



Supporting Safe and Dignified Syrian Returns:
**Policy Options for Refugee-Led and Locally
Grounded Recovery**





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INTRODUCTION: WHY SYRIAN RETURN REQUIRES A DIFFERENT POLICY APPROACH

The fall of the Assad regime in December 2024 has transformed the policy debate around Syria. Questions that were previously constrained by political deadlock are now central to international discussion, including how recovery should be financed, how reconstruction priorities should be set, what role Syrian institutions and civil society should play, and under what conditions millions of displaced Syrians can make decisions about return. This shift has created a real opening for recovery, but it has also introduced a serious policy risk. Recovery may be treated by some actors as evidence that return is already broadly safe, even where conditions remain highly uneven.

Syrian return cannot be approached as a simple transition from displacement to reintegration. Return movements have accelerated, but they are taking place alongside continued internal displacement, damaged infrastructure, weak services, limited livelihoods, protection risks, and pressures in host countries. Many Syrians are moving in ways that are temporary, exploratory, circular, or divided across household members. Some return to check property, assess services, reconnect



with family, or escape worsening conditions in host countries. Others remain displaced because return would expose them to insecurity, poverty, legal uncertainty, social pressure, or the loss of fragile livelihoods. These patterns require a policy approach that recognizes return as a process shaped by choice, constraint, and local conditions, not as a single event.

The distinction between voluntary return and pressured return is especially important in the current moment. Formal coercion is not the only way return pressure emerges.

Return may appear voluntary on paper while being shaped by conditions that leave people with little meaningful alternative. Pressure can be produced indirectly through shrinking assistance in host countries, legal insecurity, political rhetoric, reduced access to protection, threats of status loss, family separation, or the use of recovery narratives to suggest that Syria is now safe enough for return. In these circumstances, the line between voluntary return, pressured return, and de facto forced return can become dangerously blurred.

This distinction carries serious legal and policy implications. Not every form of pressure will amount to forced return in the formal legal sense,

but policies that erode real choice can undermine the voluntariness of return and may raise protection concerns, including risks linked to non-refoulement.

In this context, recovery programming can either widen Syrians' choices or narrow them. It can help restore the conditions for dignified life, or it can be interpreted as a signal that displaced Syrians should go back before those conditions are actually in place.

This paper argues for a different approach to return-related recovery. Recovery should proceed urgently, but it must be governed in ways that protect safe, voluntary, informed, and dignified decision-making. Its success should not be measured by return numbers. It should be measured by whether Syrians gain access to reliable information, housing, services, livelihoods, documentation, protection, and community-level support that allow them to decide whether to return, delay return, remain in host countries, move temporarily, or maintain divided household strategies. In other words, recovery should expand choice rather than produce return. This approach does not oppose return. It opposes policies that transform recovery into pressure, or that treat return as the only valid measure of success.

The paper first situates return-related recovery within Syria's current humanitarian, protection, and mobility landscape. It then draws comparative lessons from other post-conflict and return contexts, examines the role of Syrian-led and refugee-led actors, and proposes a policy framework, practical options, short-term project packages, and actor-specific safeguards.

The central message is clear. Syria needs recovery, but recovery must not become a quiet instrument of return pressure. International actors, Syrian authorities, UN agencies, INGOs, donors, and Syrian civil society should support recovery in ways that restore conditions for dignified life while protecting displaced Syrians' right to decide when, whether, and how to return.



THE CURRENT SYRIAN RECOVERY AND RETURN CONTEXT

1. POLITICAL OPENING, HUMANITARIAN STRAIN

The political opening created by the fall of the Assad regime has not translated into a stable recovery environment. Syria remains marked by extensive humanitarian need, damaged infrastructure, weak services, limited livelihoods, and uneven local capacity to absorb returnees.

The scale of need captures the gap between political transition and material recovery. In 2026, [15.6 million](#) people are assessed to require humanitarian assistance, while the response plan targets [8.6 million](#) and prioritizes [4.3 million](#) because of funding and operational constraints. The response requires [US\\$2.9 billion](#), with [US\\$1.5 billion](#) identified as prioritized requirements. Although the number of people in need declined from [16.5 million in 2025 to 15.6 million in 2026](#), this reduction reflects not only nominal improvements, but also stricter scope-setting and improved planning data. It should therefore not be read as evidence that households have regained reliable access to income, housing, public services, safety, or legal protection.

This is the context in which return-related recovery must be situated. Humanitarian actors are expected to sustain life-saving assistance while also supporting a gradual transition toward recovery where conditions allow. [The 2026 response framework](#) calls for principled humanitarian action alongside structured engagement with stabilization, development, and relevant government counterparts. It also identifies returnees, vulnerable host communities, residents affected by more than 14 years of crisis, and people still living in camps, IDP sites, and host communities as priority groups. The policy challenge is therefore not whether recovery should proceed, but how it should be governed so that it expands Syrians’ choices rather than validating premature assumptions that return is already broadly safe, sustainable, or appropriate for all displaced Syrians.

The Scale of Humanitarian Need in Syria:



2. RETURN AND CONTINUED DISPLACEMENT

Return movements have accelerated since December 2024, but they are unfolding alongside continued displacement and fragile absorption capacity. By March 2026, more than [1.56 million refugees](#) had returned from countries of asylum, while [1.87 million internally displaced persons](#) had returned inside Syria since December 2024. At the same time, [5.54 million](#) people remained internally displaced. These figures point to the defining contradiction of the current moment: returns are increasing, but displacement has not been resolved. Syria is simultaneously receiving refugee returnees, IDP returnees, and large numbers of people who remain displaced, often in areas where services, housing, markets, and local institutions remain under severe strain.

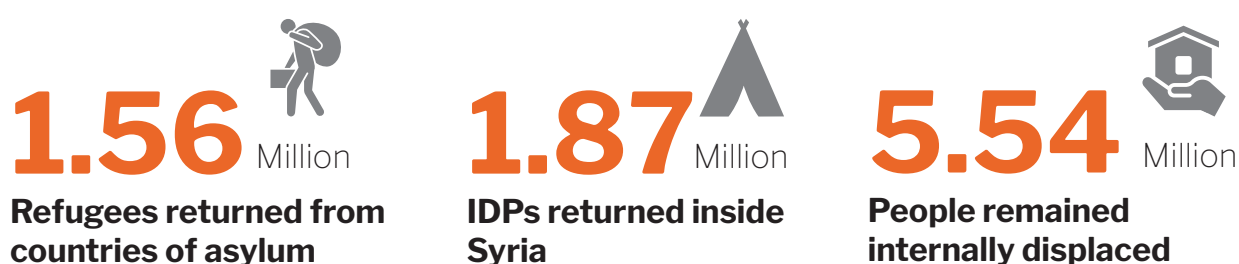
Humanitarian operations reflect this overlap. By late 2025, partners were reaching an average of [3.46 million people](#) per month across education, food security, health, nutrition, protection, shelter, WASH, and cash programming. Yet the same reporting recorded [5.5 million IDPs and 1.5 million IDP returnees](#), indicating that return and displacement are not sequential phases but concurrent realities. Return figures therefore require careful interpretation. They may reflect genuine willingness to return, but they may also reflect limited alternatives, pressure in host countries, family reunification, temporary movement, property checking, or efforts to preserve access to homes, land, and local networks.

Recent movements across the Syria-Lebanon border illustrate this fluidity. As of 11 May 2026, monitoring at four official points of entry along the Syria-Lebanon border recorded [312,996 movements](#), with [96 percent](#) involving Syrian nationals. Between 2 March and 11 May 2026, [115,850 individuals](#) were recorded across 1,229 arrival locations in all 14 Syrian governorates. Yet approximately [38,000 individuals](#) had returned to Lebanon, reportedly linked in part to limited livelihood opportunities in Syria and relative stabilization in Lebanon. Return, in this context, is not always final, linear, or durable. It may be staged, exploratory, circular, or divided across household members. Return-related recovery policy must therefore reflect multiple mobility strategies rather than assume a single pathway from displacement to permanent reintegration.

The same caution appears in international policy discussions. In June

2025, a Security Council briefing noted that almost [600,000 Syrians](#) were estimated to have crossed back into Syria in the previous six months, mostly from neighbouring countries, while emphasizing that the sustainability of these returns would depend on housing, public services, and economic revitalization. This framing remains relevant in 2026: return is politically significant, but its durability depends on conditions that are still uneven, underfunded, and locally variable.

Return Has Increased, but Displacement Has Not Ended:



3. CONSTRAINED RETURN DECISIONS

The acceleration of returns cannot be explained solely by improved conditions inside Syria. Fifteen months after Assad's fall, more than [1.4 million Syrian refugees](#) had returned, nearly triple the number recorded during the previous nine years. Yet this increase reflects deteriorating conditions in host countries as much as improvements in Syria. Economic strain, shrinking international aid, and rising political pressure in Lebanon, Türkiye, and Jordan have made continued exile increasingly difficult. This distinction matters because voluntariness cannot be measured only by the absence of formal deportation. It also depends on whether refugees are deciding under conditions of material deprivation, legal insecurity, social hostility, or fear of future removal.

Host-country pressures are increasingly visible. In Lebanon, over [90 percent](#) of Syrian refugees live in extreme poverty, while political pressure for returns has intensified. In Türkiye, more than [2.8 million Syrians](#) live under temporary protection, a status that limits access to citizenship and formal employment, while [90 percent](#) of Syrian refugees

reportedly cannot fully cover basic monthly expenses. In Europe, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, and Austria suspended asylum processing for Syrians shortly after Assad's fall, and several European states have since initiated reviews of Syrian protection status. These pressures do not make every return coerced. They do, however, show that the boundary between voluntary return and pressured return can become blurred when assistance contracts, legal security weakens, and host-country politics shift toward repatriation.

The political salience of return is particularly clear in Europe. Germany hosts approximately [900,000 to 1 million Syrian nationals](#), and recent German-Syrian discussions placed return at the centre of European debates on Syria's transition. Several European countries suspended the processing of Syrian asylum applications after December 2024, affecting tens of thousands of pending cases. The risk is that recovery programming becomes politically instrumentalized: improvements in services, infrastructure, or local stability may be used by host states as evidence that Syria is broadly safe, even where conditions remain highly uneven. A refugee-led policy approach must therefore distinguish between recovery that expands Syrians' choices and recovery that becomes a mechanism for narrowing those choices. Donors and host states should not use localized recovery gains inside Syria as justification for reducing asylum safeguards, legal status, assistance, or protection abroad.

4. CONDITIONS FOR REINTEGRATION

Inside Syria, [the scale and distribution of needs](#) show why return cannot be separated from protection, services, livelihoods, and local absorption capacity. In 14.7 ,2026 million people are assessed to need protection assistance, 13.3 million need food security and agricultural-livelihood support, 12.8 million need health assistance, and 12 million need WASH support. Shelter and basic items remain major concerns, with 6.2 million people in need of shelter assistance and 6.3 million in need of non-food item support. These figures correspond directly to the practical conditions that determine whether return can become sustainable: housing, water, electricity, health care, education, income, documentation, and protection.

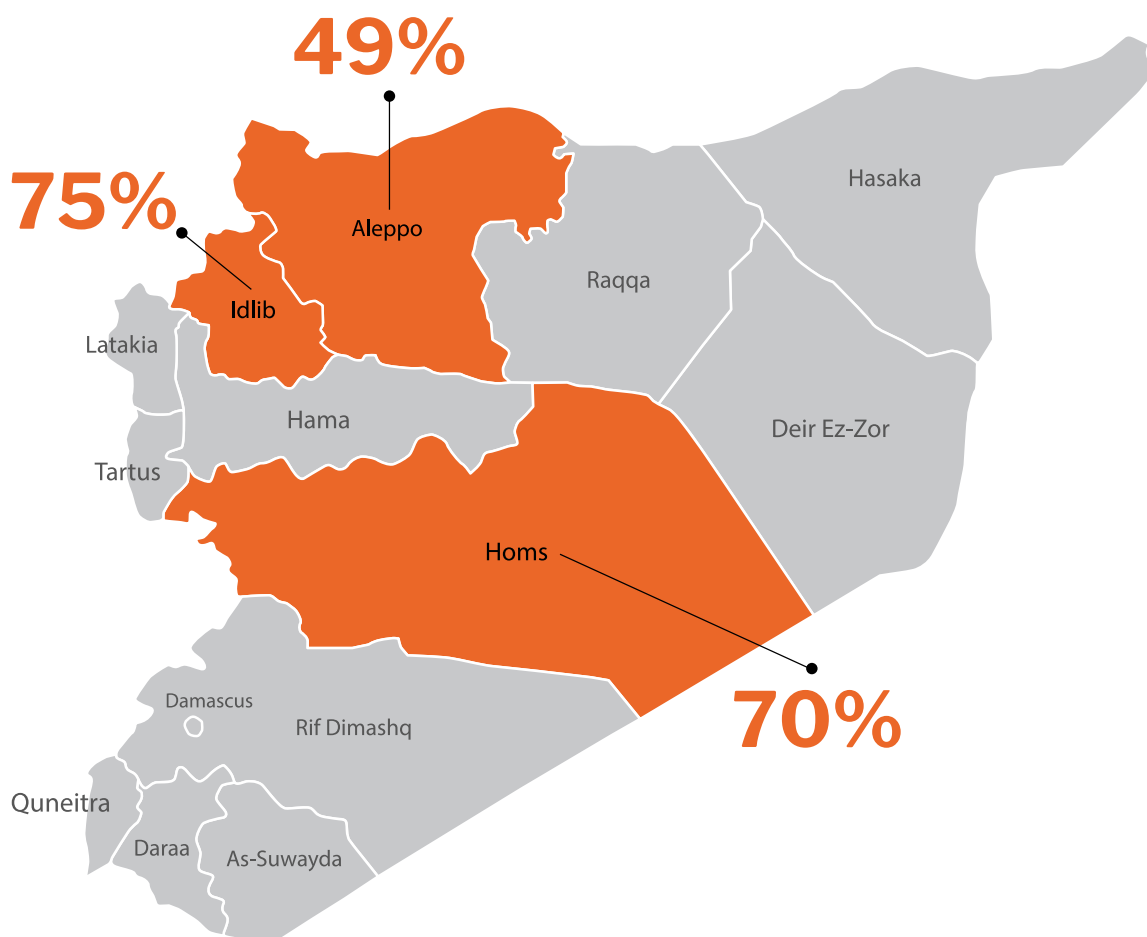
Returnee-level evidence reinforces this point. Among [surveyed returnees](#), the most commonly reported challenge after return was securing income or livelihoods, cited by 64 percent of respondents. This was followed by access to utilities such as electricity or heating, reported by 44 percent, debt by 38 percent, access to humanitarian assistance by 38 percent, and finding housing by 38 percent. Livelihood-related difficulties were reported by 67 percent of returnees from abroad and 60 percent of IDP returnees. These challenges also vary significantly by location: securing income or livelihoods was cited by 70 percent of respondents in Homs and 75 percent in Idleb, compared with 49 percent in Aleppo. Return-related recovery should therefore be area-based rather than generic, with programming tailored to local damage, market conditions, service availability, protection risks, and the capacity of communities to absorb returnees.

Food insecurity further limits the sustainability of return. [Syria was elevated to a hunger hotspot of “very high concern” for the November 2025 to May 2026 outlook](#), indicating that acute food insecurity was expected to deteriorate significantly during the period. Key drivers and aggravating factors include conflict and insecurity, displacement, dry conditions, economic shocks, and climate-related pressures. These pressures affect returnees and communities of return alike. A household may be physically able to return while remaining unable to meet food needs, rebuild assets, secure income, or access reliable water and services. Without sustained attention to livelihoods and basic services, return risks becoming physical relocation without durable reintegration.

The Main Challenges Facing Returnees:



Livelihood challenges vary significantly by location:



5. PROTECTION AND SAFETY RISKS

Protection risks remain a defining constraint on safe and dignified return. Explosive ordnance contamination is especially significant because it affects housing, agriculture, mobility, service restoration, and local livelihoods. In December 2025 alone, [43 explosive ordnance accidents](#) were recorded, causing 20 deaths, including 10 children, and 54 injuries, including 14 children. Around 65 percent of explosive ordnance incidents took place on agricultural land and grazing areas, making ordinary livelihood activity dangerous. This links mine action directly to return and recovery. Communities cannot safely repair homes, cultivate land, reopen schools, restore local markets, or rebuild infrastructure where explosive contamination remains widespread.

The wider scale of contamination is substantial. An estimated [1 million munitions](#) were used in Syria over nearly 14 years of war, with a failure rate of 10 to 30 percent, leaving potentially 100,000 to 300,000 explosive items across roads, bridges, hospitals, schools, residential areas, agricultural land, irrigation systems, and aquifers. An estimated [15.4 million Syrians](#), around two thirds of the population, are at risk of death or injury from explosive ordnance. In December 2024, 116 children were killed or injured by unexploded ordnance, an average of nearly four per day. These risks cannot be treated as a specialized technical concern outside return programming. They are central to whether communities can return, whether livelihoods can resume, and whether early recovery can proceed without exposing civilians to further harm. An emerging practice in Syria also points to a more integrated approach to recovery and mine action. In consultations with a broad group of NGOs, local organizations, and refugee-led actors, the Ministry of Emergency and Disaster Management and Relief encouraged organizations applying for recovery programming to dedicate a portion of their proposed budgets, reportedly around 10 percent, to mine action-related safeguards in the areas where they intend to operate. This approach is significant because it treats mine action not as a separate technical sector, but as a precondition for safe recovery.

Such a model could help ensure that recovery projects include explosive ordnance risk screening, survey, marking, risk education, referral to accredited clearance actors, and coordination with national mine action authorities from the design stage. This is especially important for projects involving housing rehabilitation, agriculture, schools,

roads, WASH infrastructure, debris removal, and public facilities. Not all recovery actors can or should conduct clearance directly, which requires specialized accreditation and technical capacity. However, all recovery actors operating in contaminated or potentially contaminated areas should be required to assess explosive ordnance risks, budget for appropriate safeguards, and coordinate with qualified mine action partners.

Explosive Ordnance Remains a Major Barrier to Safe Return



43

Explosive ordnance accidents
in December 2025

65%

of incidents occurred on
agricultural/grazing land

10

Children among
those killed

14

Children among
those injured

15.4

Million

Syrians at risk of
death or injury

20

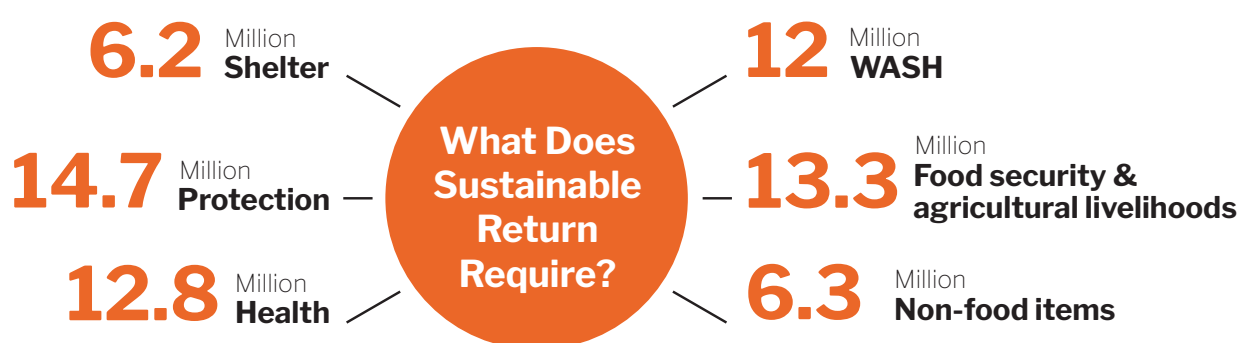
Deaths

54

Injuries

Potentially 100,000–300,000 explosive items remaining

Protection concerns also extend to gender-based violence, child protection, legal status, and civil documentation. In 2025, [1,727 protection](#) cases were reported among Palestine refugees in Syria, including 834 GBV cases, 466 general protection cases, and 427 child protection cases. Females represented 82 percent of reported protection cases, with 1,414 female and 313 male cases. Legal status and civil documentation barriers increased by [300 percent](#), affecting children, women, and returnees. These barriers directly affect access to services, birth registration, school enrolment, property claims, assistance, and legal protection. Safe return is therefore not only a question of physical security. It also depends on documentation systems, legal assistance, referral pathways, and institutions capable of resolving disputes fairly and accessibly.



6. RECOVERY GOVERNANCE

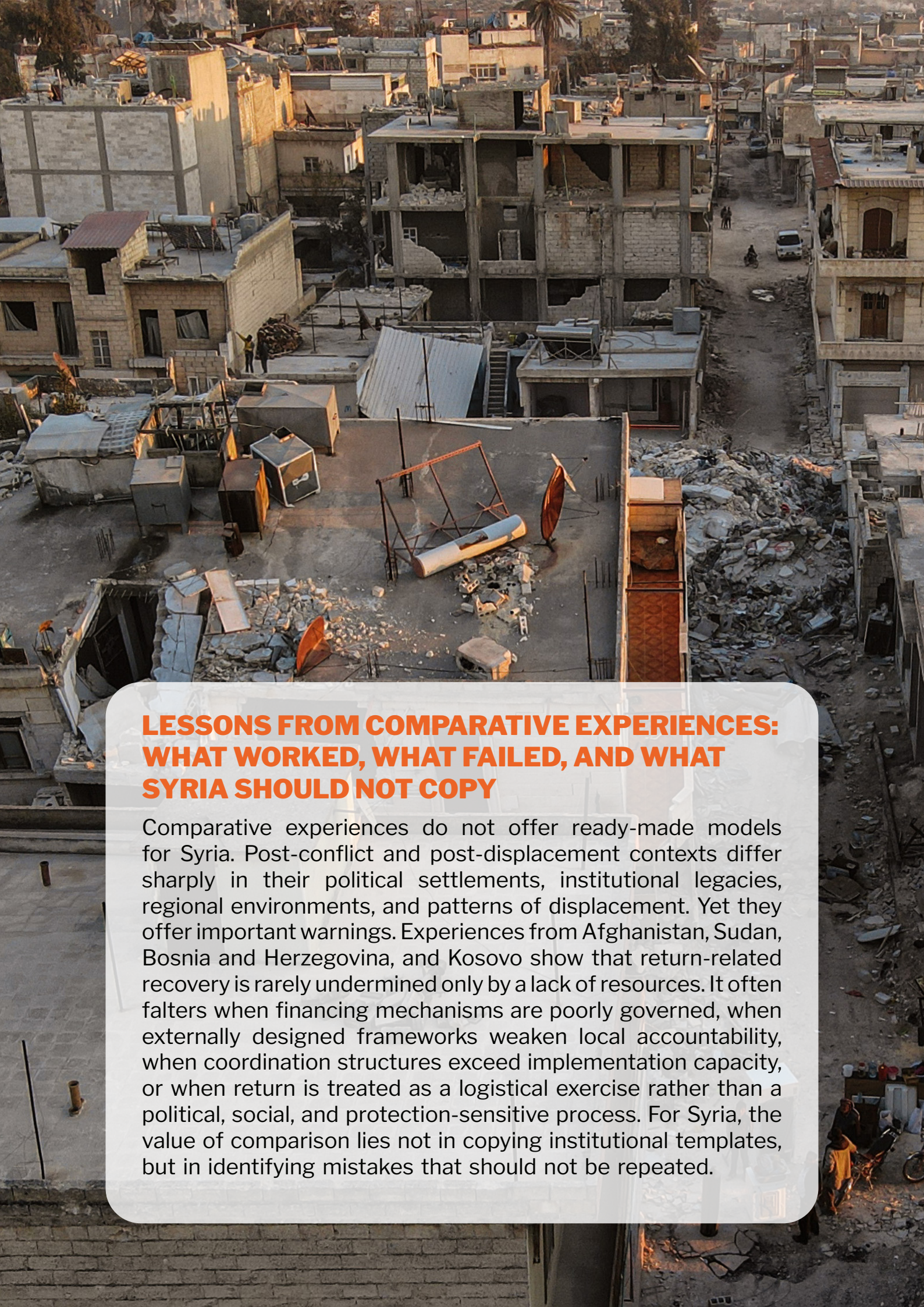
Syria's recovery architecture is beginning to take clearer institutional form. The March 2026 national recovery priorities document defines itself as the reference framework for organizing international support during the recovery phase. It identifies four priorities: restoring critical infrastructure, resuming basic services, building socio-economic resilience, and strengthening central systems and public administration. It calls on international partners to align country strategies, work plans, funding proposals, and implementation with national priorities and approved frameworks. It also refers to preparing conditions for voluntary, safe, and dignified return within national legal frameworks.

This framework creates an opening for more coherent recovery planning, but it also raises significant governance questions. Alignment with national priorities can reduce fragmentation and improve coordination, particularly after years of divided aid architecture. However, return-related recovery must preserve humanitarian principles, independent protection standards, accountability to affected people, and meaningful refugee participation. The 2026 humanitarian framework commits partners to principled engagement with national and local authorities while maintaining humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. The financing architecture is also changing in 2026.

[The Syria Humanitarian Fund](#) is expected to serve as the primary pooled fund supporting the humanitarian response, alongside CERF, while supporting area-based responses, early recovery, localization, women's leadership, and principled assistance. This shift matters because return-related recovery will require flexible and accountable mechanisms that support Syrian and refugee-led actors as strategic partners, not simply as downstream implementers.

The central policy question is therefore not whether recovery should be supported. It should. The question is how recovery is governed. If recovery programming improves services, livelihoods, documentation, housing, protection, and access to reliable information, it can expand Syrians' real choices around return, stay, onward mobility, or delayed return. If it is used by host states or donors as evidence that Syria is broadly safe, it can narrow those choices and contribute to premature return pressure. A refugee-led and locally grounded approach should therefore treat return-related recovery as a protection-sensitive governance field. Its purpose should be to enable safe, voluntary, informed, and dignified choices, not to produce return as a policy outcome.

Recovery governance will also depend on whether Syrian civil society has the legal, administrative, financial, and security space to operate. Registration barriers, approval delays, banking restrictions, unclear funding rules, and political exposure can undermine local organizations' ability to support recovery, even when they have the trust, access, and capacity to do so. Supporting recovery therefore requires not only funding projects, but protecting the civic and operational space of Syrian-led, refugee-led, women-led, and locally embedded actors.

An aerial photograph of a city, likely in Syria, showing extensive damage to buildings and infrastructure. In the foreground, a large pile of rubble and debris is visible on the right side of a street. To the left, a building's roof is cluttered with various items, including a large satellite dish, a metal frame, and other debris. The background shows a dense urban area with many multi-story buildings, some of which appear to be partially destroyed or under construction. The overall scene conveys a sense of devastation and the aftermath of conflict.

LESSONS FROM COMPARATIVE EXPERIENCES: WHAT WORKED, WHAT FAILED, AND WHAT SYRIA SHOULD NOT COPY

Comparative experiences do not offer ready-made models for Syria. Post-conflict and post-displacement contexts differ sharply in their political settlements, institutional legacies, regional environments, and patterns of displacement. Yet they offer important warnings. Experiences from Afghanistan, Sudan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo show that return-related recovery is rarely undermined only by a lack of resources. It often falters when financing mechanisms are poorly governed, when externally designed frameworks weaken local accountability, when coordination structures exceed implementation capacity, or when return is treated as a logistical exercise rather than a political, social, and protection-sensitive process. For Syria, the value of comparison lies not in copying institutional templates, but in identifying mistakes that should not be repeated.

1. FINANCING AND GOVERNANCE

In politically sensitive recovery contexts, donors have often relied on indirect financing arrangements, pooled funds, trust funds, humanitarian carve-outs, and third-party implementation to support assistance without fully normalizing relations with contested or fragile authorities. Such mechanisms can create practical space for service delivery and early recovery while reducing some of the risks associated with direct budgetary support. In sanctioned or politically constrained settings, humanitarian exemptions have also allowed funds, goods, and services to move through authorized channels, provided that due diligence and risk-management measures are maintained ([UNSC 2021](#)).

The comparative lesson, however, is that financing instruments are not neutral technical devices. Their effectiveness depends on security conditions, administrative capacity, political incentives, and the quality of oversight. In Sudan, the post-CPA experience showed how ambitious implementation benchmarks can exceed institutional capacity, while donor fragmentation and delays in visible benefits can weaken public confidence in the recovery process ([ICG 2006](#)). In Afghanistan, humanitarian carve-outs created legal and operational space for assistance under sanctions, but they also underscored the need for risk mitigation, monitoring, and safeguards against diversion (UNSC 2021). These cases suggest that financing mechanisms may help manage political sensitivity, but they cannot compensate for weak governance, poor coordination, or limited accountability.

For Syria, this means that any future financing arrangement should not be judged only by whether it mobilizes funds. The more important question is whether it protects affected communities, supports credible implementation, and prevents recovery resources from being captured, politicized, or disconnected from local needs. A pooled fund, trust fund, or escrow-style mechanism can be useful only if it is tied to transparent project selection, independent monitoring, clear accountability channels, and meaningful participation by the communities it is meant to serve. Otherwise, it risks becoming another layer of bureaucracy unless it is tied to clear accountability, credible implementation pathways, and meaningful participation.

2. EXTERNAL DESIGN AND LOCAL LEGITIMACY

Bosnia and Herzegovina remains one of the clearest warnings against confusing externally managed stabilization with durable political recovery. The Dayton framework helped stop the war, but its post-war governance arrangements produced a complex institutional order in which external supervision expanded over time. Critics of post-Dayton state-building argue that the Office of the High Representative and related international powers reduced domestic institutions to administrative shells, weakening the relationship between formal governance and domestic accountability ([Chandler 2006](#)). Other analyses similarly show how external administration and market-reform templates often failed to address Bosnia's specific post-war political economy ([Donais 2005](#)). The result was not simply slow reform, but a governance environment in which international authority could displace local responsibility.

The lesson is not that international support should be avoided. In fragile transitions, external support may be necessary to provide resources, coordination, guarantees, and technical capacity. The problem emerges when external design substitutes for political ownership, or when institutions are built to look coherent while remaining weak in practice. Knaus and Martin's critique of Bosnia's "European Raj" is relevant here: extraordinary international powers may appear efficient in the short term, but they can undermine accountable politics when emergency governance becomes routine ([Knaus and Martin 2003](#)). For Syria, this is a caution against recovery arrangements that create formal coordination without meaningful local legitimacy. Syrian civil society, refugee-led organizations, women-led groups, municipalities, and affected communities should not be consulted only after priorities have already been defined.

Kosovo adds a related warning. Unresolved status questions and fragmented international security governance contributed to instability and uncertainty, while the 2004 crisis revealed weaknesses in coordination between international actors and constrained investment and institution-building ([ICG 2004](#)). Later debates around supervised independence and recognition further illustrated how externally managed settlements may remain politically fragile even when they are legally and diplomatically sophisticated ([Peritt 2010](#); [Oeter 2015](#)). For Syria, the point is not that Kosovo offers a direct analogy. It does not.

The lesson is that recovery frameworks can become fragile when they depend heavily on external design while leaving underlying questions of legitimacy, participation, and accountability unresolved.

These cases matter because Syria's recovery will unfold in a fragmented social and territorial landscape. The risk is not only that assistance may be insufficient, but that it may consolidate local inequalities, empower narrow intermediaries, or reinforce conflict-era divisions. Area-based support, local governance, and community participation can contribute to recovery, but only if they are designed with safeguards against exclusion, elite capture, and the reproduction of wartime power structures. Comparative experience therefore warns against treating "local" as automatically inclusive or legitimate. Local implementation can bring assistance closer to communities, but it can also reproduce local hierarchies unless accountability mechanisms, transparent beneficiary selection, and meaningful participation are built into programming from the start.

3. RETURN BEYOND LOGISTICS

Across comparative cases, one final lesson is especially relevant for Syria: return is never only a matter of transport, housing, and service delivery. It is also a question of security, property, documentation, livelihoods, social trust, justice, gendered protection risks, and relations between returnees and communities that remained or were displaced differently. When recovery programming treats return as a technical sequence, it risks overlooking the power relations that determine whether people can actually rebuild their lives. In Bosnia, the formal right to return existed within a deeply fragmented political order. In Sudan, the promise of peace dividends was weakened by implementation delays, unresolved flashpoints, and weak institutional capacity (ICG 2006). In Kosovo, uncertainty around status and weak coordination affected both security and investment (ICG 2004).

For Syria, return-related recovery should not be measured only by the number of people who cross borders or leave displacement sites. It must be assessed by whether returnees can access documentation, reclaim or secure housing, find livelihoods, use services, move safely, participate in local decision-making, and avoid renewed displacement. Comparative experience reinforces the central argument of this paper: recovery can support return only if it protects choice. It should create conditions under which Syrians can make voluntary, informed, safe, and dignified decisions, including the decision to delay return, move temporarily, split household strategies, or remain in host countries for the time being.

These comparative experiences do not provide a model for Syria to copy. They clarify the risks that any Syrian return-related recovery approach must avoid, financing without accountability, coordination without legitimacy, reconstruction without protection, localization without safeguards, and return programming without meaningful participation from those most affected. The next section therefore turns from comparative experience to Syria's own organizational ecosystem, examining the Syrian-led, refugee-led, and diaspora-linked actors already working across relief, protection, livelihoods, local recovery, and social cohesion.



SYRIAN ORGANIZATIONAL ECOSYSTEM: WHAT LOCAL AND REFUGEE-LED ACTORS ARE ALREADY DOING

Syria's return-related recovery is unfolding within an already active, though uneven, organizational ecosystem. Over more than a decade of conflict, displacement, fragmented governance, and humanitarian adaptation, Syrian-led, refugee-led, women-led, community-based, and diaspora-linked actors have developed practical capacities across relief, protection, health, education, shelter, livelihoods, social cohesion, advocacy, and local needs assessment. A recent civil society baseline [study](#) covering all 14 Syrian governorates confirms that Syrian CSOs remain active across a wide range of sectors and communities, despite fragmentation, donor-driven competition, and fragile long-term sustainability systems.

These organizations do not only deliver services. They often understand which schools have reopened, which roads are unsafe, which families are returning temporarily, which women face documentation barriers, which communities are receiving returnees, and which areas people are leaving again after attempted return. This kind of knowledge is essential for recovery planning because it captures risks and realities that may not appear in national plans, donor dashboards, or sector-level reporting.

1. EXISTING CAPACITIES

Syrian organizations are already adapting to the shift from emergency response toward early recovery. In areas of return, this shift is visible in programming that moves beyond relief distribution toward restoring the basic local functionality needed for people to remain.¹

At the local level, recovery means more than repairing individual homes. Return becomes more viable when housing is connected to schools, health centres, access roads, lighting, water, sanitation, and minimum service continuity. In several areas, families are already returning to damaged homes, partially repaired rooms, or temporary shelters before these conditions are in place. Rising return figures should therefore not be read as evidence of adequate recovery. They may also reflect limited alternatives in displacement.

Health-sector evidence points to the same conclusion. Return readiness cannot be assessed through population movement alone. Health needs also vary sharply by geography and level of care. Smaller communities require functioning primary health care at minimum, while larger towns and cities need hospitals, specialized services, diagnostic capacity, essential medicines, and qualified staff. Heavily affected areas, including parts of the northeast, Deir-ez-Zor, Ar-Raqqa, Al-Hasakeh, Rural Damascus, and other damaged localities, continue to face major gaps in infrastructure, equipment, medicines, and specialized personnel.²

Health services can support reintegration, but they cannot alone establish that an area is safe or functional. They must be assessed alongside security, education, municipal services, water, sanitation, electricity, justice, documentation, and livelihoods. In some cases, weak services contribute to renewed movement, as households go back to their areas and then leave again when daily life proves unsustainable. Recovery should therefore be measured by people's ability to remain safely and rebuild their lives, not only by physical movement.³

2. AREAS OF PRACTICE

The work of Syrian, refugee-led, women-led, and locally embedded actors spans the sectors that determine whether return can move beyond physical relocation. Shelter, education, health, protection, livelihoods, psychosocial support, referral systems, and community dialogue form the practical infrastructure of reintegration. When these systems remain weak, return can become another stage of instability.

The scale of health and protection needs underscores the centrality of these sectors. [UNFPA reported](#) that between mid-February and the end of April 2026, renewed hostilities, floods, and arrivals from Lebanon increased sexual and reproductive health and protection needs among returnees, refugees, and host communities. It estimated that 1.2 million people required urgent assistance, including more than 300,000 women of reproductive age and around 18,000 pregnant women. In April, UNFPA and its partners reached more than 33,000 people with sexual and reproductive health services and nearly 37,000 people with GBV prevention and response services, relying on mobile teams, static facilities, women and girls' safe spaces, and referral pathways. These services are part of the recovery environment, shaping whether households can return and remain without heightened exposure to harm.

Protection risks cut across almost every dimension of return. Field evidence points to a layered risk environment involving explosive ordnance, weak documentation, housing and property disputes, GBV, child protection concerns, food insecurity, unemployment, social stigma, and the loss of social networks.⁴ Economic pressure can push households toward harmful coping strategies, including child labour, early marriage, debt accumulation, and depletion of savings. These risks interact at the household, community, and market levels rather than appearing as separate sectoral problems. A household may return physically while remaining exposed to economic, legal, social, and safety risks that undermine durable reintegration.

Return-related risks also vary significantly by area and household profile. Areas with higher return numbers, heavier destruction, weaker services, or higher levels of contamination by unexploded ordnance face different protection concerns from areas with stronger absorption capacity.⁵ Vulnerability is also shaped by gender, age, disability,

documentation status, housing stability, and the conditions under which people left host countries. Heightened risks are especially visible among women-headed households, children, older people, persons with disabilities, undocumented individuals, families without stable housing, and returnees from highly precarious host-country contexts such as Lebanon.⁶ Programming that treats returnees as a single category may look administratively coherent while missing the actual distribution of harm.

Women-led and feminist organizations bring a layer of knowledge often absent from technical recovery frameworks. Their work across protection, GBV response, psychosocial support, referrals, justice and accountability, survivor support, digital violence, and small livelihood projects is central to understanding how return affects women differently. For many women, return is shaped by social violence, stigma, family pressure, housing dependency, access to education for children, and renewed forms of control over mobility, work, dress, and social acceptability.⁷ This aligns with recent [research](#) on female-headed Syrian refugee households in Lebanon, which shows that women's return decisions are shaped by caregiving responsibilities, gendered insecurity, legal precarity, economic exclusion, and perceptions of safety after the fall of the Assad regime. Gender-responsive recovery must therefore account for women's bargaining power, housing arrangements, livelihoods, caregiving burdens, social norms, and exposure to violence.

3. COORDINATION AND VOICE

The organizational ecosystem is also being reconfigured institutionally. In September 2025, several NGO coordination platforms, including the Northwest Syria NGO Forum, Northeast Syria NGO Forum, Damascus-based INGOs, the Partnership Coordination Group, and the Syria Regional INGO Forum, merged into the Syria NGO Forum, creating a more unified national coordination and representation platform ([ACAPS 2026](#); [Enab Baladi 2025](#)). The Syria NGO Forum can provide an important coordination structure, especially for shared analysis, advocacy, access negotiation, and engagement with national and international actors. However, no single forum should become the only gateway for defining local legitimacy, setting recovery priorities, or routing funding.

Large coordination platforms can reduce fragmentation, but they do not automatically guarantee meaningful participation, local legitimacy, or implementation capacity. Their value depends on whether they support transparent priority-setting, inclusive representation, direct engagement with local actors, and accountability to affected communities. Return-related recovery will require plural structures: national coordination through the Forum, direct funding windows for Syrian-led and refugee-led organizations, area-based coalitions, women-led networks, and independent monitoring systems.

ACAPS' assessment of Syria's data and analysis ecosystem shows that improved humanitarian access after the fall of the Assad regime has not produced a coherent knowledge environment. Data collection, analysis, and coordination remain fragmented, project-driven, and shaped by funding cycles and institutional incentives. The same report finds that Syrian-led organizations continue to face barriers to meaningful participation in coordination and decision-making structures. These barriers are linked less to technical capacity gaps than to governance arrangements, informal power dynamics, and representation norms that limit the use of locally generated knowledge. For return-related recovery, this limits the ability of planning systems to identify where return is viable, where it remains premature, and where it may expose households to new risks.

Field evidence reinforces this point. Syrian and women-led organizations often encounter funding models that arrive with priorities already defined, leaving limited room to shape the design, purpose, or

assumptions of interventions. This is especially problematic in return-related recovery, where needs are area-specific and risks are socially embedded. The issue is not only whether Syrian organizations receive funding, but whether they participate early enough to influence how problems are defined.

The EU Roadmap baseline reaches a similar conclusion from a broader civil society perspective. It identifies organizational sustainability, participatory governance, and community resilience as core priorities for Syrian civil society in the transitional period. It also notes that CSOs are often confined to service delivery roles, with limited opportunities to influence policy or represent community priorities in decision-making spaces. This supports one of the central arguments of this paper. Syrian, refugee-led, and women-led actors should be involved in defining readiness for return, designing interventions, monitoring risks, and interpreting return trends.

4. FROM IMPLEMENTATION TO GOVERNANCE

These capacities operate within constrained legal, financial, and administrative conditions. Syrian organizations continue to face registration procedures, approval requirements, short-term funding, donor-driven priorities, and limited institutional support.⁸ Health actors face sector-specific constraints linked to large needs, damaged infrastructure, shortages in specialized medical staff, and long approval chains involving public authorities.⁹ Women-led organizations operate within an especially narrow and fragile funding environment, despite their central role in addressing GBV, psychosocial support, documentation, livelihoods, survivor support, and gendered return risks. Protection systems are similarly vulnerable where referral pathways depend heavily on local organizations without sufficient formal or financial support.

These constraints are structural rather than incidental. The EU Roadmap baseline finds that Syrian CSO sustainability is weakened by fragmentation, donor-driven competition, and fragile long-term funding systems. It also shows that sustainability and partnership lag behind other organizational capacity areas, suggesting that operational capacity is not matched by durable institutional support. Field evidence points in the same direction: funding assumptions, approval chains, weak referral systems, and unequal access to decision-making shape what Syrian organizations can do, how quickly they can respond, and whether they can influence recovery beyond implementation.¹⁰

The issue is therefore not only whether Syrian-led, refugee-led, women-led, and locally embedded actors can implement recovery projects. They already do. The deeper question is whether they can influence funding priorities, risk analysis, project design, monitoring, and recovery governance. Treating local actors as implementers may improve delivery, but it does not necessarily improve policy. Treating them as partners changes the questions recovery programming asks, who defines readiness for return, whose evidence counts, how risks are monitored, and whether programming expands choice or narrows it.

The Syrian organizational ecosystem should therefore be understood as a strategic asset rather than a delivery layer. Its value lies in operational reach, social knowledge, local legitimacy, community relationships, diaspora connections, and the ability to detect risks that may not appear in national-level plans or donor dashboards. Return-related

recovery should build on this ecosystem through flexible funding, equitable partnerships, shared analysis, community accountability, and meaningful participation in decision-making. Without this shift, recovery risks repeating a familiar pattern in which local actors carry the burden of implementation while others retain control over strategy, resources, and political interpretation.

Coalition models can also help bridge the gap between national coordination and local implementation. Syrian and refugee-led coalitions, including emerging models such as ASCEND, can bring together organizations working across relief, livelihoods, education, shelter, protection, early recovery, and community-based support. ASCEND brings together six Syrian refugee-led, returnee-led, and women-led organizations with a combined operational budget of approximately US\$100 million. Its relevance is not that any one coalition should become the model for all recovery, but that such structures can help coordinate area-based recovery across sectors while connecting local knowledge, community trust, diaspora capacity, and refugee leadership. These models show how local and refugee-led actors can function as governance and implementation partners when they are funded directly and protected through responsible risk-sharing.

Direct partnership with Syrian and refugee-led actors must come with risk-sharing, not risk transfer. Donors should provide core funding, overhead, staff safety support, insurance, digital security, legal and compliance assistance, flexible contingency funding, and protection from political or security retaliation. Otherwise, localization risks becoming a system in which local actors carry the danger while international actors retain control over strategy, visibility, and funding.



POLICY FRAMEWORK: GOVERNING RETURN-RELATED RECOVERY WITHOUT FORCING RETURN

Return-related recovery in Syria requires a governance framework that can support reconstruction and service restoration without turning recovery into a political signal that return is already safe, appropriate, or sustainable for all displaced Syrians. The central policy challenge is not whether recovery should be supported. It should. The challenge is how to design, finance, and monitor recovery in ways that expand people's choices rather than produce return as a policy outcome.

This framework rests on a simple distinction. Recovery programming can create the conditions that allow people to return, remain, delay return, move temporarily, or pursue divided household strategies. It should not be used to narrow those choices. In the Syrian case, this distinction is especially important because return is already taking place amid extensive humanitarian need, damaged infrastructure, weak livelihoods, protection risks, and uneven local absorption capacity. It is also taking place under growing pressure in host countries, where shrinking assistance, legal insecurity, and political debates around repatriation can make “voluntary” decisions more constrained than they appear.

1. RECOVERY AS CHOICE EXPANSION

The first principle is that recovery should expand choice rather than produce return. This means that the success of recovery programming should not be measured by the number of people who return. It should be measured by whether affected Syrians gain safer, better-informed, and more realistic options. A household that decides to delay return because it has reliable information about housing damage, missing services, or protection risks is also exercising agency. A family that returns temporarily to assess property, reconnect with relatives, or test livelihood possibilities is not necessarily moving toward permanent reintegration. A refugee who remains in a host country because return would expose her to insecurity, social violence, or loss of income should not be treated as a failure of recovery policy.

This principle responds directly to the fluidity of Syrian mobility. Cross-border movement and return monitoring show that return is not always linear or final. Some people return, others move back to host countries, and many households divide their strategies across borders, governorates, and family members. A governance framework that assumes a single path from displacement to permanent return will misread these realities. Recovery should therefore create conditions for voluntary, informed, safe, and dignified decision-making, while recognizing that different households will use those conditions differently.

This also means that recovery communication matters. Donors, host states, and Syrian authorities should avoid treating individual projects, reopened services, or localized improvements as evidence that Syria is broadly safe for return. A functioning clinic in one town, a repaired school in one village, or a cash-for-work project in one district does not establish nationwide readiness. Recovery achievements should be communicated with geographic precision, protection caveats, and clear limits. Without this discipline, recovery can easily become political evidence for premature return pressure.

2. AREA-BASED READINESS

The second principle is that return-related recovery should be area-based and protection-sensitive. Syria's needs vary sharply by governorate, district, and locality. Damage to housing, availability of water and electricity, health access, school functionality, explosive ordnance contamination, local security, documentation barriers, and livelihood opportunities differ from one area to another. A national recovery framework is necessary for coordination, but it cannot substitute for local readiness assessments.

Area-based readiness should combine basic service indicators with protection and social indicators. It should ask whether people can access primary health care, schools, water, sanitation, electricity, markets, legal documentation, housing support, and safe transport. It should also assess whether women, children, older people, persons with disabilities, undocumented individuals, and women-headed households can access these services without heightened risk. Readiness should never be reduced to infrastructure. A place may have repaired buildings while still exposing returnees to explosive ordnance, property disputes, GBV, lack of documentation, weak referral systems, or social tension.

This approach also requires attention to absorption capacity. Communities receiving returnees often face their own hardship, poverty, damaged services, and unresolved grievances. Recovery programming should therefore avoid treating returnees and host communities as separate populations with competing claims. Area-based recovery should support the shared systems that both groups rely on, including schools, health facilities, WASH networks, local markets, protection referral pathways, and community dispute-resolution mechanisms.

3. PROTECTION-SENSITIVE GOVERNANCE

The third principle is that return-related recovery must be governed as a protection-sensitive field. Protection should not be added after infrastructure, livelihoods, or service projects are already designed. It should shape how recovery priorities are defined, where projects are implemented, how beneficiaries are selected, and how risks are monitored.

Protection-sensitive governance begins with the recognition that return can generate new risks even when it appears successful on paper. Explosive ordnance can prevent agricultural livelihoods, school access, housing repair, and infrastructure rehabilitation. Documentation gaps can block access to services, assistance, school enrolment, property claims, and legal protection. Housing and property disputes can create conflict within families and communities. Economic insecurity can contribute to child labour, early marriage, debt, and other harmful coping strategies. GBV, social stigma, family pressure, and loss of support networks can affect women returnees and women-headed households in ways that are not captured by household-level return counts.

A protection-sensitive framework should therefore require safeguards across all recovery programming. These include conflict-sensitive targeting, protection risk screening, safe referral pathways, complaint mechanisms, accessible information, gender-sensitive monitoring, and clear procedures to identify whether assistance is creating unintended pressure to return. It should also include a “do no pressure” test. Before funding or scaling any return-related recovery intervention, donors and implementing agencies should ask whether the project could be interpreted or used as evidence that return is safe for people who have not chosen it. They should also assess whether the project creates incentives for return without adequate housing, services, livelihoods, or protection.

4. MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

The fourth principle is meaningful participation by locally embedded actors. The previous section showed that these actors already understand many of the practical conditions that determine whether return can become sustainable. They identify where services are failing, where risks are rising, where returnees are leaving again, and where donor priorities do not match local needs. Yet published evidence and field interviews suggest that Syrian CSOs are still too often confined to implementation roles, with limited influence over problem definition, programme design, funding priorities, or analytical products.

Meaningful participation requires earlier and deeper involvement. Syrian and refugee-led actors should help define area-based readiness criteria, identify protection risks, interpret return trends, design project packages, and monitor unintended pressure. Women-led organizations should participate in all stages of recovery planning, particularly where programmes affect housing, livelihoods, documentation, education, GBV response, psychosocial support, and women-headed households. Participation should also be funded. It cannot rely on unpaid consultation, rushed validation workshops, or symbolic representation in coordination meetings.

5. ACCOUNTABILITY AGAINST RETURN PRESSURE

The fifth principle is accountability against direct and indirect return pressure. Recovery can unintentionally become a tool of pressure when host states, donors, or authorities use localized improvements to justify reducing protection, assistance, or legal security for refugees abroad. It can also create pressure inside Syria if aid is tied to return status in ways that encourage households to move before conditions are adequate. These risks do not require explicit coercion. They can emerge through funding incentives, public messaging, eligibility rules, reduced assistance in host countries, or assumptions that return should be the preferred outcome.

Accountability mechanisms should therefore track whether recovery programming is expanding or narrowing choices. Monitoring should ask whether refugees and IDPs have access to accurate information, whether assistance is available to returnees and non-returnees without discriminatory conditions, whether host-country policies are changing in response to recovery narratives, and whether returnees are able to remain without renewed displacement. It should also track reverse movement, temporary return, split households, and returnees' access to livelihoods, documentation, housing, services, and protection. This kind of accountability requires shared data and independent analysis. Return-related recovery governance should therefore support common indicators, transparent data-sharing protocols, community feedback systems, and independent monitoring by Syrian-led, refugee-led, and protection actors. The purpose is to ensure that recovery is assessed by its effects on people's choices and safety, not by the number of completed activities.

Under this framework, recovery becomes a means of restoring conditions for dignified life rather than a mechanism for engineering return. It supports infrastructure, services, livelihoods, documentation, protection, and local institutions, while refusing to treat return as the only desirable outcome. This is the policy balance Syria requires. Recovery should proceed urgently, but it must be governed carefully enough to protect the voluntariness, safety, dignity, and agency of displaced Syrians.

Accountability should therefore include indicators that measure whether recovery expands choice. These may include access to reliable area-of-origin information, civil documentation, HLP support, functioning schools, health care, WASH, electricity, roads, markets, explosive ordnance risk screening, livelihood opportunities, GBV and child protection referral pathways, disability access, psychosocial support, community feedback mechanisms, and evidence of reverse movement, temporary return, or split-household strategies. These indicators provide a better measure of recovery than return numbers alone.



POLICY OPTIONS AND SHORT-TERM PROJECT PACKAGES

The policy framework outlined above requires practical instruments. The options below focus on financing, geographic targeting, livelihoods, and governance mechanisms that can support recovery without turning recovery outputs into proxy evidence of return readiness. The short-term packages then identify practical interventions that can be funded through these options. They should be treated as modular and combinable rather than as separate project silos.

POLICY OPTION 1: TRANSITIONAL RECOVERY FINANCING MECHANISM WITH SAFEGUARDS

A transitional recovery financing mechanism could provide a structured channel for supporting early recovery without relying exclusively on direct budgetary support or fragmented project-by-project funding. Such a mechanism could pool donor resources, finance priority recovery projects, and create safeguards around project selection, implementation, monitoring, and reporting. It could be administered through an international financial institution, a multilateral mechanism, or another agreed structure with strong fiduciary controls, while remaining aligned with national recovery priorities and humanitarian principles.

The purpose of this mechanism would not be to bypass Syrian institutions permanently. It would create a transitional channel capable of supporting urgent recovery needs while national systems, legal frameworks, and public administration capacities are still being rebuilt. Syria's national recovery priorities already call for alignment between international support and approved national frameworks, while also recognizing the need for organized financing channels and coordinated engagement with international partners (Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2026). A transitional mechanism can therefore be framed as a way to reduce fragmentation, improve transparency, and support recovery in line with national priorities, provided that it includes safeguards against capture, politicization, exclusion, and premature return pressure.

This mechanism should include several design features. First, project selection should be based on area-based needs, protection risks, and community priorities rather than on return numbers alone. Second, Syrian-led, refugee-led, women-led, and locally embedded organizations should be eligible for funding directly or through equitable partnerships, with simplified but responsible compliance requirements. Third, the mechanism should include independent monitoring, anti-diversion measures, public reporting, and complaint channels accessible to affected communities. Fourth, public communication should distinguish between completed recovery activities and actual readiness for safe and dignified return. A repaired school, clinic, or water network should be reported as a local recovery output, not as evidence that an area is generally safe for return.

A useful model already exists in partial form through pooled humanitarian financing. The Syria Humanitarian Fund demonstrates how pooled funding can support flexible, area-based, and locally informed assistance while maintaining accountability and risk management. A transitional recovery mechanism would differ in scope because it would support early recovery and local functionality rather than only humanitarian response. Still, the principles of transparency, flexibility, localization, risk management, and accountability remain relevant.

POLICY OPTION 2: AREA-BASED SUPPORT FOR PRIORITY RETURN COMMUNITIES FINANCING MECHANISM WITH SAFEGUARDS

Area-based support should be the main geographic approach for return-related recovery. Rather than funding isolated sectoral interventions, donors should support integrated packages in localities where returns are already occurring, where communities are receiving IDP returnees, or where basic recovery would reduce instability and renewed displacement. These interventions should focus on restoring minimum local functionality, including housing, schools, health access, WASH systems, roads, lighting, documentation pathways, and protection referrals. In areas with known or suspected explosive ordnance contamination, area-based recovery packages should include a dedicated mine action component or set-aside, covering risk screening, referral, and coordination with accredited actors. Mine action should be treated as an enabling condition for recovery, not as a parallel technical sector.

The value of an area-based approach is that it matches how return actually unfolds. Families do not return to sectors. They return to towns, villages, neighbourhoods, homes, markets, schools, clinics, and social environments. A shelter project may fail if the school remains closed. A livelihood project may fail if roads, markets, or safety conditions are absent. Health support may help but cannot compensate for documentation gaps, insecure housing, or explosive ordnance contamination. Area-based support allows donors and implementers to assess these conditions together and sequence interventions accordingly.

Area-based support should avoid treating returnees and host communities as separate populations with competing claims. In many areas, returnees, residents, IDPs, and families that never left rely on the same damaged services and local markets. Support should therefore prioritize shared public goods and community-level systems, including schools, primary health facilities, water points, local roads, and referral pathways. This reduces the risk of tension around assistance and helps stabilize communities without making assistance conditional on return.

The safeguard is that area-based recovery should never be presented as a blanket declaration of readiness. Each locality should be assessed through a limited set of service, protection, livelihood, and social indicators. These should include housing conditions, access to health and education, WASH, documentation, explosive ordnance risk, protection referral capacity, livelihood options, and risks facing women, children, persons with disabilities, older people, and undocumented households. Area-based support should be designed with local and refugee-led actors because they are often best positioned to identify whether recovery is improving people's choices or creating pressure to move.

POLICY OPTION 3: LIVELIHOODS AND SKILLS FOR RETURN, STAY, AND MOBILITY

Livelihoods programming should support people's ability to make choices rather than assume that return is the preferred or final outcome. This means designing livelihoods and skills interventions for returnees, IDPs, residents, refugees considering return, and households that may move temporarily or maintain links across borders. The aim is to reduce vulnerability, harmful coping strategies, and dependency, not to create economic incentives for premature return.

Livelihoods support should be tied to local market conditions and household constraints. Short training courses are unlikely to change outcomes if they are not connected to real demand, tools, capital, childcare, transport, safety, or market access. This is especially important for women-headed households, young people, persons with disabilities, and families with depleted savings or debt. Livelihood programming

should therefore combine skills with small grants, tools, cash-for-work, agricultural inputs, business support, cooperatives, or links to employers where feasible. Agricultural livelihood support should not proceed in areas with known or suspected explosive ordnance contamination unless mine action risk screening and referral systems are in place.

The mobility dimension is important. Some Syrians may return temporarily to assess opportunities. Others may remain in host countries while supporting recovery through remittances, remote work, professional networks, or short-term visits. Livelihoods and skills programming should therefore include diaspora and refugee skills mapping, remote mentorship, technical support to local organizations, and professional exchange mechanisms. These tools allow Syrians outside the country to contribute to recovery without making return an immediate condition of participation.

Gender must be built into this option from the start. Women's access to livelihoods is shaped by care responsibilities, safety, mobility restrictions, documentation, social norms, and exposure to violence. Programmes should therefore include childcare support, safe transport, home-based or community-based work options where appropriate, legal and psychosocial referrals, and specific support for women-headed households. Women-led organizations should be involved in designing these interventions, because they are better positioned to identify when livelihoods programming is feasible, safe, or likely to reproduce dependency.

POLICY OPTION 4: REFUGEE-LED AND LOCALLY GROUNDED GOVERNANCE MECHANISMS

Recovery governance should include structured roles for Syrian-led, refugee-led, women-led, and locally embedded actors in priority-setting, project design, monitoring, and accountability. Participation should not be limited to consultation after decisions have already been made. The evidence reviewed in this paper shows that Syrian organizations are already identifying service gaps, protection risks, funding constraints, and gendered barriers to return. The problem is that this knowledge does not always shape financing and policy decisions early enough.

A locally grounded governance mechanism could include refugee and community advisory boards, women-led consultation structures, participatory needs assessments, joint risk reviews, and community feedback systems linked to funding decisions. These mechanisms should be attached to recovery financing and area-based programming rather than kept as separate dialogue exercises. If communities and local actors can only comment on programmes after priorities are fixed, participation becomes symbolic. If they influence eligibility criteria, targeting, risk analysis, and monitoring, participation becomes a governance tool.

This option is especially important for preventing recovery from becoming indirect return pressure. Refugee-led and community-based actors can help identify when recovery narratives are being misread by host states, when assistance creates incentives for premature movement, when services remain too weak to sustain return, and when households are leaving again after attempted return. Their role should therefore include monitoring whether recovery expands or narrows people's choices.

SHORT-TERM PROJECT PACKAGES

The following project packages translate the policy options into practical interventions. They are designed for short-term funding cycles, but they should be sequenced within a longer recovery vision. Each package should include protection screening, community participation, gender-sensitive design, and safeguards against direct or indirect return pressure.

- **Package 1: Safe Return Preparedness**

Safe return preparedness should focus on information, documentation, protection risk mapping, and referral systems. This package would help refugees, IDPs, returnees, and affected residents access reliable information before making movement decisions. It should include area-specific information on housing damage, service availability, documentation procedures, school access, health services, explosive ordnance risk, livelihood conditions, and available assistance. It should also support civil documentation and legal counselling, including birth registration, marriage registration, identity documents, rental agreements, inheritance issues, and housing, land, and property claims. These services are particularly important for women-headed households, children, people with missing relatives, undocumented individuals, and families returning to damaged or contested property.

The package should include protection referral pathways for GBV, child protection, disability support, psychosocial support, legal aid, and explosive ordnance risk education. It should be available to people considering return as well as those who have already returned. This reduces the risk that people move simply to access information or assistance.

- **Package 2: Light Rehabilitation for Dignified Living**

Light rehabilitation should support the minimum physical conditions needed for dignified daily life in areas where returns are already taking place. It could include minor housing repairs, rehabilitation of schools and primary health facilities, WASH repairs, solar or basic electricity solutions, street lighting, accessibility improvements, debris removal where safe, and small repairs to roads or public spaces.

This package should focus on shared services and community-level infrastructure rather than only individual household assets. It should be selected through area-based assessments and community consultation, with attention to women's safety, disability access, school access, and protection risks. Rehabilitation should not proceed in contaminated areas without explosive ordnance risk screening and referral to mine-action actors.

The safeguard is communication. Light rehabilitation should be described as support for affected communities, not as evidence that an area is ready for large-scale return. Completed repairs should be reported with clear geographic and protection caveats.

- **Package 3: Gender-Responsive Livelihoods and Care Support**

Gender-responsive livelihoods should address the economic and care constraints that shape women's ability to return, remain, or support their households. This package should include market-linked training, small grants, business tools, home-based or community-based work options, childcare support, safe transport, psychosocial support, legal referrals, and targeted assistance for women-headed households.

The package should not treat women as a generic vulnerable group. It should distinguish between women returnees, women who remained, women-headed households, survivors of violence or detention, young women, women with disabilities, and women caring for children, older people, or injured relatives. It should also consider risks linked to social stigma, family control, mobility restrictions, and girls' education.

Women-led organizations should be eligible for flexible funding under this package. Their role should include programme design, outreach, referral management, monitoring of gendered risks, and feedback on whether livelihoods support is improving women's agency or increasing exposure to harm.

Women-led organizations should not only be consulted on gender risks; they should be eligible to lead and receive flexible funding for protection, livelihoods, GBV referral, psychosocial support, and community accountability components.

- **Package 4: Diaspora and Refugee Skills for Recovery**

Diaspora and refugee skills can support recovery without requiring immediate physical return. This package should create channels for Syrian professionals, refugees, and diaspora networks to contribute through remote technical support, mentoring, professional exchange, and institutional strengthening for Syrian organizations.

This package could include a skills registry, short-term technical missions where safe and voluntary, remote advisory teams, professional mentorship, links between diaspora experts and local organizations, and support for refugee-led research and monitoring. It should also support Syrian organizations that can absorb and coordinate this expertise.

The safeguard is that diaspora engagement should not be framed as an expectation of return. Many Syrians abroad may be willing to contribute to recovery while remaining in host countries. Their participation should be treated as one form of transnational recovery support, not as a step toward repatriation.

- **Package 5: Local Accountability and Social Cohesion**

Local accountability and social cohesion should address the tensions that may emerge as return, aid, reconstruction, and local governance overlap. Return can generate disputes around property, aid eligibility, employment, services, political affiliation, wartime experiences, and relations between those who left and those who remained. These tensions require mechanisms that combine transparent targeting, community feedback, local mediation, and protection-sensitive monitoring.

This package should include community feedback and complaint systems, participatory monitoring, local dialogue around service priorities, transparent beneficiary selection, support to community committees, youth and women's participation, and small grants for shared public goods. It should also support referral to legal or protection actors when disputes involve property, violence, documentation, or family-level harm.

Social cohesion programming should not be used to depoliticize structural grievances. Dialogue cannot replace fair access to services, documentation support, HLP mechanisms, legal remedies,

or protection from abuse. Its value lies in helping communities manage tensions while connecting them to the systems needed to resolve underlying problems.

These policy options and short-term packages should be implemented as connected parts of one recovery approach. Financing mechanisms without local participation risk becoming bureaucratic channels. Area-based support without protection safeguards can unintentionally legitimize unsafe return. Livelihoods without care support may exclude women. Accountability without funding power may become symbolic. The purpose of combining options and packages is to ensure that return-related recovery supports daily life, protects choice, and strengthens Syrian and refugee-led agency rather than turning recovery into a quiet instrument of return pressure.





RISKS, SAFEGUARDS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS BY ACTOR

Return-related recovery in Syria carries real policy risks if it is financed or communicated without safeguards. The risk is not recovery itself. Recovery is urgently needed. The risk is that localized improvements may be interpreted as proof that return is broadly safe, or that assistance may be designed in ways that pressure households to move before they have access to housing, services, livelihoods, documentation, and protection. The following safeguards and actor-specific recommendations are intended to keep recovery focused on expanding choice rather than producing return.

KEY RISKS AND SAFEGUARDS

Risk 1: Recovery becomes evidence for premature return.

Localized recovery outputs, such as rehabilitated schools, health centres, roads, or water networks, may be used by host states or political actors as evidence that Syria is generally ready for return. This would misrepresent the highly uneven nature of recovery. The safeguard is to require all reporting to distinguish between completed recovery activities and actual readiness for safe, voluntary, informed, and dignified return. Public communication should include geographic limits, protection caveats, and clear statements that recovery support does not establish nationwide safety.

Risk 2: Assistance is captured, politicized, or unevenly distributed.

Recovery resources may be captured by narrow intermediaries, directed toward politically favoured areas, or distributed in ways that deepen local inequalities. The safeguard is transparent project selection, independent monitoring, public reporting, complaint mechanisms, and community feedback systems. Financing mechanisms should require clear eligibility criteria, anti-diversion measures, and participation by Syrian-led, refugee-led, women-led, and locally embedded actors.

Risk 3: Area-based support creates local tension.

Support to return communities may create resentment if residents, IDPs, returnees, and host communities are treated as competing groups. The safeguard is to prioritize shared services and public goods that benefit communities as a whole, including schools, health facilities, water systems, roads, lighting, referral pathways, and local markets. Targeting should be vulnerability-based and transparent, rather than tied narrowly to return status.

Risk 4: Protection is treated as secondary to reconstruction.

Recovery projects can expose people to harm if they overlook explosive ordnance, documentation gaps, HLP disputes, GBV, child protection risks, disability access, or weak referral systems. The safeguard is to integrate protection screening into all recovery programming. Projects involving housing, agriculture,

schools, debris removal, roads, or infrastructure should include explosive ordnance risk review. Programmes should also include documentation support, HLP referrals, GBV and child protection pathways, and accessible complaint mechanisms.

● **Risk 5: Localization becomes implementation without power.**

Syrian-led, refugee-led, and women-led organizations may be asked to implement projects without influencing priorities, design, monitoring, or funding decisions. The safeguard is to make participation part of governance, not consultation theatre. Local and refugee-led actors should have formal roles in area-based assessments, funding review, risk monitoring, community accountability, and evaluation. Flexible funding should be available to organizations that hold local knowledge, not only to those able to survive heavy compliance systems.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY ACTOR

● **Donors and host states should:**

- Avoid using localized recovery projects as blanket evidence that Syria is safe for return.
- Fund recovery through mechanisms that include safeguards against capture, politicization, and premature return pressure.
- Provide flexible and direct funding windows for Syrian-led, refugee-led, and women-led organizations.
- Keep assistance and legal protection in host countries separate from recovery progress inside Syria.
- Support area-based recovery only when paired with protection monitoring and clear public communication.
- Fund Syrian-led, refugee-led, women-led, and locally embedded organizations directly where possible, while covering core costs, overhead, security, compliance, legal support, and institutional strengthening.

● **UN agencies and INGOs should:**

- Use area-based readiness assessments that combine services, protection, livelihoods, housing, documentation, and social risks.
- Build protection, HLP, GBV, child protection, disability access, and explosive ordnance safeguards into recovery programming from the design stage.

- Share data, analysis, and decision-making space with Syrian-led, refugee-led, and women-led actors.
- Avoid treating local organizations only as downstream implementers.
- Track reverse movement, temporary return, split-household strategies, and barriers to reintegration.
- Adopt minimum partnership standards with Syrian-led, refugee-led, and women-led organizations, including fair overhead, shared risk analysis, data ownership protections, timely payment, and meaningful roles in project design.

● **Syrian transitional authorities should:**

- Facilitate legal registration, movement, and operational access for Syrian civil society organizations.
- Reform outdated association laws and reduce administrative delays affecting humanitarian and recovery work.
- Ensure that recovery assistance is not politicized, securitized, or distributed through loyalty-based channels.
- Support civil documentation, HLP procedures, health, education, and municipal services in areas receiving returnees.
- Create structured channels for civil society, women-led organizations, and community representatives to participate in recovery planning.
- Protect the independence, safety, and operating space of Syrian civil society, including local, refugee-led, women-led, and diaspora-linked organizations.

● **Syrian-led, refugee-led, and women-led organizations should:**

- Build shared evidence platforms on return conditions, service gaps, protection risks, and community priorities.
- Document reverse movement, gendered barriers, HLP disputes, documentation gaps, and local tensions.
- Coordinate across sectors so that shelter, livelihoods, health, protection, and social cohesion are not treated as separate realities.
- Strengthen community feedback, complaint, and accountability mechanisms.
- Use collective advocacy to push for flexible funding, meaningful participation, and protection-sensitive recovery.
- Develop shared evidence products on return conditions, mine action risks, service gaps, protection risks, reverse movement,

gendered barriers, HLP disputes, documentation gaps, and community priorities.

- Use coalitions and coordination platforms to negotiate for direct funding, fair overhead, risk-sharing, and meaningful participation in recovery governance.

The central safeguard is simple. Recovery should make life more possible for Syrians without making return more compulsory. If recovery expands access to services, livelihoods, documentation, protection, and reliable information, it can widen people's choices. If it is used to justify reduced protection abroad or to signal that Syria is broadly ready for return, it risks becoming another form of pressure. The task for donors, authorities, UN agencies, INGOs, and Syrian civil society is to ensure that return-related recovery restores conditions for dignified life while protecting the right to choose when, whether, and how to return.

NOTES:

1. Interview with Ahmad Abu Shaar, Co-founder of Molham Volunteering Team and Damascus Office Director, May 2026.
2. Interview with Dr. Ahmad, health practitioner working with an INGO operating in Syria, May 2026.
3. Interview with Dr. Ahmad, health practitioner working with an INGO operating in Syria, May 2026.
4. Interview with Imen Elubeyd, Protection Sector Lead/Coordinator at an INGO operating in Syria, May 2026.
5. Interview with Imen Elubeyd, Protection Sector Lead/Coordinator at an INGO operating in Syria, May 2026.
6. Interview with Imen Elubeyd, Protection Sector Lead/Coordinator at an INGO operating in Syria, May 2026.
7. Interview with Hanin Al-Sayed, Syrian feminist activist and practitioner working with Syrian women-led organizations, May 2026.
8. Interview with Ahmad Abu Shaar, Co-founder of Molham Volunteering Team and Damascus Office Director, May 2026.
9. Interview with Dr. Ahmad, health practitioner working with an INGO operating in Syria, May 2026.
10. Interview with Dr. Ahmad, health practitioner working with an INGO operating in Syria, May 2026.



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