applications, suspending the processing of pending cases, and stopping the issuance of new travel authorizations. The administration has moved faster to revoke parole status for individuals admitted under the Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV) parole program, and news reports indicate that Ukrainians may lose parole status once the CHNV case is resolved. See Welcome.US, "Latest Changes to Humanitarian Parole Programs, Including Private Sponsorship Programs," updated June 2, 2025; "Exhibit 3 to Plaintiff's Motion for Partial Summary Judgment as to Mass Truncation of CHNV Parole," in *Doe v. Noem*, no. 1:25-cv-10495 (U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts, filed June 16, 2025), table titled "Ukraine & CHNV Parolee Immigrant Benefit Tracking," 2.

BOX 1
When Does Refugee Status Cease?

Under the 1951 Refugee Convention, refugee status "shall" cease once the conditions that led to that status have resolved. The rules on the cessation of status (and eventual return) make clear that "changes in circumstances" require more than just the end of open hostilities or a change in the governing regime. Guidelines issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2003 specify that changes in the country of origin should be "fundamental, stable, and durable," which means that people should not fear the same persecution that caused them to flee, they should be able to regain the protection of their country of origin, and the changes should be durable over time. EU jurisprudence similarly requires durable changes—including specific human rights guarantees—before cessation or refugee status is allowable. UNHCR has stated clearly that Syria, for example, has not yet met any of these criteria.

Sources: UNHCR, "Syria: UNHCR Comment on Asylum Processing Suspension and Returns" (briefing note, UNHCR, Geneva, December 10, 2024); UNHCR, "Cessation of Status No. 69 (XLIII) - 1992, Executive Committee 43rd Session, Contained in United Nations General Assembly Document No. 12A (A/47/12/Add.1)" (committee conclusions, UNHCR, October 9, 1992); UNHCR, "Guidelines on International Protection No. 3: Cessation of Refugee Status under Article 1C(5) and (6) of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (the 'Ceased Circumstances' Clauses)" (guidelines HCR/GIP/03/03, UNHCR, Geneva, February 10, 2003); Maria O'Sullivan, *Legal Note on the Cessation of International Protection and Review of Protection Statuses in Europe* (Brussels: European Council on Refugees and Exiles, 2025); Catherine Briddick, Cathryn Costello, and Minos Mouzourakis, *Ensuring a Human Rights-Compliant End to Refugeehood through Integration, Naturalisation or Voluntary Repatriation* (Strasbourg: Council of Europe, Division of Migration and Refugees, 2026).

For asylum seekers who have not yet been granted status, states may hesitate to provide new grants of protection while conditions on the ground in their origin country shift. Shortly after the regime change in Syria in December 2024, governments in several European countries suspended processing of both new and pending asylum applications from Syrians while they monitored the situation.[3] The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been clear that temporary suspensions of processing asylum applications may make sense when conditions are changing rapidly and asylum agencies face a need to update their internal guidance and decision-making as a result.[4] However, these suspensions cannot be open-ended, as the continued uncertainty is destabilizing for asylum applicants and expensive for governments to maintain. In the United Kingdom, for example, more than 7,000 Syrian asylum seekers had to remain in government-funded accommodations while waiting for the processing of their applications to restart, increasing government expenditure and delaying access to work and other opportunities for those ultimately granted status.[5] The European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) issued interim guidance on Syria in June 2025 and a comprehensive update to its country guidance in December 2025, providing more

3 The following countries announced the suspension of asylum application processing for Syrian nationals in December 2024: Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom. Countries such as Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Portugal, Slovakia, and Slovenia did not suspend processing but made statements regarding the uncertain situation in Syria and the potential for changes. See European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), "Syria: European Reactions to the Overthrow of the Assad Regime," updated December 13, 2024. France also suspended some applications due to changes in circumstances in Syria but has not made a general decision to suspend all applications. See French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless People, "Communiqué de Presse - Syrie" (news release, December 9, 2024).

4 Even if conditions become safer and fewer grounds for protection exist, specific individuals may continue to need protection, and their claims must be assessed fairly. See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Syria: UNHCR Comment on Asylum Processing Suspension and Returns" (briefing note, UNHCR, Geneva, December 10, 2024).

5 Becky Morton, "Call for Freeze on Syrian Asylum Claims to End," BBC, May 25, 2025; Becky Morton, "UK to Start Processing Syrian Asylum Claims Again," BBC, July 14, 2025.

information for Member States on which profiles of Syrians continue to need protection.[6] Many countries have now resumed adjudication, though some, such as Germany, have applied narrower qualification criteria.[7] Others, including Austria and Germany, have announced reviews of some cases—primarily those involving criminal convictions—to assess whether cessation or revocation of status criteria apply.[8]

In practice, winding down protection humanely—without exacerbating the already-difficult task of post-conflict recovery—requires balancing legal obligations, domestic political pressures, the reconstruction goals of countries of origin, and the varied situations and desires of displaced persons. High-income donors and asylum countries are likely to face a range of competing interests.

The public in host countries may be experiencing hospitality fatigue, sometimes driven by increased public concern that asylum systems are being misused and anxiety about pressure on public services.[9] Governments may thus face pressure to demonstrate action to electorates eager for a return to the predisplacement norm when the worst of a conflict has passed and to show that asylum systems are functioning as intended. Germany, for example, has pledged to deport Syrians who have criminal convictions (and thus do not qualify for protection) now that conditions in Syria have changed.[10] As of January 2026, German authorities had carried out at least one removal to Syria involving a person with a criminal conviction.[11] Other countries have also announced plans to prioritize status reviews for Syrians with criminal records as a first step toward wider return efforts.[12] At the same time, a large-scale review of individual statuses would likely be costly and time-consuming, and encouraging the return of refugees employed in key labor sectors, such as Ukrainians who have powered growth in eastern Europe's manufacturing sectors, could have economic consequences.[13]

Encouraging the return of refugees employed in key labor sectors, such as Ukrainians who have powered growth in eastern Europe's manufacturing sectors, could have economic consequences.

6 European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA), "Syria: Updated EUAA Country Guidance Outlines Changing International Protection Needs" (press release, December 3, 2025).

7 Finnish Immigration Service, "Finnish Immigration Service Resumes Issuing Asylum Decisions for Syrians," updated September 26, 2025; UK Parliament, "Decision-Making for Syrian Nationals with Outstanding Protection Claims" (statement, UK Parliament, London, July 14, 2025); Danish Immigration Service, "Information for People from Syria and Their Family Members," updated July 21, 2025; Dutch Immigration and Naturalization Service, "IND Resumes Processing Syrian Asylum Applications," updated June 12, 2025.

8 Natasha Mellersh, "Germany Reviews Syrian Asylum Cases amid Tougher Migration Policy," InfoMigrants, December 16, 2025.

9 Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, M. Murat Erdoğan, and Lucía Salgado, *Confronting Compassion Fatigue: Understanding the Arc of Public Support for Displaced Populations in Turkey, Colombia, and Europe* (Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2024); Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan, *From Fear to Solidarity: The Difficulty in Shifting Public Narratives about Refugees* (Washington DC: MPI, 2022).

10 See, for example, German Federal Ministry of the Interior, "Security, Stability, and Prospects for Return: Federal Minister Faeser Travels to Syria" (press release, April 27, 2025).

11 Richard Connor, "Germany Deports Criminal to Syria after Yearslong Halt," Deutsche Welle, December 23, 2025.

12 In July 2025, Austria conducted the first deportation of a person who lost protection status because of a criminal conviction; see Jennifer Rankin, "Austria Deports Man to Syria for First Time in 15 Years," *The Guardian*, July 3, 2025. Sweden and Denmark have cooperations initiatives under way with Syria that would enable the forced return of rejected Syrian asylum seekers and certain criminal offenders; see Emma Wallis, "Sweden and Syria Announce Cooperation for Returns of Migrants Convicted of Crime," InfoMigrants, November 28, 2025. Denmark is also negotiating a post-civil war agreement with Syria that would allow Denmark to forcibly repatriate rejected Syrian asylum seekers in addition to certain criminal offenders; see Helena Thorsen, "Denmark Is Planning a Syria Agreement on Deportations, While the EU Still Says It Is Unsafe," NordiskPost, December 3, 2025.

13 Libby George, "Ukraine Migrant Exit Could Squeeze Eastern Europe's Economies," Reuters, January 16, 2025.

Many countries of asylum will also want to avoid destabilizing fragile post-conflict settings. Large-scale refugee returns, whether voluntary or coerced, without adequate absorption capacity could be destabilizing. In Syria, for example, there is little in the way of economic opportunity, infrastructure, and trust in governance structures,[14] and the security situation remains volatile, with continued insurgent attacks on government forces and airstrikes from abroad. Premature returns risk further straining resources and triggering new outmigration.[15] A destabilized Syria also presents risk for its neighboring countries, especially if the Islamic State or other insurgent actors become stronger.

Countries of origin may have similar concerns to countries of asylum in the short run. In the long term, however, countries of origin may wish for their nationals to return, particularly those with financial resources and valuable human capital. Ukraine, for example, has been clear that it wants much of its population to return.[16]

Displaced individuals, of course, have their own interests and concerns. Many may themselves be eager to return, or to visit temporarily to check on their homes, relatives, and friends. UNHCR estimates that nearly than 1.5 million Syrians returned to the country between December 2024 and February 2026.[17] And the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that although return to Ukraine has been substantial, 93 percent of returns from Europe are temporary (pendular), with people intending to go back to their countries of protection.[18] Many may hope eventually to return more permanently but are waiting until the situation improves. In a flash survey of Syrians in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon, 18 percent indicated their intention to return within the year, compared with 1.7 percent in the previous survey. Among those not planning to return immediately, 83 percent hoped to return within five years, up sharply from 37 percent.[19] Surveys of displaced Ukrainians conducted between April 2022 and December 2023 found that more than 90 percent wished to return in the long term, though only 15 percent wanted to do so in the short term because of the ongoing conflict.[20] Notably, return intentions frequently vary between groups within a displaced population. Certain ethnic minorities facing continued persecution, people with chronic medical conditions, and families with elderly relatives or young children may be more reluctant to return.

Return intentions are also influenced by the lives displaced persons have built in their countries of asylum, including family roots they have put down, their earning potential, and the communities they have formed.

14 United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Syria, *The Impact of the Conflict in Syria* (Damascus: UNDP, 2025).
15 Qutaiba Idlbi, Charles Lister, and Marie Forestier, *Reimagining Syria: A Roadmap for Peace and Prosperity Beyond Assad* (Washington, DC and Brussels: Atlantic Council, Middle East Institute, and European Institute of Peace, 2025).
16 Chris Lunday, "Ukraine Is Trying to Get Its Refugees Back from Germany," Politico, January 21, 2025.
17 UNHCR, "Regional Flash Update #66: Syria Situation" (regional update, February 27, 2025). However, the volatile security situations in Syria and Lebanon have led to multiple rounds of (re)displacement. For example, nearly 40,000 Syrians fled sectarian violence to Lebanon, and Israel's bombing in Lebanon has led many Syrians, as well as more than 15,000 Lebanese, to flee to Syria; see Hanna Davis, "Syrian Alawites Flee to Lebanon, with Little Aid to Meet Them," The New Humanitarian, June 4, 2025; UNHCR, "Regional Flash Update #69: Syria Situation" (regional update, March 20, 2026).
18 IOM, *Ukrainians Crossing Back to Ukraine: Regional Analysis, July–December 2024* (Vienna: IOM, 2025).
19 UNHCR, *Enhanced Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2025), 7; UNHCR, *Flash Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2025); Sam Heller, *Cross-Border Shuffle: Refugee Movement Between Lebanon and Syria after Assad* (New York: The Century Foundation, 2025).
20 Ravenna Sohst, Tino Tirado, Lucia Salgado, and Jasmijn Slootjes, *Exploring Refugees' Intentions to Return to Ukraine: Data Insights and Policy Responses* (Brussels and Vienna: MPI Europe and IOM, 2024).

The longer they have been in their new countries, as in the case of Syrians displaced for a decade or more, the stronger these connections tend to become.

The longer they have been in their new countries, as in the case of Syrians displaced for a decade or more, the stronger these connections tend to become. Among Ukrainians, the desire to return has decreased over time. Surveys conducted two months after the Russian invasion of Ukraine showed that nearly nine in ten respondents planned to return home once the security situation allowed. By 2024, only one-third of respondents expressed a firm or tentative intention to return.[21]

As conditions in countries of origin stabilize, governments will face the challenge of solidifying three intertwined sets of policies: those regarding transitions of status, the possibility of return, and coordination with the origin country's immediate neighbors (which typically host the largest numbers of refugees). Doing so effectively calls for balancing the interests of host states, countries of origin, and displaced people themselves.

A. Status during Transition

The volatility of post-conflict settings makes permanent return unlikely in the short term, despite the desire of many displaced individuals to go home eventually. In many cases, the scale of destruction and the sheer number of people displaced mean that return will be a protracted process. In the short term, host governments will need to decide how to manage the legal status of people who are unable to return. In the longer term, governments face the question of whether to provide opportunities for displaced persons to transition to nonprotection statuses and, if so, how to facilitate such transitions.

Ensuring Short-Term Stability

In the short term, it is important to provide stability and predictability for people who already hold some form of protection and for those with pending applications. Doing so allows time for conditions in countries of origin to stabilize and for displaced persons to make informed decisions about return.[22] For most people who already hold protection, maintaining status is the most straightforward solution. Per UNHCR assessment, circumstances in Syria and Ukraine have not changed in a "fundamental, stable, and durable" manner, even when the specific grounds for flight no longer apply.[23] Regime change, reconstruction efforts, and neighboring conflicts can also create new grounds for protection. The revised EUAA country guidance

21 The survey showed that 89 percent of respondents planned to return after the end of the war; see Daryna Dvornichenko, "To Stay or Return? Exploring Trends in the Intentions of Forcibly Displaced Ukrainians," Refugee Law Initiative, March 20, 2025.

22 Samuel Davidoff-Gore and Susan Fratzke, "The Complicated Reality of Syrians' Return" (commentary, MPI, Washington, DC, December 2024). Uncertainty about their legal status in the host country during this time could also lead to panic among displaced persons that could drive them into hiding, prompt hasty decisions to move elsewhere, or cause undue mental hardship. See, for example, Victoria Sophie Boettcher and Frank Neuner, "The Impact of an Insecure Asylum Status on Mental Health of Adult Refugees in Germany," *Clinical Psychology in Europe* 4, no. 1 (2022): e6587; Marianne Côté-Olijnyk, J. Christopher Perry, Marie-Ève Paré, and Rachel Kronick, "The Mental Health of Migrants Living in Limbo: A Mixed-Methods Systematic Review with Meta-Analysis," *Psychiatry Research* 337, July (2024): 115931.

23 UNHCR, "Cessation of Status No. 69 (XLIII) - 1992, Executive Committee 43rd Session, Contained in United Nations General Assembly Document No. 12A (A/47/12/Add.1)," October 9, 1992; UNHCR, "Syria: UNHCR Comment."

on Syria notes that "persons associated with the former Government of Syria and members of ethno-religious groups such as the Alawites, Christians, and Druze" may still require international protection.[24] Although some Syrians fled specific persecution under the Assad regime, ongoing instability means they remain eligible for protection from refoulement (that is, being sent back to a country where they would be at risk of persecution, torture, or other serious human rights violations).[25] Maintaining status is also operationally the most feasible short-term solution. Reviewing and potentially ceasing status for each refugee or beneficiary of subsidiary protection would be procedurally burdensome because authorities must conduct reviews on an individual basis and decisions to revoke status could be appealed.[26] And even after status is ended, host countries would need to see that people who no longer have a right to stay depart or are returned, which European countries have struggled to do even in the best of circumstances.[27]

For new arrivals, different approaches may be needed. As conditions evolve, certain populations or people from certain geographic areas may no longer warrant protection, or at least not refugee protection. Norway, for example, has limited new temporary protection applications to only Ukrainians from specific conflict-affected regions.[28] For such groups, authorities would need to consider whether return is possible and, if not, whether another status may be needed as a short-term bridge. Many EU Member States have humanitarian statuses or tolerated stays under national legislation that they could use for this purpose.[29]

Creating Opportunities for Longer-Term Status Transitions

As post-conflict settings stabilize, host-country governments can use transition periods to assess legal and practical options for displaced persons. This question will not arise in many cases of protracted displacement if refugees have become eligible for permanent residence or citizenship. For example, in the European Union, refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection status are eligible for long-term residence after five years (among other requirements).[30] In the United States, refugees can apply for permanent residence after one year and have a fast-track to citizenship, and in Canada, most are eligible for

24 EUAA, "Syria: Updated EUAA Country Guidance"; ACAPS, *Risk Analysis: Escalating Sectarian Tensions and Humanitarian Implications, July–December 2025* (Geneva: ACAPS, 2025).

25 ECRE, "Maintaining International Protection in Europe during Syria's Transition" (policy note 46, ECRE, Brussels, 2025). However, for groups with temporary or time-bound protection status, maintaining the same specific status may not be legally possible. For example, for Ukrainians with temporary status in the European Union, temporary protection is unlikely to be extended beyond March 2027, and the European Council has recommended transitioning Ukrainians to other forms of status. See Council of the European Union, "Protection of Displaced Ukrainians: Council Adopts Recommendation about Transition Out of Temporary Protection" (press release, September 16, 2025).

26 In most EU countries, residence permits for beneficiaries of international protection must be renewed every three years for holders of refugee status and every year for beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. Renewal technically requires that the conditions of flight persist, but declining to renew a permit amounts to a formal withdrawal of status under EU law.

27 Available Eurostat statistics show that between 25 and 30 percent of third-country nationals with return orders in the European Union are returned effectively, although this figure does not provide the full picture. Barriers to return include lack of resources for return systems, difficulties establishing the identity or nationality of returnees, lengthy asylum procedures that increase return costs, and restrictions imposed by countries of origin on return procedures or the types of cases they accept. See MPI Europe, "Beyond the Pact: Addressing Maritime Arrivals and Strengthening Return" (unpublished background note, MPI Europe, Brussels, October 8, 2024).

28 Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, "The Government Is Changing the Rules: Norway Will Grant Collective Protection to Fewer Ukrainians" (press release, September 27, 2024).

29 Such a status could also be developed at the EU level. See ECRE, "Transitioning Out of the Temporary Protection Directive" (policy paper 13, ECRE, Brussels, 2024).

30 European Commission, Directorate-General of Migration and Home Affairs, "Long-Term Residents," accessed June 30, 2025.

permanent residence immediately after arrival.[31] By the end of 2023, more than 177,000 Syrians had long-term resident status in the European Union, and nearly 413,000 had naturalized since 2013.[32]

However, not all displaced persons have the same ability to transition to long-term residence. Some Syrians may be recently arrived and not yet eligible, while others may not meet the language requirements, for example. Other displaced individuals may be on nonrefugee and temporary statuses, which have become more common responses to displacement worldwide and present unique challenges for post-conflict transitions. Most Ukrainians in Europe, for instance, are beneficiaries of temporary protection and thus not eligible to transition to long-term residence at all.[33] For groups such as these, authorities will likely need to consider alternatives. One option could be to create programs that allow for lane changes—for instance, switching from a humanitarian status to a labor- or family-based status. The European Union, following the lead of some Member States such as Austria, Italy, and Lithuania, is recommending that governments allow Ukrainians to switch to other statuses, including labor-based statuses.[34] Some Member States are also creating bespoke options for Ukrainians, such as the Czech Republic's permit that allows Ukrainians to qualify for a five-year residence permit if they can prove at least two years of residence, along with employment and economic self-sufficiency.[35] Many countries used similar policy approaches for Bosnian refugees in the late 1990s, such as the temporary protection regimes in Austria and Sweden that were turned into permanent forms of status.[36] If conditions in Syria improve enough that cessation of status becomes possible for some groups, officials could consider a similar approach for individuals who do not yet qualify for long-term residence but who have found employment or formed family ties in the host country.

The European Union, following the lead of some Member States such as Austria, Italy, and Lithuania, is recommending that governments allow Ukrainians to switch to other statuses, including labor-based statuses.

Europe's transition away from granting Ukrainians temporary protection highlights a broader challenge with the growing use of temporary statuses to respond to displacement crises. Such measures provide an easy way to circumvent backlogged asylum procedures during emergencies, but they suffer from a lack

31 American Immigration Council, "Asylum in the United States" (fact sheet, American Immigration Council, Washington, DC, May 9, 2025); Government of Canada, "Applying for Permanent Residence from within Canada: Protected Persons and Convention Refugees," accessed June 30, 2025.

32 Eurostat, "Acquisition of Citizenship by Age Group, Sex and Former Citizenship [migr_acq]," accessed June 30, 2025.

33 Similarly, in the United States, Temporary Protected Status and Deferred Enforced Departure (which allow citizens of conflict- and disaster-affected countries who are already in the United States to remain legally) and parole (widely used by the Biden administration to provide prima facie protection from refoulement for certain groups) do not provide a path to permanent residence and have been vulnerable to abrupt termination by the government. See Muzaffar Chishti and Kathleen Bush-Joseph, "In the Twilight Zone: Record Number of U.S. Immigrants Are in Limbo Statuses," *Migration Information Source,* July 31, 2023; "Council Directive 2003/109/EC of 25 November 2003 Concerning the Status of Third-Country Nationals Who Are Long-Term Residents," *Official Journal of the European Union* 2011 L016/23 (November 25, 2003). Article 3 of the directive explicitly excludes residence permit holders on a temporary protection status.

34 Council of the European Union, "Protection of Displaced Ukrainians."

35 Visit Ukraine, "Czech Government Approves Transition of Ukrainian Refugees to a Special Type of Residence Permit: Details," updated August 7, 2024.

36 Mikkel Barslund et. al., "Integration of Refugees: Lessons from Bosnians in Five EU Countries," *Intereconomics Review of European Economic Policy* 52, no. 5 (2017): 257–63.

of planning for how to handle status transitions after the end of a conflict or in the event a displacement situation becomes protracted.[37] Turkey, for example, granted Syrians temporary status but without providing a pathway to permanent residence. As a result, many Syrians in Turkey have few options beyond repatriation, despite having put down roots in the country. Given that most displacement situations globally become protracted, such gaps represent a policy oversight that should be corrected. One exception to this trend is the Temporary Statute of Protection for Venezuelans in Colombia, which provides Venezuelans with a resident visa after five years.[38] Building such policy measures before they are needed may help prevent difficult political negotiations in the midst of a crisis.

Differentiating Approaches to Cessation of Protected Status

In the long term, some countries may consider options for cessation of status, assuming stable conditions in countries of origin and sufficient support for reconstruction and stabilization. Reaching the point where cessation of status is viable could take some time. UNHCR recommended cessation of status for Ivoirians only in 2021, ten years after the end of active conflict in Côte d'Ivoire.[39] Governments should plan and implement cessation measures carefully and only after conditions meet the standards required by EU and international law. Moving too soon or without structure and coordination carries clear risks, including renewed instability and the possibility that such moves could prove burdensome for host states.

In Denmark and Norway. . . status cessation and revocation campaigns targeting Afghans, Palestinians, Somalis, and Syrians have entailed a high administrative burden and resulted in few returns.

In Denmark and Norway, for example, status cessation and revocation campaigns targeting Afghans, Palestinians, Somalis, and Syrians have entailed a high administrative burden and resulted in few returns. Norwegian authorities ended up withdrawing most cases, and in Denmark, while some Somalis have had asylum permits revoked, more than half of those revocations were overturned or remanded on appeal, and few people have been returned.[40] Those awaiting appeals have been housed in temporary removal centers that migrant and refugee rights organizations have criticized for harsh conditions and for disrupting the lives of people who were otherwise integrating into their communities.[41]

This argues for a phased approach to cessation, in which governments extend status for some groups based on their circumstances and needs instead of withdrawing protected status from all beneficiaries at once. After the Bosnian War, UNHCR identified five categories of people who continued to need international protection, including ethnic minorities or humanitarian cases (such as people who had been severely traumatized), individuals at risk of statelessness, and potential political cases (such as draft evaders or

37 Andrew Selee, Susan Fratzke, Samuel Davidoff-Gore, and Luisa Feline Freier, *Expanding Protection Options? Flexible Approaches to Status for Displaced Syrians, Venezuelans, and Ukrainians* (Washington DC: MPI, 2024).
38 Selee, Fratzke, Davidoff-Gore, and Freier, *Expanding Protection Options?*
39 UNHCR, "UNHCR Recommends the Cessation of Refugee Status for Ivorians" (press release, October 7, 2021).
40 Jan-Paul Brekke, Jens Vedsted-Hansen, and Rebecca Thorburn Stern, "Temporary Asylum and Cessation of Refugee Status in Scandinavia: Policies, Practices, and Dilemmas" (EMN Norway occasional paper, European Migration Network [EMN] Norway, Oslo, 2020); Michala Clante Bendixen, "The Refugee Appeals Board Overrules Immigration Service Decisions," Refugees Welcome, September 19, 2019.
41 Michelle Pace, "Think Twice before Copying Denmark's Asylum Policies," The Conversation, November 14, 2025.

deserters).[42] UNHCR adopted a similar procedure for Ivoirians to request exemptions to the cessation of status in 2021.[43] Governments could construct a similar framework for Syrians and Ukrainians, one that continues protection for at-risk persons or transitions them to more permanent statuses. Authorities could gradually phase out temporary protection for the newest arrivals, people from safer or more recovered geographic areas, or those unlikely to qualify for other permits.[44]

Any move toward cessation of status should include clear communication, advance notice, and opportunities to transition to other statuses or return voluntarily before nonvoluntary return becomes necessary. For example, Germany's withdrawal of protection for Bosnians in the 1990s ultimately led to repatriating more than 250,000 Bosnians, most of which occurred under a voluntary program offered as an alternative to eventual revocation of status.[45] The process for Ivoirian refugees similarly included measures to support status transitions in host countries and voluntary return. It also set out a timeline with milestones, with cessation of status following only after affected persons had failed to avail themselves of other options.[46] Both UNHCR and the EUAA could play critical roles in developing a similar plan for the Syrian and Ukrainian situations.

B. Preparing for Returns

Returns to post-conflict situations are likely to occur in two stages. In the short to medium term, returns should be fully voluntary, given the uncertain security situation, level of economic disruption, and destruction of infrastructure. Research on returns shows that changes in origin-country conditions, coupled with emotional and personal ties to those countries, are among the most critical drivers of return.[47] As conditions stabilize over the long term, host governments may explore cessation of refugee protection and enforced repatriation.

Facilitating Exploratory Returns

Before deciding to return permanently to their country of origin, displaced persons generally want sufficient information about conditions on the ground, including the status of their property and family, access to services, personal safety, and employment prospects, among other conditions. Social networks and government outreach can provide some of this information, but many displaced people may wish to conduct exploratory go-and-see visits to observe conditions firsthand. Some such visits are self-organized (such as in Ukraine), but in other contexts, host countries, countries of origin, and international organizations arrange and facilitate these visits (such as for Rwandan refugees in Uganda and Bosnian refugees in Denmark and Sweden).

42 U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, "World Refugee Survey 2001: Bosnia and Herzegovina," updated June 20, 2001.
43 UNHCR, "UNHCR Recommends the Cessation of Refugee Status for Ivorians."
44 Martin Wagner and Marina Grama, "Phasing Out Temporary Protection? Shaping EU Policies through National Experiences," International Centre for Migration Policy Development, March 4, 2025.
45 Marko Valenta, Jo Jakobsen, Drago Župarić-Iljić, and Hariz Halilovich, "Syrian Refugee Migration, Transitions in Migrant Statuses and Future Scenarios of Syrian Mobility," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (2020): 153–76.
46 UNHCR, *The Comprehensive Solutions Strategy for the Situation of Ivorian Refugees Including UNHCR's Recommendations on the Applicability of the Cessation Clauses* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2021).
47 Louay Constant et al., *In Search of a Durable Solution: Examining the Factors Influencing Postconflict Refugee Returns* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021).

However, temporary returns can be risky for those without long-term residence or citizenship in their host country. Many countries cancel protection status for people who travel to their country of origin, arguing that even temporary return constitutes re-availment of "the protection of the country of [their] nationality"[48] and thus they no longer need international protection. As such, for countries to support displaced individuals' exploration of return as an option via short-term visits without loss of status, changes to administrative regulations and procedures will likely be needed. Some countries have already adjusted their policies. Turkey allows Syrians to visit Syria temporarily, and Ukrainians can move back and forth between Ukraine and the European Union without losing temporary protection status. Several EU Member States have signaled a desire to make similar changes for Syrians, but few have taken concrete steps to do so.[49] By way of exception, Denmark has a permission procedure for refugees to apply for a temporary lifting of travel restrictions to conduct go-and-see visits before deciding whether to relinquish protection.[50] The European Union could support such approaches by providing bloc-wide policy and operational guidance to Member States, such as sharing best practices for handling applications for temporary return.

Supporting Sustainable Voluntary Returns

Beyond allowing go-and-see visits, destination and donor countries have other tools that can be used to facilitate voluntary return in the medium term. Governments can provide effective predeparture counseling and assistance. Setting realistic expectations for the types of services and support that will be available after repatriation, along with an unvarnished assessment of conditions on the ground, can help ensure that those who choose to return are better prepared to succeed and less likely to leave again.[51] This support can be even more essential in post-conflict environments, where people may not be returning to their original communities or homes. When possible, information should be tailored to local conditions as much as possible, given many potential returnees will want to know the conditions in their specific town or region of origin. UNHCR supported a repatriation information center run by the Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in part to provide information on conditions at the municipality level. The center collected reports on local conditions and shared these with organizations working directly with refugees.[52] For Syria, IOM developed a Communities of Return Index that synthesizes returnees' impressions of conditions in their specific return areas.[53] And the Ukrainian government and UNHCR jointly operate a repatriation information platform that provides local information.[54]

48 United Nations General Assembly, "Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees," July 28, 1951.
49 For example, Germany has proposed allowing Syrians to return for up to four weeks to assess conditions, but whether this will be instituted is unclear; see ECRE, "Germany: New Government Takes Office; Immediately Orders Police to Turn Away Most Undocumented People at Border—Far Right Party Labelled 'Extremist' by Intelligence Agency—Proposal to Let Syrian Refugees Visit Home—Rise in Attacks against People Seeking Asylum in Berlin—Court Approves Deportations to Greece," updated June 30, 2025.
50 ECRE, "Maintaining International Protection."
51 In Denmark, some unsuccessful returnees noted that either their predeparture counseling portrayed the security situation in Iraq inaccurately or they did not want to fully listen to the counseling because of their desire to return as swiftly as possible. See Maria Helene Bak Riiskjaer and Tilde Nielsson, "Circular Repatriation: The Unsuccessful Return and Reintegration of Iraqis with Refugee Status in Denmark" (research paper no. 165, UNHCR, Geneva, October 2008).
52 International Crisis Group, *Going Nowhere Fast: Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina* (Sarajevo: International Crisis Group, 1997).
53 IOM, *Syrian Arab Republic: Communities of Return Index, April 2025, Round 1* (Geneva: IOM 2025).
54 Ukraine Is Home, "About Ukraine Is Home," accessed June 30, 2025.

Assistance provided within a country of origin—either for individuals or broader communities and institutions—can also be key. Host-country governments can provide funding through relocation grants or initial repatriation allowances to help ease the immediate transition for returning individuals and families. Assistance finding or restoring housing can be particularly valuable. During large-scale returns to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s, for example, one factor that made these returns relatively successful was the robust international support for housing reconstruction assistance for returnees and resolution of property rights disputes.[55] Finally, host-country governments can provide targeted skills and capacity training tailored to labor needs in countries of origin, connect returnees with other returnee groups in country, and identify potential job opportunities. For Syrians, such programs should be embedded as part of larger development support programs, but ensuring that returnees can access these programs on an individual basis can make return more sustainable and attractive.

During large-scale returns to Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 1990s. . . one factor that made these returns relatively successful was the robust international support for housing reconstruction assistance for returnees and resolution of property rights disputes.

Some countries have also experimented with payments to incentivize individuals to agree to repatriate. Austria, for example, has offered Syrians 1,000 euros to return.[56] Germany similarly implemented a pay-to-go program for Bosnians following the end of the Yugoslav Wars.[57] Research on the impact of financial incentives to return has found that while such support can encourage return by overcoming financial barriers such as transportation costs, this only works when the country of origin has reached a point of relative safety and stability.[58]

Finally, and somewhat counterintuitively, having a secure status in a country of asylum can also be an enabler of return. For example, a fallback option that allows Syrians to return to Germany or France could incentivize first movers and entrepreneurs to start establishing the conditions for new lives in Syria without the pressure to make a permanent decision to return. Among displaced Ukrainians, those with more social and economic stability in their countries of protection have indicated a higher likelihood of returning to Ukraine.[59]

C. Continued Responsibility Sharing

Return decisions made in high-income asylum countries do not occur in a vacuum. For Syrians, returns from Europe should be considered in the context of much larger numbers of returns from Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. It will be in the interest of all countries involved—and the displaced persons returning—to ensure

55 Constant et al., *In Search of a Durable Solution*.
56 Euronews, "Austria Offers Syrians €1,000 'Return Bonus' as Europe Suspends Asylum Claims," Euronews, December 14, 2024.
57 Valenta, Jakobsen, Župarić-Iljić, and Halilovich, "Syrian Refugee Migration."
58 Christopher Blair, "Research on Durable Solutions: Repatriation and Refugee Policy" (presentation to MPI, May 2025).
59 Sohst, Tirado, Salgado, and Slootjes, *Exploring Refugees' Intentions to Return to Ukraine*.

that returns happen in an orderly and safe manner, at the appropriate time, and with sufficient support. High-income countries can contribute in several ways.

First, these countries can continue to provide development assistance to countries in the region of displacement to help relieve the financial costs of continuing to host refugees during the transition and to help maintain and improve access to services for both refugees and host communities. Withdrawals or shifts in funding, which could occur given the global retrenchment in foreign assistance, could trigger large-scale returns before countries of origin have the capacity to receive returnees—or secondary movements onward to other asylum countries. Thus far, despite a dramatic shift in the overall foreign assistance landscape, the European Union continues to provide promised development assistance to Syria's neighbors while increasing assistance to Syria.[60]

Second, high-income destination countries should coordinate return efforts with neighboring countries, while providing support for returnees on the ground, including mechanisms to help returnees cross the border and access assistance. UNHCR has put together an operational framework on voluntary return to Syria from neighboring countries.[61] It includes recommendations for coordinating returns across host countries and within Syria, and for ensuring access to information, planning, and support at destination for returnees. The framework also includes a website providing up-to-date advice and guidance on conditions in Syria and small amounts of transportation and other financial assistance.[62] In the Ukrainian context, the Ukrainian government is working to establish structures to support return, including its newly created Ministry of National Unity.[63]

Finally, high-income states can continue to provide resettlement and complementary pathways for refugees in countries neighboring the country of origin. For many people in such countries, including those with medical needs or other vulnerabilities, return may not be viable in the short to medium term while health and other services undergo reconstruction. For others, membership in a particular group (such as religious or ethnic minorities or LGTBQI refugees) may mean continued exposure to danger in the country of origin, even after conditions allow majority groups to return. For these populations, resettlement will remain an important pathway to long-term status and stabilization and will also support neighboring countries as they work toward a safe and predictable transition for displaced populations within their borders.

3 Harnessing Mobility to Facilitate Reconstruction

States emerging from conflict face the daunting tasks of physical reconstruction and economic and societal recovery. Meeting these challenges requires immense resources, including a workforce, technical expertise, and financial capital. While the international community often provides support, especially financial, a country's diaspora and returnees can be critical sources of the brains and brawn needed for reconstruction.

60 See, for example, European Commission, "EU Opens New Chapter in Its Relations with Syria" (press release, January 8, 2026); Reuters, "EU Grants Syria $722 Million for Recovery, Humanitarian Aid, von Der Leyen Says," Reuters, January 9, 2026.
61 UNHCR, *UNHCR Operational Framework: Voluntary Return of Syrian Refugees and IDPs 2025* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2025).
62 UNHCR, *UNHCR Operational Framework*.
63 UNHCR, "UNHCR and the Ministry of National Unity Partner to Support Forcibly Displaced Ukrainians Stay Connected with Home" (press release, March 7, 2025).

Reconstruction costs in both Syria and Ukraine will be enormous. Estimates indicate that Syria's long-term recovery will require hundreds of billions of dollars. Ukraine faces equally steep costs, estimated at USD 524 billion over ten years.[64] By comparison, the international community spent USD 220 billion on rebuilding Iraq between 2003 and 2014.[65] A critical unanswered question is how to support post-conflict rebuilding in a world where aid budgets are declining. Diasporas cannot contribute even close to the amount of funding needed, but leveraging diaspora support—including investments in returning entrepreneurs—can help unlock key targeted funding and investment.

A. Build Human Capital across Borders

Reconstruction requires substantial labor and human capital to rebuild infrastructure and restart damaged economies. Ukraine's demographic challenges are especially acute. Before Russia's invasion, Ukraine was already experiencing severe demographic decline and collapsing fertility, and since the start of the war, it has lost an estimated 10 million people.[66] The International Labor Organization estimates that to return to prewar productivity levels by 2032, Ukraine will need an additional 8.6 million workers.[67] Even if half of Ukrainian refugees were to return permanently, the country would still face a significant skills shortfall, including a need for 4.5 million skilled workers.

But supporting the return of high-skilled workers to post-conflict states also has implications for the labor needs of the asylum countries they leave. Many host-country governments have invested significant resources in supporting their local integration. In 2016, for example, Germany spent 5.3 billion euros on refugee integration and 4.4 billion euros on welfare payments, and it has spent billions of euros since then.[68] Over time, Syrians have integrated into the German economy, reaching a 61 percent employment rate seven years after arrival, and they now represent a vital part of Germany's health-care system, providing services in underserved areas of the country as well as large cities.[69] Ukrainians have experienced even better outcomes, due to both differences in their displacement circumstances and improvements in host-country integration programs, such as the prioritization of language learning.[70] Host countries have also benefited significantly: estimates indicate that Ukrainians contributed 2.7 percent of Poland's GDP in 2024.[71] These same workers can be vital to their country of origin's recovery. Many Syrians in Turkey, for example, work

64 World Bank, Government of Ukraine, European Union, and United Nations, *Ukraine: Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA4), February 2022–December 2024* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2024).

65 Hideki Matsunaga, *The Reconstruction of Iraq after 2003: Learning from Its Successes and Failures* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019).

66 This loss stems from a combination of out-migration (especially of young people and women), conflict-related deaths, and fertility far below replacement levels among those left behind. Thomas Escritt, "Ukraine's Population Has Fallen by 10 Million since Russia's Invasion, UN Says," Reuters, October 22, 2024; Jamie Dettmer, "The Depopulation of Ukraine," Politico, March 14, 2025.

67 International Labor Organization, *Prospects for Achieving Ukraine's 2032 GDP Target: A Labour Market Perspective* (Geneva: International Labor Organization, 2023).

68 Stefan Trines, "Lessons from Germany's Refugee Crisis: Integration, Costs, and Benefits," World Education News and Reviews, May 2, 2017.

69 Herbert Brücker et al., *Syrian Workers in Germany* (Nürnberg: Institute for Employment Research, 2024); Anthony Faiola and Kate Brady, "6,000 Syrians Work as Doctors in Germany. Some Weigh Whether to Stay or Go," *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2025.

70 Maddalena Honorati, Mauro Testaverde, and Elisa Totino, "Labor Market Integration of Refugees in Germany: New Lessons After the Ukrainian Crisis" (discussion paper no. 2404, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2024).

71 Deloitte, *Analysis of the Impact of Refugees from Ukraine on the Economy of Poland, 2nd ed.* (Warsaw: Deloitte, 2025).

in labor-intensive industries such as textiles, an industry that analysts suggest could be crucial to Syria's reconstruction.[72]

The labor and skills needs of countries of origin and destination do not automatically have to be in conflict. Enabling diaspora members to move between and invest in both countries could generate mutual gains. Refugees have long moved between countries of origin and destination—particularly across porous borders—to maintain property, visit family, and access health care. While this is often allowed implicitly, it can also be explicit policy, as with Ukrainians who can move back and forth between Ukraine and the European Union without losing their temporary protection status.[73] Business leaders can also capitalize on this movement. A Turkish industry representative has noted that companies could turn the return of Syrian workers into an advantage by starting production in labor-intensive sectors across the border.[74] Ukraine's strong tech sector points to another option: a virtual or hybrid reconstruction model that allows diasporas to support reconstruction from their new homes elsewhere.

The labor and skills needs of countries of origin and destination do not automatically have to be in conflict.

Three main tools can help immigration policymakers unlock these mutual benefits:

- **Facilitating diaspora engagement and innovative partnerships.** Temporary returns to facilitate knowledge exchange can help tap the expertise of highly skilled diaspora members who do not intend to return permanently. Over the past few decades, the IOM, the United Nations Development Program, Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, and others have operated projects that match diaspora experts with short- or longer-term placements in their country of origin to share their expertise. For instance, IOM facilitated the temporary return of 862 members of the Bosnian diaspora over five years to work in various sectors and start-up businesses.[75] These projects range from facilitating permanent return to shorter visits lasting several weeks or months.[76] Some countries are extending this model to Syria, with Germany, for example, adding Syria to its existing Hospital Partnerships program.[77] While these projects are small scale and often costly, evaluations suggest they can have a meaningful impact in developing health-care systems, including refining public health policy and providing on-the-ground training of health-care providers.[78]

72 Hurriyet Daily News, "Return of Syrians to Impact Labor Market: Gov't Report," *Hurriyet Daily News*, February 5, 2025.
73 European Commission, "Returning to Ukraine: Questions and Answers," accessed April 8, 2025.
74 Hurriyet Daily News, "Return of Syrians to Impact Labor Market."
75 Claes Sandgren, *The IOM Project "Reconstruction, Capacity Building and Development through the Return of Qualified Nationals to Bosnia and Herzegovina"—An Evaluation* (Geneva: IOM, 2001).
76 Katie Kuschminder, *The Role of the Diaspora in Knowledge Transfer and Capacity Building in Post-Conflict Settings: The Temporary Return of Qualified Nationals to Afghanistan* (Maastricht: Maastricht University, 2011); Reiko Shindo, "The Hidden Effect of Diaspora Return to Post-Conflict Countries: The Case of Policy and Temporary Return to Rwanda," *Third World Quarterly* 33, no. 9 (2012): 1685–1702.
77 Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit, "Together for Syria: Hospital Partnerships Improve Healthcare," accessed February 10, 2025.
78 IOM the Netherlands, *MIDA Ghana Health Project* (The Hague: IOM the Netherlands, 2012); Ultimate Consulting Firm, *Evaluation Report: External Evaluation of the Project "Institutionalize Health Care Improvement Through Temporary Returns of Somali Diaspora Health Professionals to Somaliland Through Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA)," a Project Funded by the Government of Finland* (Geneva: IOM, 2020).

Partnerships between companies in destination and origin countries are also promising and could achieve greater scale and investment from private equity. The UK-Ukraine TechBridge, for instance, fosters strategic partnerships between UK businesses and Ukrainian innovators, with industry partners offering skills training and credentialing free of charge.[79]

- **Joining up integration and reintegration programming.** "Dual-intent" programming was initially used by Norway during the Yugoslav Wars to provide integration support for refugees in host countries while equipping people with skills that would be in demand upon their eventual return.[80] More recently, European governments have started implementing similar programs for Ukrainians, including supporting vocational training in sectors that will be in demand in both countries and using both Ukrainian and English during integration programs.[81] But operating dual-intent integration programming can be challenging, as it requires investments in language learning, skills recognition, and close coordination with authorities in countries of origin that host countries might not otherwise commit to. With a willing partner government, however, this burden might be lessened. Ukraine has signed agreements with several of the largest EU host countries (including Germany, France, and Spain) to open Unity Hubs to help Ukrainians with voluntary repatriation and with identifying job opportunities in Ukraine as well as in their host country.[82] These measures are designed to maximize human capital regardless of whether the population returns. Similar hubs could be established for Syrians in Syria's neighboring countries through a centralized and coordinated approach to reconstruction.
- **Supporting programming that benefits both returnees and a broader population.** Governments should seek to align development programming and reintegration services around the shared goal of growing human capital across the board and ensuring skills transfer on return. The Skills Alliance for Ukraine, launched in 2024, has raised more than 1.1 billion euros to train more than 1 million Ukrainians (both in Ukraine and abroad) in occupations urgently needed for recovery and reconstruction, such as construction, transport, information technology, engineering, and health care.[83] Governments can also facilitate development-oriented diaspora investment by providing legal guidance and casework support, setting up online resources, and creating one-stop shops (such as the Afghan Investment Support Agency that facilitated investment in Afghanistan) to help investors navigate the potentially complex challenges of operating in a post-conflict setting.

Short-term diaspora engagement programs and partnerships have had some positive impacts, but deeper and longer-term diaspora engagement could develop if governments create the conditions for circular mobility, including by ensuring that refugees who visit their countries of origin temporarily do not lose their protection status. Some corridors are already well established. Circular mobility between Ukraine and Poland existed even before the war, and Poland has taken steps to allow Ukrainians to gain more permanent

79 For more information, see UK-Ukraine TechBridge, "The UK-Ukraine TechBridge," accessed March 15, 2026.
80 OECD, "Working towards Dual Intent Integration of Ukrainian Refugees" (OECD policy paper, OECD Publishing, Paris, 2023).
81 OECD, "Working towards Dual Intent Integration"; Sophie Meiners, "Return and Reconstruction: How the EU Should Invest in Ukrainian Refugees" (policy brief no. 7, German Council on Foreign Relations, Berlin, 2024).
82 German Federal Ministry of the Interior, "Germany and Ukraine Sign Declaration of Intent to Open Unity Hubs" (press release, February 15, 2025).
83 Skills Alliance for Ukraine, "€1.1 Billion for Skills Development: Skills Alliance Presents Results and European Practices for Ukraine" (press release, January 13, 2026).

status through labor market integration. But for corridors without a long history of migration, cultural ties, or geographic proximity, such as Syria-Germany, circular mobility is likely to be more difficult. Destination-country governments will face the challenge of balancing their own political interests in reducing immigration pressures and conveying to constituents that conflict-related protection is temporary, with facilitating mobility patterns that could be economically beneficial.

In the long term, post-conflict countries will need to build new immigration systems and infrastructure. Even if a large share of the diaspora returns to Syria and Ukraine, both countries will still have significant labor needs. In previous reconstruction settings, such as Iraq, the local population could not meet even modest labor needs, and the demographic indicators for Syria and especially Ukraine clearly show that foreign labor will be a vital component of recovery.[84] Bringing migrants into fragile contexts can pose additional risks, including exploitative working conditions. Meeting economic needs through regular migration pathways and ethical recruitment systems is therefore important. The international community can support these efforts by inviting Syria to join multilateral migration management structures such as the Budapest Process and the EuroMed Dialogues.

Demographic indicators for Syria and especially Ukraine clearly show that foreign labor will be a vital component of recovery.

B. Leverage Diaspora Engagement to Help Navigate a Difficult Funding Landscape

All of the programs described above, however valuable, must be considered against the backdrop of funding shortages. Foreign assistance budgets are being cut across the board in Europe and the United States, creating severe funding shortages for the international organizations and nongovernmental organizations best positioned to help meet Syria's immediate needs.[85] The United States alone provided more than USD 18 billion in humanitarian aid for Syria since 2011 and more than USD 37 billion to Ukraine, much of which has ended since President Donald Trump re-entered office in 2025.[86] Europe could unlock additional funding for Syria by using provisions in already agreed-upon EU assistance to Syria's neighbors to facilitate voluntary Syrian returns from these countries,[87] though attention should be paid to ensure that reallocating this funding does not have a destabilizing effect on these countries.

84 Vasyl Arovych, "Ukraine Races to Bring Back Refugees as Labor Crisis Deepens," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 2, 2025.

85 The EU Brussels Conference raised nearly USD 3.2 billion for Syria and its neighbors in 2025, with an additional USD 1.4 billion for 2026 and beyond, but it fell short of the 2024 pledges of USD 4.17 billion. European External Action Service (EEAS), "Brussels 9th Syria Conference Pledging Statement," March 24, 2025; EEAS, "Brussels 8th Syria Conference Pledging Statement," May 27, 2024.

86 Rachel Wilson, "USAID's Extremely Uncertain Future Risks Global Aid Efforts, Especially in Ukraine," CNN, February 27, 2025; Natasha Hall, "Syria Is Trying to Get Up with a Boot on Its Neck," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2025.

87 European Commission, Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), *Commission Implementing Decision of 29.11.2024 on the Financing of the Special Measure in Favour of Syria for 2024* (Brussels: European Commission, 2024); DG NEAR, *Commission Implementing Decision of 1.8.2024 on the Financing of the Special Measure on EU Support for Vulnerable Lebanese and Refugees from Syria and for Durable Solutions for Refugees from Syria 2024* (Brussels: European Commission, 2024); DG NEAR, *Commission Implementing Decision of 17.12.2024 on the Financing of the Individual Measure in Favour of Migration and Border Management Support in Türkiye for 2024* (Brussels: European Commission, 2024); DG NEAR, *Commission Implementing Decision of 19.12.2024 on the Financing of the Special Measure in Favour of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and Support for Durable Solutions for Refugees from Syria for 2024* (Brussels: European Commission, 2025).

Regardless of what happens with the current global economic uncertainty, it is clear that donors face a need to do more with less, while also harnessing new forms of investment. In an era of shrinking aid budgets, diaspora contributions will become even more important. Destination countries can explore levers to make remittances go further (e.g., exempting remittances from sanctions) and encourage direct diaspora investment. Entrepreneurs within the diaspora are eager to start investing in Syria, for example, and destination countries could encourage this through actions such as lowering tariffs on imported raw materials that these entrepreneurs rely on to start transnational businesses.[88] Other private-sector actors could also benefit from working in Syria, potentially partnering with firms in Jordan and Turkey to support reconstruction efforts. Existing private-sector activation efforts, such as the Refugee Investment Network, can help make the business case for these investments and link potential impact investors with refugee-led or refugee-serving companies engaged in reconstruction.[89] Governments should explore ways to help the Syrian diaspora navigate the complex legal environment inhibiting larger remittances, and also coordinate with diaspora organizations and private-sector actors so that their investments align and build on one another.

The international community has taken concrete steps to facilitate these investments by dismantling the sanctions regime imposed on Assad-led Syria. In May 2025, the European Union and the United Kingdom lifted key sanctions on Syria, having previously provided smaller forms of relief. The United States has also lifted its sanctions, which had been the most crippling for the Syrian economy.[90] Waiving U.S. sanctions will allow governments, companies, and individuals to invest in Syria and help fund its recovery. In the immediate aftermath Assad's fall, Gulf States struck deals to pay Syria's debt to international financial institutions, provide support to civil service sectors, and increase electricity and gas provision, and the World Bank provided additional funds.[91] But these positive developments are only the first steps. Infrastructure reconstruction, stabilization of public services and utilities, and rebuilding will take time, and the situation remains volatile.

Investing in Ukraine's reconstruction will likely be more straightforward, and promising practices already exist. The European Union has launched the Ukraine Investment Framework to attract public and private-sector investment in Ukraine.[92] The World Bank has issued insurance guarantees, and other development banks have followed.[93] However, securing private-sector investment before the conflict ends and without sufficient security guarantees will likely remain difficult.

88 Kathleen Newland and Hiroyuki Tanaka, *Mobilizing Diaspora Entrepreneurship for Development* (Washington DC: MPI, 2010).
89 For more information, see the Refugee Investment Network, "Our Approach," accessed June 30, 2025.
90 UK Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office and Hamish Falconer MP, "UK Bolsters Support for Syrian People by Amending Syria Sanctions" (press release, April 24, 2025); Council of the European Union, "Syria: EU Adopts Legal Acts to Lift Economic Sanctions on Syria, Enacting Recent Political Agreement" (press release, May 28, 2025); Isabela Espadas Barros Leal and James C. McKinley Jr., "U.S. Lifts Some Sanctions on Syria, Fulfilling a Trump Pledge," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2025; Abdi Latif Dahir and Reham Mourshed, "Trump Signs Law Repealing Tough Sanctions on Syria," *The New York Times*, December 19, 2025.
91 World Bank, "Syria: World Bank US$146 Million Grant to Improve Electricity Supply and Support Sector Development" (press release, June 25, 2025).
92 European Commission, "Ukraine Investment Framework," accessed April 8, 2025.
93 Tinatin Akhvlediani, "Explaining Ukraine's Recovery and Reconstruction: What, How, and When?" (CEPS Explainer, Center for European Policy Studies, Brussels, 2024).

Other post-conflict situations may require more work-arounds if engaging with a new regime proves difficult. In previous post-conflict settings, such as Afghanistan and Sudan, the international community channeled reconstruction funding through closely monitored pooled funds supporting reconstruction work done by third parties, including international organizations and nonprofits.[94] Similarly, the international community could establish specific escrow accounts to help diaspora members channel remittances to approved reconstruction activities. Local authorities could also be partners, especially if they operate with enough autonomy from sanctioned central government authorities. These efforts would require policy creativity, and nongovernmental actors such as diaspora organizations would need sufficient capacity to navigate the complex legal landscape.

The international community could establish specific escrow accounts to help diaspora members channel remittances to approved reconstruction activities.

Diaspora organizations can play a critical role in contributing to and helping direct reconstruction efforts at both the local and national levels. Aside from sending financial remittances to family members, diaspora organizations can pool funds for specific reconstruction projects, perhaps targeting infrastructure projects in their communities of origin or supporting specific service sectors. Throughout the Syrian conflict, for example, diaspora groups have played a critical role in supporting humanitarian aid and health-care services in Syria.[95] And these organizations—alongside Syria's interim authorities and communities who stayed in Syria—can help advise development actors and host-country governments on how to most effectively invest in recovery efforts. In Iraq, for example, post-conflict reconstruction efforts suffered when international actors, foreign contractors, and consulting firms made key decisions, which meant that local communities had little buy-in and did not trust the reconstruction process.[96] Syria's interim authorities and the Ukrainian government will likely be willing partners in diaspora engagement, but donors should also seek out diaspora advice so that solutions reflect community priorities and promote more sustainable outcomes.[97]

4 Conclusion

The stakes for ensuring a peaceful and sustainable future in Syria and Ukraine could not be higher. Yet, in many high-income destination countries, there is depleted political and financial capital for both hosting refugees and supporting reconstruction. Destination countries under pressure to facilitate returns face the challenges of managing public expectations about the speed and number of repatriations as well as taking a calibrated approach to the diverse needs of displaced populations. Poorly planned returns can imperil

94 Mustafa Alio, "Supporting Syrian Returns and Promoting Stabilization: Key Considerations and Context" (working paper prepared for the Transatlantic Council on Migration, MPI, May 2025).

95 Nora Jasmin Ragab and Amer Katbeh, *Syrian Diaspora Groups in Europe: Mapping Their Engagement in Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom* (Copenhagen: Danish Refugee Council, December 2017).

96 Kenneth M. Pollack, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Failure in Iraq: A Retrospective Analysis of the Reconstruction" (commentary, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, December 2006); Hideki Matsunaga, "Getting Reconstruction Right and Wrong: Lessons from Iraq" (commentary, Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, October 1, 2019).

97 See, for example, the role of local engagement in climate mobility programming. Lawrence Huang and Camille Le Coz, *Engaging Local Communities for More Effective Climate Mobility Programming* (Washington, DC: MPI, 2024).

fragile reconstruction processes, potentially fueling additional cycles of displacement or tipping these situations into greater instability. They also risk disrupting host-country economies and communities if they lead to a sharp exit of needed workers and well-integrated community members.

Policymakers should focus on the following:

- **Develop and communicate a clear road map for return.** Policymakers should avoid blanket withdrawals of status in the short term, particularly as conditions in Syria and Ukraine are not yet conducive to large-scale returns. Such approaches are administratively costly, and rapid policy changes can cause psychological harm and hinder people's ability to plan for a successful return. These approaches can also destabilize origin countries economically and politically. Host-country governments can still send political signals about eventual return, but this should be done through comprehensive return and reconstruction plans that set clear benchmarks, are coordinated with humanitarian and reconstruction assistance efforts in partner countries, and are well communicated to affected individuals and the public.
- **Adopt a differentiated approach to status transitions for different profiles**. After prolonged displacement, individuals and families may have myriad different statuses, integration situations, and return intentions. Policymakers should avoid treating all cases the same and instead adopt approaches tailored to different circumstances. Targeted voluntary return packages could be developed for specific groups, such as people who have struggled to integrate into the host-country labor market. At the same time, governments could create opportunities for lane changes from a humanitarian status to another forms of status (e.g., for people in employment or training or with family connections), and provide counseling to interested individuals on options for transitioning status or returning to their country of origin. These options can also change over time as circumstances evolve.
- **Coordinate responses with other host countries**. Returns from high-income countries do not occur in isolation and, especially in the case of Syria, should be coordinated with major host countries in the region. UNHCR's return support and coordination plan is one important vehicle for coordination. However, high-income countries, particularly in Europe, should also coordinate among themselves. Otherwise, changes in approach by one country risk triggering secondary movements to other EU countries, as happened after Denmark announced a review of status for Syrians in 2021.[98] The EUAA could play a role in coordinating an EU-wide return plan.
- **Treat the diaspora as a partner and a resource.** Reconstruction requires human capital and local knowledge, both of which diaspora communities can contribute. Policymakers should therefore consider how to support the cross-border flow of the knowledge and capital diaspora communities bring. Support could involve enabling skilled workers to relocate—temporarily or for longer periods—back to Syria or Ukraine, as Germany has done with its Germany-Syria Hospital Partnerships program, which expanded to include Syrians at the request of members of the Syrian diaspora. Policymakers could also adopt joined-up, dual-intent labor market integration programs (akin to the one Norway deployed after the Yugoslav Wars) that include modules to build transferable human capital that

98 Mais Katt et al., "Mapping the EU Flight of Refugees Fleeing Danish Crackdown on Syrians," Lighthouse Reports, January 10, 2022.

would be of use in both the host and origin country. Finally, the diaspora can also be a source of financial support, through easier remittance transfers or escrow accounts that allow diaspora members to contribute directly to reconstruction projects back home.

Ultimately, it will take time for people to return to their countries of origin, and not all will return in the end. The international community has a strong interest in supporting return, but only if it advances reconstruction and stabilization. As governments grapple with how to demonstrate order and control in migration management systems, policymakers should seek to communicate to anxious publics that conflicts do wind down and that hospitality need not be a bottomless commitment. However, they should balance such messaging against the risks of overly hasty return efforts. Clear planning and communication with diaspora communities, neighboring countries, and the country of origin are crucial. If policymakers can successfully navigate these tensions for Syria and Ukraine, they can create the playbook for future post-conflict scenarios.

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Acknowledgments

This report was tabled at a virtual meeting of the Transatlantic Council on Migration, an initiative of the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), in April 2025. The meeting's theme was "Navigating Mobility in Post-Conflict Settings," and this report informed the Council's discussions.

The Council is a unique deliberative body established by MPI in 2008 that examines vital policy issues and informs migration policymaking processes across Europe, North America, and Australia. The Council's work is generously supported by the following foundations and governments: the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Open Society Foundations, the Robert Bosch Stiftung, and the governments of Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway, and Sweden.

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The authors are grateful to MPI colleagues Meghan Benton and Natalia Banulescu-Bogdan for their insights, contributions, and review throughout the drafting process, and MPI interns Nurbanu Hayır and Gabriello Clemente White for their research assistance. They also thank the stakeholders consulted in the run-up to the Transatlantic Council on Migration meeting in April 2025 for the insights they shared. Finally, they thank Sue Kovach for her incisive edits.

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Design: Sara Staedicke, MPI
Layout: Katie O'Hara
Cover photo: IOM/Batoul Ibrahim

Suggested citation: Davidoff-Gore, Samuel and Susan Fratzke. 2026. *From Exile to Return: Rebuilding Lives and States after Conflict*. Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute.

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