



By: **Ferry Biedermann**

Merz's ill-advised rush to repatriate Syrians



Germany, like most European countries at the moment, is in the throes of what can only be called Immigration Derangement Syndrome. The moment the subject is touched upon, many politicians go into a nationalist spasm and start talking the biggest possible nonsense.

The latest sufferer is Chancellor Friedrich Merz, now six months into a job that most German commentators, apart from those on the far-right, say should focus on reinvigorating the country's spluttering economy. Instead, he's chosen to make the return of Syrian refugees his signature policy push.

Merz has single-handedly declared Syria safe and stable. The hundreds of thousands of registered and recognised refugees are no longer in need of a "safe haven in Germany" and should go back to do their "patriotic duty" to help in the reconstruction of their own country, he has said.

Even his own foreign minister, Johann Wadephul, from the same centre-right CDU party, has contradicted him. On a visit to a destroyed area of Damascus, he doubted whether many Syrians could return, saying, "I doubt that many people can live here in a dignified way."

Germany's ructions over the return of **Syrian refugees** come at a moment when the country's jihadist-leader-turned-president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, is about to embark on a historic visit to Washington D.C. Merz, not to be outdone, has invited him to Berlin.

Normalising relations with a still very unstable Syria

The speed with which major Western countries seek to normalise relations with a still very **unstable Syria** can be interpreted in various ways. What it will definitely do is boost the impression that all is well now in the Levant and that refugees can safely return.

As local political drama, the Oedipal spectacle of Merz undoing the work of 'Mutti' Angela Merkel – or in his words, "correcting her mistakes" – makes for compelling viewing. He has never made a secret of his disdain for the previous CDU Chancellor's tolerant admissions policy.

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More relevant for the current situation, though, is the tussle for top position in the opinion polls between his CDU/CSU and the far-right, rabidly anti-immigrant AfD.

Elections are due in several German states, or Länder, in four- and ten-months' time, and the AfD's seemingly unstoppable growth will at the very least make post-election coalition-building a tad awkward.

With the Syrians, Merz gives the impression of having found a migration issue that he's able to outflank the AfD on. This might yet come back to haunt him, as a large-scale return will probably fail to materialise in the short run and maybe not ever.

The situation on the ground remains explosive

Even though Germany and the US seem to be going along with the largely Arab Gulf states-led attempt to consolidate Syria under Al-Sharaa, the situation on the ground remains explosive.

While millions of displaced Syrians have been able to return home, the UN also estimated that close to half a million had been displaced again in the first six months of the year.

A **UN report** issued at the end of October notes: "...renewed, brutal violence is jeopardizing the hard-won optimism that followed the fall of the former Syrian

government last year.”

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The UN Syria Commission also expressed “deep concern that repeated massacres and human rights violations, including those allegedly committed by members of the interim government’s security forces, risk plunging the country back into conflict.”

It did welcome the interim government’s steps towards stabilising the situation and solving the most urgent outstanding questions but calls on the authorities and UN members to address the “underlying causes” of the several outbursts of violence that have taken place.

A country that can hardly police its population

Crucial parts of the stabilisation process are lagging. More than a month after flawed and partial elections, Al-Sharaa has failed to name the one-third of the new National Assembly that is his prerogative. Thus, the country is still waiting for the new parliament to meet.

More worryingly, killings in Alawite areas of the country are still being reported. No progress has been made towards re-integrating the **Kurdish-controlled regions** of the country. And the Druze area of Sweida remains a flashpoint.

Reconstruction has barely started, and the humanitarian situation in many parts of the country remains dire.

The lifting of sanctions against Syria, as the US is advocating, might go some way to help, as might massive injections of cash and probably arms for the new government.

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This is what Al-Sharaa will seek in **Washington** and eventually in Berlin. In return, the US will demand the former jihadists actively take on the remnants of IS and embark on some sort of normalisation, or at least security stabilisation, with Israel.

Germany might make similar requests – Merz has said he’s willing to help Syria stabilise – but will also seek agreement on the return of, initially at least, Syrians convicted of serious criminal offences.

It seems that nobody in Berlin sees the contradiction in helping Syria stabilise and shipping off thousands of criminals to a country that at the moment can hardly police its existing population.

A dangerous issue for Merz to stake his reputation on

While the AfD is wholesale anti-immigrant and particularly loathes those from non-Western countries, the right-wing of the CDU and Merz mostly make economic arguments.

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Yet an editorial in the left-of-centre *Süddeutsche Zeitung* points out that: “If Germany wants to maintain its prosperity in the coming decades, it needs everyone who can work - regardless of whether they apply through an international skilled worker program or whether they are already there, for example as a war refugee.”

The paper goes on to rubbish the numbers of Syrian refugees actually on benefits if one filters out the young, the old, the sick and the recent arrivals.

Returning large numbers of Syrians from Germany is sometimes compared to the ‘success’ of repatriating the majority of Bosnian refugees after that country’s civil war ended, starting by the end of 1996.

To compare these two situations is almost laughable. The fighting in Bosnia had in fact all but ended, and the relative peace was overseen by a Western-led stabilisation force.

The EU and others poured in massive resources to meet the humanitarian crises and also oversaw the country politically. Nothing similar is on offer in Syria.

Also, Bosnia is a bus ride away from Germany. Syrians have come a long way and will have to return mostly by air, raising travel costs and making logistics much more complicated.

Even then, the return of Bosnian refugees posed huge problems for their shattered home

country, often increasing tensions in areas they had fled from and where they were no longer welcome.

An imminent mass return from Germany to Syria seems unlikely, making this a dangerous issue for Merz to stake his reputation on vis-à-vis the AfD, which has neither government responsibility nor is beholden to the facts.