



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Does Assad's political end mean a shift for Syrian refugees in Europe?



Almost all the most developed European countries, which have been the main destinations for refugees for a decade, **closed** the procedures for issuing asylum to Syrians immediately after the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad.

In the coming days, those who have not yet done so will undoubtedly follow the decisions made by Germany, the UK, France, Italy, and others, which have halted the granting of asylum to Syrian refugees.

Only a few days after the overthrow of the Assad regime, the European Union will completely shut down its doors to Syrian asylum seekers. Tens of thousands of Syrians who are currently in a legal in-between space and hope for the hospitality of some of the most developed European countries will remain waiting.

The rapid, chain closure of asylum procedures is a measure by which European governments want to take time to assess whether there will be a calm in Syria after the coup.

Although they do not say so, the authorities worry that Assad supporters fleeing possible persecution by the forces that overthrew his regime might be among the refugees in the asylum process.

The appointment of Mohammed al-Bashir as the head of Syria's interim government, agreed upon by opposition forces and Assad's Prime Minister Mohammed Jalali on Tuesday, may mark the beginning of a thaw and the normalisation of the country's decade-long crisis.

But European governments will want much more evidence and time to decide the fate of the hundreds of thousands of Syrians who are already on their territory or trying to enter it.

The fall of Assad brought relief to the EU

As many as 14 million Syrians **have left** their

homes since 2011, when the conflict in that country began. Internal displacement within Syria accounts for half of them, while another 5.5 million have fled to neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Turkey is home to the largest number, approximately 3.3 million.

Those remaining chose to migrate to developed European countries, particularly during the significant waves of 2015 and 2016, with the majority residing in Germany, numbering between 850,000 and one million. Altogether, it makes Syria and its population the most difficult refugee crisis of our time. Will the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad mark the beginning of its resolution?

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European governments and the EU welcomed the departure of the long-time Syrian dictator. It is a "positive and long-awaited development," said Kaja Kallas, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. "Our priority is to ensure security in the region. The process of rebuilding Syria will be long and complicated and all parties must be ready to engage constructively."

The shift in Syria, after a decade of devastating conflict, happened at a time when the anti-migrant trend is in full swing in Europe, as a result of the strengthening of the right during a series of elections in the past year or two.

This momentum is also very visible in the hasty decisions to pause or completely stop the process of resolving asylum requests from Syrian migrants.

Returning home

Even more, the decisions of some of the European capitals hint at a scenario according to which the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad will be the beginning of a systematic and long-

term reverse process, stopping the further flow of migrants and their return home.

"I see groups celebrating this development here in Sweden. You should see this as a good opportunity to return home," said Jimmy Åkesson, leader of Sweden's far-right party, Sweden Democrats, which supports the centre-right minority government.

Austrian chancellor Karl Nehammer requested a review of all asylum grants

He announced that the government will review the residence permit applications of Syrians. In the largest migrant wave in 2015 and 2016, Sweden received the most Syrian refugees after Germany.

The current government of Austria, home to around 100,000 Syrians, is taking a similar course. In addition to ordering the interior ministry to suspend all ongoing Syrian asylum applications, Conservative Chancellor Karl Nehammer requested a "review of all asylum grants."

The right sets the tone towards migrants

Given that the campaign for the federal elections on 23 February is under way in Germany, it is certain that the events in Syria will sharpen the rhetoric towards migrants even more than before.

"Anyone in Germany who celebrates 'free Syria' evidently no longer has any reason to flee. They should return to Syria immediately," Alice Weidel, the far-right AfD candidate for German chancellor, posted on X.



They should return to Syria immediately - Alice Weidel (AfD)

Already now, two and a half months before the elections, she is setting the tone for the rhetoric that will undoubtedly have fertile ground in the growing part of German voters, who, with their support for the right, also demand a harsher attitude towards migrants.

The UN refugee agency UNHCR **calls** for "patience and vigilance" when it comes to solving the fate of Syrian migrants and asylum seekers, but such appeals do not have many prospects in the face of growing anti-migrant sentiment across Europe.

And certainly not when the governments of the countries with the most migrants, like Germany and France, are in the midst of political turmoil and when the voices of the growing right are exerting strong pressure to make access to migrants as restrictive as possible.