

2. The implications of leaving Syria

Following the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, this document has been reviewed and updated. Please consult '[Interim Country Guidance: Syria \(2025\)](#)'

COMMON ANALYSIS

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It is inherent in the situation of applicants for international protection that they have left their country of origin. In the context of Syria, and in particular of targeting by the government of Syria (GoS), this in itself could have implications for the treatment of an individual upon return. [4](#)

This section is to be read in conjunction with the other sections of this country guidance, and in particular those concerning different profiles under [4. Refugee status](#), [5.2. Article 15\(b\) QD](#), [6. Actors of protection](#) and [7. Internal protection alternative](#).

Following the Syrian forces' territorial gains over the past years, the government has been trying to foster the image of stability and has called on refugees to return. Such GoS statements constituted a change from the previous stance of the GoS, which had perceived the mass exodus as a means of gaining a more homogenous society and ensuring subservience from the civilian population [[IDPs and returnees](#), 3.1, p. 19]. The EU and UNHCR argued that the situation in Syria was not conducive to a safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable return of refugees, pointing out that the Syrian authorities continued to violate human rights, including by forced conscription, indiscriminate detention, enforced disappearances, torture, physical and sexual violence and discrimination in access to housing, land and property. [[Returnees from abroad](#), 1.1, p. 11; [Damascus 2021](#), 2.2.1, p. 25]

There are no comprehensive statistics on how many Syrians and stateless persons from Syria have returned to Syria [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.5, pp. 29-36]. UNHCR stated in June 2022 that surveys carried out since 2017 had revealed that the number of returns of Syrian refugees remained very limited and decreased over the years. As of 30 June 2023, UNHCR reported 370 323 self-organised refugee returns to Syria since 2016. The actual numbers could however be greater, as there is also return movement via informal routes [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.2, p. 21]. Some EU+ countries have also observed movements of Syrian applicants and beneficiaries of international protection, travelling back to Syria and subsequently returning to Europe. Among the main reasons given for not returning were safety and security concerns, while reasons for returning were the need to protect assets and properties as well as the worsening economic situation in the displaced location, especially for those returning from outside Syria [[Security 2022](#), 1.6.4, pp. 65-66].

The Syrian Ministry of Interior issued a circular in March 2019 waiving the punishment of illegal exit by means of imprisonment and/or fines which used to be in effect previously. However, individuals returning to Syria may need to go through two procedures to return: security clearance and status settlement. These procedures are run by the Syrian intelligence. Sources have indicated that no clear-cut distinction existed between making an application for security clearance and settling one's status. As the European Institute of Peace observed, 'there is no single set of uniform procedures that a returnee must undergo before going back

to Syria, nor any process that provides guarantees about security on their return, even where there is a process for specific groups or in specific circumstances.’ [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.5, p. 30; [Returnees from abroad](#), 2.1, p. 18, 3.1]. The Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic (UNCOI) found that on-the-ground procedures regarding return varied considerably. Some returnees were reportedly required to settle their status in ‘status settlement’ centres in GoS-held areas before embarking on their return, thus having to rely on family members or friends in Syria acting on their behalf. Others lodged a request for status settlement at a border crossing or accessed such centres in person after re-entering Syria through clandestine routes. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.2, p. 20]

Obtaining security clearance can be understood as a background check on whether an individual has an ‘unsettled’ security issue such as participation in protests, criticising the government or taking up arms against the GoS. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.5, p. 30]

As part of their return process, many returnees were required to fill out return or reconciliation forms in order to reconcile their status with the state authorities ‘while attempting to demonstrate a clean record or seek “forgiveness” from the state’. Most returnees were required to undergo the process of reconciliation, which implied providing personal information to the GoS, including on their relatives’ past and relating to social media accounts. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.5, p. 31; [Returnees from abroad](#), 3.2, pp. 21-22].

Syrian refugees in Lebanon have pointed out that a risk they fear upon returning is the practice of writing a *taqrir* (a ‘report’, meaning reporting people to the security agencies). They reported on instances of detention upon return as a result of being denounced by neighbours or even family members. The practice of writing a *taqrir* is reportedly used either to avoid being targeted, for personal gain, or vengeance. [[IDPs and returnees](#), 3.5, p. 34].

Concerning the treatment of returnees, it was noted that due in particular to GoS restrictions on the UN and UNHCR, no systematic monitoring of returnees has been carried out and as a result, obtaining information about the extent of mistreatment and violations committed by GoS against returnees was not possible. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.5, p. 33]

According to one source, there were no consequences known of having applied for asylum abroad and the source had no information that such applicants were specifically punished on return. The same source also reported that returnees who have not engaged in opposition activities and departed Syria only due to the war tended not to face problems upon return unless somebody in their absence had reported them to the authorities alleging that they were, for example, involved in activities opposing the GoS. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.5., p. 33]

According to multiple sources, obtaining a security clearance would by no means guarantee a safe return to Syria, and the Syrian authorities continued to arrest, (temporarily) detain, interrogate, torture and/or prosecute returnees in terrorism courts upon return. Sources noted that persons who departed from Syria were viewed with suspicion by the Syrian authorities for leaving the country and one source highlighted the government’s ‘hostile perceptions towards those who sought safety outside of the country’. According to another source, nearly half (48 %) of the interviewed returnees to GoS areas reported that they or a family member had experienced persecution due to having left Syria illegally, for having applied for asylum abroad or because of their area of origin. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.5, p. 33; [Returnees from abroad](#), 2.2, p. 18; [Targeting 2020](#), 1.3.6, p. 27].

According to one source, there was no guarantee that a returnee would not be targeted by intelligence services ‘due to the lack of proper coordination between agencies’. Moreover, given the involvement of the General Intelligence Directorate in the coordination of returns, a returnee may incidentally be wanted by this agency and thus targeted upon return. The UNCOI in a July 2023 report covering the period from January 2020 to April 2023, noted that the GoS authorities arrested returnees at checkpoints for carrying outdated or inadequate papers and inflicted torture to coerce confessions from returnees, including about their previous

involvement in protests. [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.2, pp. 21-22]

According to returnees' testimonies collected by Amnesty International, Syrian officials perceived individuals who left the country as having been disloyal and supportive of the opposition 'either because of the fact that they fled or because of the place where they sought refuge'. Refugees were perceived 'as traitors, given that they readily incriminate the Syrian government before host countries in order to obtain protection there'. [[Targeting 2022](#), 1.2.5, pp. 32-33].

According to some sources, lacking civil documentation does not necessarily obstruct the process of return itself. Those who do not have a passport or whose passport expired, for instance, can apply for a laissez-passer at a Syrian diplomatic mission abroad. However, a lack of civil documentation certainly represents an obstacle upon return when seeking to access government services, to initiate legal procedures and to file property claims. [[Returnees from abroad](#), 4.2, p. 25].

Several reports documented violations against returnees based on interviews with returnees and their relatives, namely unlawful or arbitrary detention, torture and other ill-treatment including rape and sexual violence, and enforced disappearance. These also took place in Damascus, the Damascus area and the international airport [[Returnees from abroad](#), 5, p. 27]. The UN also observed that the Syrian authorities routinely denied Syrians return to their places of origin, most notably in formerly besieged areas that had been retaken by the Syrian armed forces. Some sources stated that some groups of returnees were denied access to a particular area of origin, because of their ethnicity, religion and/or political orientation [[Returnees from abroad](#), 4.1, p. 24].

More recently, the UNCOI, described cases of returnees from abroad to GoS areas who were either extorted, arrested, detained, conscripted, tortured, or forcibly disappeared [[COI Update 2023](#), 3, p. 11]. Numerous arrests of returnees were also reported at the Syrian-Lebanese border (notably at the al-Masnaa border crossing), including of individuals returning from Lebanon under a voluntary repatriation scheme after agreeing to security settlements with the GoS. Further concentrations of arrests of returnees, including persons who were wanted for opposition to the GoS, draft evasion or defection from the Syrian military, were reported at the Syrian-Turkish border, especially at the Kasab border crossing [[Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.2, p. 21].

Returnees from abroad were arrested for a variety of reasons, most frequently on broad accusations of 'terrorism', often based on the claim that a relative was affiliated with the political/armed opposition, because the returnee originated from an area previously held by the opposition or for their alleged participation in protests or political opposition groups in the early days of the Syrian uprising, or for purportedly criticising Syria. [[Returnees from abroad](#), 5, p. 27]. There were also cases of returnees being arrested for the purpose of exacting bribes in exchange for their release [[COI Update 2023](#), 3, p. 11; [Country Focus 2023](#), 1.1.2, p. 21].

For more guidance on the required documentation and treatment at checkpoints in Damascus, see the section [7.3. Travel and admittance](#) under [internal protection alternative](#).

The fact of having left Syria in itself would not normally lead to the level of risk required to establish well-founded fear of persecution. In most cases where a well-founded fear of persecution is substantiated, this would be related to circumstances falling under other profiles included in this guidance, and in particular [4.1. Persons perceived to be opposing the government](#).

However, in some cases, returnees could be exposed to acts which are of such severe nature that they would amount to persecution (e.g. arrest, torture) and a nexus to a reason for persecution may be substantiated.

In cases where no nexus can be substantiated, the implications of having left Syria may be a relevant consideration with regard to subsidiary protection. They should also be taken into account when assessing the

willingness of the GoS to provide protection in the meaning of [Article 7 QD](#) and in the assessment of an internal protection alternative (IPA).

The individual conduct of the applicant is a relevant consideration in this regard, including when they left Syria, possible contact with the Syrian authorities (e.g. issuance of passport), and travel back to Syria, modalities of entry/exit and time spent in the country, etc. These circumstances should be taken into account in the examination of the international protection needs of an applicant, as well as in relation to the potential withdrawal of international protection in accordance with Article 14 or Article 19 QD.

⁴ This section uses the terms ‘return’ and ‘returnee’ in their usual meaning in everyday language, and should not be understood as a reference to Directive 2008/115/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 December 2008 on common standards and procedures in Member States for returning illegally staying third-country nationals (Return Directive).

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