

Security Diplomacy And Refugees: How Reconstruction And Repatriation In Syria Shape Regional Negotiations

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the dynamics of security diplomacy in the Middle East through a case study of repatriation and post-conflict reconstruction in Syria during the 2024–2025 period. The main focus of this research is to examine how the process of Syrian refugee return and national reconstruction efforts are used as political instruments in regional negotiations among Syria, host countries (Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan), and international actors such as Russia, Iran, the European Union, and UNHCR. Using a qualitative-descriptive approach with a library research method, the study finds that the repatriation of Syrian refugees is not merely a humanitarian issue but also a tool of security diplomacy and political legitimacy. The Syrian government has utilized the return program to strengthen its domestic position and gain international recognition, while host countries have used the refugee issue as a bargaining tool with international donor institutions to obtain financial and security support. Therefore, the success of Syria's repatriation and reconstruction efforts depends on three main factors: ensuring security and human rights protection for refugees, involving local communities in reconstruction, and promoting inclusive, regionally based security diplomacy. This study contributes to the understanding of the relationship between refugee politics and the security architecture of the Middle East and offers an analytical framework for policymakers in designing sustainable and equitable post-conflict reconstruction strategies.

Keywords : Security diplomacy, Repatriation, Reconstruction, Syria, Refugees, Middle East, Political legitimacy

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict, which began in 2011, has lasted for over a decade, causing widespread destruction to the country's physical, social, economic, and political structures. Over the years, the conflict has escalated, involving multiple parties—the Syrian government, rebel groups, local militias, and foreign powers—with a devastating impact on civilians. The destruction of infrastructure, public services (hospitals, schools, clean water, and sanitation), and other basic facilities has triggered a mass exodus. Millions of citizens have become refugees or internally displaced persons (IDPs), seeking safety abroad or within the relative safety of Syria itself. (EUAA, 2025).

Since the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime on December 8, 2024, significant changes have occurred in Syria's political and security landscape. The established interim government, with the support of various international actors, has successfully gained control of many areas previously held by opposition groups and non-state militias. The recapture of these areas opens up opportunities for the resumption of reconstruction and refugee repatriation, which conflict conditions and fragmented territorial control have hampered. (Jalabi, 2025). However, major structural and practical challenges emerge: the need to rehabilitate severely damaged infrastructure, address the residual effects of the conflict, such as

landmines and unexploded ordnance, and provide adequate public services in areas regained by the government (UNICEF, 2025).

The latest data indicate that the return movement of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) has begun to increase since December 2024. However, the numbers remain far from the total number of refugees. According to UNHCR Regional Flash Update #39, as of August 7, 2025, 754,436 Syrian refugees had returned from abroad, and 805,279 IDPs had returned home from IDP camps since December 8, 2024. The total number of returnees, both refugees and IDPs, since the beginning of 2024 has reached more than one million people (UNHCR, 2025). On the ground, provinces such as Aleppo, Damascus, Homs, Rural Damascus, and Idlib have been the largest recipients of returnees; however, basic services such as water, electricity, education, and healthcare remain severely limited or severely damaged in many areas.

However, the desire to return does not always translate into a permanent return. UNHCR surveys show that many refugees remain hesitant even if they rhetorically express a desire to return. Obstacles include unstable security conditions, political uncertainty over who governs the areas of return, a lack of basic services, and documentation issues such as land or property ownership, identity, and administrative legality. (EUAA, 2025).

Meanwhile, on the side of host or refugee-receiving states, such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq, there are diplomatic and domestic pressures arising from the socio-economic burden of refugees, border security, and issues of government legitimacy based on public perceptions of the refugee burden. In the context of regional diplomacy and security, repatriation and reconstruction have become strategic elements. Returning refugees demand that their return be “voluntary, safe, and dignified,” and that it be accompanied by conditions that support adequate housing, infrastructure, public services, physical security, legal certainty, and land ownership rights. Conversely, the Syrian government and international actors use repatriation as a tool to demonstrate stability, legitimacy, and the restoration of administrative control, which directly impacts their diplomatic standing in the regional and international arena. Host states and international donors often link reconstruction and rebuilding assistance to meeting security, transparency, and legal requirements (Maarouf, 2025).

Finally, although the momentum for repatriation and reconstruction has increased since December 2024, the key challenges remain significant and numerous. The urgent need for international support, both financial, technical, and diplomatic, remains high. Without adequate aid flows, mass repatriations under poor conditions could trigger a return to displacement or even worsen security and social conditions. This makes security diplomacy not merely a formal discourse, but an operational and political framework that must be addressed seriously by all stakeholders in the Middle East.

2. METHOD

This Research uses a descriptive, qualitative approach to understand in depth the dynamics of security diplomacy and the Syrian refugee issue in the context of post-conflict reconstruction. A qualitative approach was chosen because this Research focuses on the meaning, processes, and socio-political interactions between state and non-state actors in the context of international relations. As John W. Creswell (2018) explains in his book **Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches**, qualitative Research aims to explore and understand the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to specific social or humanitarian issues (Denzin, 2018). This approach is relevant because

it allows researchers to examine how perceptions of security, political legitimacy, and diplomatic interests are shaped through interactions among actors in the Middle East.

This study uses a descriptive, qualitative approach to understand in depth the dynamics of diplomacy. According to Bogdan and Taylor (1992), qualitative methods are Research procedures that produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words from people and observable behavior. With this approach, Research does not simply collect empirical data; it also interprets cause-and-effect relationships in context. A qualitative approach also allows for in-depth analysis of complex social and political phenomena such as security diplomacy and the repatriation of Syrian refugees (Bogdan, 1992). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) state that qualitative Research is an interpretive activity that places researchers in the social world to understand phenomena in their natural context, so the results of this study are expected to represent the reality of life in the post-conflict Middle East region.

Data collection in this study was conducted through library Research and documentary analysis. Data were obtained from various credible secondary sources, including scientific journals, international agency reports, policy documents, and trusted news sources (Creswell, 2018). Academic sources included publications from the Journal of Refugee Studies, Middle East Policy Journal, and International Affairs. In contrast, international agency sources included reports from the UNHCR, EUAA (European Union Agency for Asylum), Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR), and the International Crisis Group (ICG). Additionally, global media outlets such as Al Jazeera, The Guardian, and Reuters were used to supplement the latest empirical information on Syria's post-December 2024 repatriation and reconstruction policies.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Political & Security Framework of Post-Assad Syria (2024-2025)

Since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's government in December 2024, Syria has entered a transitional phase fraught with political and security uncertainty. A caretaker government was formed shortly afterward and was replaced by a legitimate transitional government in March 2025. The new government, under President Ahmed al-Sharaa, issued an interim constitution and took over several airports, borders, and oil and gas fields from the control of non-state military actors, including the previously autonomous Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in northeastern Syria, as part of an integration agreement (Berry, 2025).

This integration agreement between the central government and the SDF is an important signal that the transitional regime is seeking to expand its administrative control while simultaneously quelling sectarian and autonomy demands raised by Kurdish and other armed groups. However, the process will be challenging. The SDF has de facto administered its territory for years, building local institutions and its own security system, and possesses substantial military and political experience. This transfer of control over institutions such as borders and geopolitically important oil and gas fields also opens the potential for new conflicts over the distribution of resources and authority, particularly if promises of security, Kurdish-language education, and citizenship rights are not satisfactorily met for the Kurdish community (Berry, 2025).

On the other hand, although the major conflict has subsided, residual conflict activity or small-scale insurgencies persist in several areas. According to recent reports, areas such as Aleppo, Deir Ezzor, and Homs are still experiencing sporadic clashes between remaining loyalists of the Assad regime, non-state militias, and groups resisting full stabilization. In addition to the threat of armed violence, the physical

conditions in these areas are limited by landmines and explosives left over from the war that have not been removed, threatening the safety of civilians, especially those wishing to return to their hometowns. Furthermore, access to public facilities such as clean water, electricity, hospitals, and schools remains extremely limited, so so-called “safe areas for return” are often far from ideal (Santosa, 2024)

The absence of the Assad regime as a single power-holder has also sparked various declarations of a fragmentation of spheres of Influence. The opposition and some analysts warn that Syria will, de facto, fragment into several zones of foreign or local Influence, each controlled by actors such as Turkey in the northwest, the SDF or the Kurds in the northeast, and Russia’s allies on the coast and in the south. The transitional government authorities are attempting to maintain the image of a unified state by withdrawing administrative and security controls, but the challenges to achieving this political stability are significant, including legitimacy concerns, doubts among local citizens, and potential resistance from groups that previously held local or military power (Primayanti, 2024)

The policy also has a strong international dimension. The European Union has expressed its intention to engage more diplomatically with Damascus, stating that Europe will support Syria’s transition efforts while maintaining sovereignty and human rights as conditions (Djohan, 2024). Turkey is also pushing for the lifting of sanctions on Syria to allow the country to stabilize more quickly and resume reconstruction; on the other hand, there is domestic and diplomatic pressure for Syria to meet human rights standards and transparency in order to lift the sanctions (Ağlarci, 2025).

From a non-traditional security perspective, the direct impact on civilians is very real. The evacuation of foreign nationals and the diaspora is one indicator that the security situation remains dangerous. A concrete example: the Indonesian Embassy in Damascus declared the highest alert level (Alert 1) for all of Syria following the escalation of the conflict towards the end of 2024. Provinces with residual conflict, such as Aleppo, Idlib, Deir Ezzor, Hama, and Hasaka, are characterized by unsafe conditions despite being claimed as stable areas (Santosa, 2024).

These dynamics demonstrate that despite the de facto collapse of the Assad regime, the Syrian state structure has not yet been fully reassembled. Administrative and security control are significantly fragmented, government institutions are still undergoing reconstruction and reintegration, and certain areas remain highly vulnerable to physical and political threats. All of this creates a complex political and security environment that significantly influences refugees’ decisions about whether to return, how security conditions are defined, and how regional actors and international donors view Syria in diplomatic negotiations on reconstruction and repatriation.

B. Repatriation and Reconstruction Policy: Actors & Their Interests

The repatriation policy for Syrian refugees following the regime change at the end of 2024 is one of the most complex issues in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. After more than a decade of conflict that has devastated the social and economic fabric, Syria faces the enormous challenge of rebuilding the country and repatriating more than 6.6 million refugees scattered across neighboring countries (UNHCR, 2025). This repatriation and reconstruction process involves various domestic, regional, and international actors with overlapping interests. In the context of international relations, this policy serves not only as a humanitarian instrument but also as a tool for security diplomacy and political legitimacy.

The post-Assad Syrian government has sought to project repatriation as a symbol of “political victory” and the restoration of national sovereignty. According to a report by the International Institute for Asian Studies, the new government in Damascus has sought to project an image as an authority capable of restoring stability and reconstructing the country without significant foreign intervention. The

reconstruction program has focused on areas deemed “safe,” particularly Damascus, Homs, and Aleppo, to demonstrate administrative capacity and attract displaced residents (International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS), 2024). However, this strategy also serves as a political mechanism to strengthen domestic legitimacy and assert the country’s continued sovereignty. Thus, repatriation is not only a social process but also a domestic and international diplomatic strategy.

In contrast, for neighboring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, refugee repatriation has different implications. Since 2011, these countries have borne the economic, social, and political burden of the presence of millions of Syrian refugees. For example, Lebanon hosts approximately 1.5 million refugees, a huge number compared to the country’s total population. Domestic pressure from the public and local political parties has prompted the Lebanese government to demand the return of refugees, particularly due to rising unemployment and declining public service capacity. According to the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed, 2024), the repatriation issue is now being used by Beirut as an external diplomatic tool to obtain financial support from the European Union and international donor agencies. A similar policy has been implemented by Turkey, which uses the refugee issue as a regional political instrument in negotiations with the European Union regarding financial assistance and border security cooperation.

On the other hand, international actors such as the UNHCR, IOM, the European Union, Russia, and Iran played a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of Syrian repatriation and reconstruction. Russia and Iran, as long-standing allies of the former regime, promoted a “stabilization-first” approach, focusing on building basic infrastructure such as housing, electricity, and hospitals to create the minimum conditions for repatriation (Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), 2024). Pendekatan ini dianggap efektif untuk mempercepat kembalinya pengungsi tanpa harus menunggu. This approach was considered effective for accelerating the return of refugees without waiting for a comprehensive political solution. However, this approach was criticized by Western countries and human rights organizations for failing to uphold the principles of safe, voluntary, and dignified return, which form the foundation of international law on repatriation (UNHCR, 2025).

Western countries, including the European Union and the United States, have refused to provide full reconstruction aid without guarantees of respect for human rights, an inclusive political settlement, and accountability mechanisms for human rights violations committed during the conflict. According to a report in *Modern Diplomacy* (2024), this dispute has created a diplomatic deadlock that has slowed the flow of reconstruction funds, while the socio-economic situation on the ground has worsened (Diplomacy, 2024).

In practice, numerous reports indicate that repatriation policies are often not entirely voluntary. In Lebanon, for example, several Syrian refugees have experienced indirect pressure to return through restrictions on residency permits, camp closures, and security raids in refugee settlement areas (Watch, 2024). Laporan *Syrian Network for Human Rights* (SNHR, 2024) report by the Syrian Network for Human Rights (SNHR, 2024) even revealed that some returnees have faced arbitrary detention and violence by security forces in Syria. This demonstrates the disparity between political rhetoric promising a “safe and dignified return” and the reality on the ground, which remains rife with security threats and legal violations ((SNHR), 2024).

For the Syrian government, successfully repatriating refugees also serves as a tool of international diplomacy to pressure donor countries to lift economic sanctions and open access to development aid. Meanwhile, for host countries, successful repatriation can reduce socio-economic burdens and strengthen the government’s legitimacy among domestic populations (Yulia Rimapradesi, 2025). However, the misalignment of interests between actors complicates coordination. Repatriation becomes a political

bargaining chip among Damascus, Ankara, Beirut, Tehran, and Brussels, where security, political stability, and economic interests intertwine.

Thus, Syrian repatriation and reconstruction are multidimensional issues that reflect the political dynamics of the post-conflict Middle East. Refugee repatriation efforts are not merely a humanitarian responsibility but also a negotiating ground that brings together security diplomacy strategies, political legitimacy, and international economic interests. This process will determine the future direction of Syria and the stability of the region in the coming decades.

The biggest challenge in repatriating Syrian refugees lies in the physical and economic damage to the country. SNHR (2024) reports that more than 40% of housing in Syria has been destroyed or severely damaged, while public infrastructure such as hospitals, schools, and water and electricity networks have not been restored. The OAPEN Library notes that the total reconstruction costs have reached over 400 billion USD, a figure that is nearly impossible to meet without international support (Daher, 2025).

Legal and land ownership issues also complicate the situation. Many refugees have lost their ownership documents due to the Damascus regime's new policy requiring re-verification of land through property laws (Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), 2024). Furthermore, fear of reprisals, political surveillance, and the risk of military service are major barriers to refugee return. Modern Diplomacy (2024) highlights the equally important psychological and social dimensions: war trauma, loss of family, and distrust of state authorities make many refugees reluctant to return despite worsening economic conditions in host countries (Diplomacy, 2024).

C. Regional Negotiations and Security Diplomacy

Negotiations regarding Syrian refugees have become one of the most strategic issues in Middle East security diplomacy. This issue is no longer simply a humanitarian one, but also a political and economic bargaining tool between host countries, donor countries, and the Syrian government. Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, the three countries with the largest number of Syrian refugees, are using their positions on migration to strengthen their negotiating positions with global actors such as the European Union (EU) and the UN (OUP, 2024).

Turkey has actively leveraged its status as "Europe's migration gatekeeper" to negotiate a multibillion-dollar aid package from the European Union and visa policy changes for its citizens. In this context, Ankara positions repatriation not only as a humanitarian responsibility but also as part of its national security strategy and domestic political stability.

On the other hand, Lebanon faces complex domestic pressures due to a worsening economic crisis and rising anti-refugee sentiment. The Lebanese government uses the issue of repatriation as a diplomatic tool to demand assistance from the international community. As explained by the Carnegie Middle East Center (2024), this policy is often ambivalent: on the one hand, Beirut emphasizes the importance of voluntary repatriation, but on the other hand, there are indications that the policy encourages "covert forced repatriation" due to limited resources and rising social tensions..

Meanwhile, the Bashar al-Assad regime, with the support of Russia and Iran, has used repatriation and reconstruction as a political tool to rebuild its international legitimacy. Damascus seeks to demonstrate to the world that the country is "stable and secure," making it worthy of accepting refugees back and inviting foreign investment in reconstruction projects. Russia, in particular, promotes a "stabilization-first" approach, prioritizing the development of basic infrastructure, such as housing and electricity, to create the minimum conditions for refugee return. However, Western countries reject this

strategy without human rights guarantees and an inclusive political process (Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), 2024).

International agencies such as the UNHCR and the IOM continue to emphasize that repatriation must be based on the principle of voluntary, safe, and dignified return, in accordance with the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Agenda for Protection. However, numerous reports indicate that the reality on the ground is often different: refugees in Lebanon and Turkey face pressure to return even though the security situation in their areas of origin remains unfavorable.

D. Security and Diplomatic Implications for Host and Home States

From the perspective of host states, refugee repatriation has direct implications for domestic stability, security policy, and foreign relations. In Lebanon, for example, the presence of approximately 1 million Syrian refugees has exacerbated social tensions and deepened the economic crisis that has been ongoing since 2019 (Azhari, 2025). Anti-refugee sentiment is growing, and nationalist groups are pressuring the government to expedite the repatriation process, even without adequate security guarantees. Similar conditions exist in Jordan, where limited water and energy resources are major factors complicating integration and repatriation policies.

For Syria, as the home state, repatriation serves as a symbol of the restoration of national sovereignty. The Assad government has used the return policy as evidence of its success in ending the war and normalizing the political situation. However, some analysts warn that this policy can also be used for political purposes, such as selecting citizens deemed loyal to the regime and excluding opposition groups. Many “reconstructed” areas are actually targeted at economic and military elites close to the regime. At the same time, civilians who have lost their homes or are considered political opponents face difficulties in regaining their property rights (Albam, 2025).

Regionally, large-scale repatriation without adequate infrastructure is likely to create new instability. Modern Diplomacy (2024) warned that forced repatriation under unstable security conditions could trigger a new wave of exodus and worsen the humanitarian situation on the Turkish-Lebanese border. Thus, the issue of repatriation will impact not only bilateral relations between host countries and Syria but also the overall regional security architecture (Diplomacy, 2024).

E. Plans and Strategies: Conditions for Safe Repatriation and Sustainable Reconstruction

The success of the repatriation of Syrian refugees is determined not only by political decisions but also by the extent to which the international community and the Syrian government can create conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified return. This principle, as affirmed in the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2018), places human safety and dignity at the core of any return policy.

In practice, the principle of “voluntary, safe, and dignified return” requires countries of origin to ensure security, access to necessities, and legal certainty for every refugee who chooses to return. However, conditions in Syria remain significant challenges: many former conflict areas have not been completely cleared of landmines, basic infrastructure such as electricity and water has not been restored, and detention and torture of citizens deemed affiliated with the opposition persist (Human Right Watch, 2024). Therefore, forced repatriation before conditions stabilize will only exacerbate the suffering of refugees and potentially create a new cycle of displacement.

The post-war reconstruction approach must be understood not simply as a physical effort to rebuild infrastructure, but as a sustainable social and political project. According to the European Institute of the

Mediterranean (IEMed, 2024), the reconstruction model in Syria should adopt the principle of community-based reconstruction, namely the active involvement of local communities in every stage of development planning and implementation. This approach emphasizes the participation of civil society organizations, women's groups, youth, and minority communities previously marginalized during the war. This participation not only strengthens a sense of ownership but also reduces the potential for future social conflict.

In addition to local participation, an independent monitoring mechanism is also a crucial prerequisite for credible repatriation and reconstruction. Agencies such as the UNDP or the UN Human Rights Commission should be mandated to monitor human rights violations, particularly those related to arbitrary detention, property confiscation, and political discrimination against returnees. The UN Security Council could also consider establishing a special monitoring mission focused on post-return security, similar to UNAMI's role in Iraq. This step is crucial to ensure that repatriation does not become merely a political instrument for the Syrian regime, but truly becomes part of a just and transparent national reconciliation process (UNDP, 2024).

The economic dimension of reconstruction is equally important. A 2024 study by the Carnegie Middle East Center showed that economic inequality and unemployment are key factors hampering post-conflict stabilization in Syria. Therefore, sustainable reconstruction must integrate local economic empowerment strategies, such as support for small and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs), labor-intensive infrastructure development programs, and cross-sector investments that strengthen regional connectivity. This inclusive economic approach is expected to reduce the community's dependence on international aid and create a more stable social foundation for the return of refugees.

Furthermore, sustainable reconstruction must also address social reconciliation and legal reintegration. Many Syrian refugees lost land ownership documents, birth certificates, and legal identities during the conflict. Without clear administrative policies, they will struggle to regain property rights and access public services. In this regard, the UN and partner institutions, such as the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), recommend establishing a property restitution system and specialized local courts to handle post-war disputes. These mechanisms are crucial to prevent horizontal conflict between returnees and communities that occupied their land during the war.

From a security-diplomacy perspective, the repatriation and reconstruction process cannot be separated from the region's geopolitical dynamics. Countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Russia play a dual role as mediators and actors with economic and military interests in Syria. Therefore, post-war stability can only be achieved through inclusive diplomatic cooperation involving regional and international actors in a balanced manner. This approach aligns with the regional security complex theory (Buzan & Wæver, 2003), which emphasizes that a country's security in a region such as the Middle East cannot be separated from the stability of its neighbors. Therefore, regional security diplomacy needs to be directed not only at the physical repatriation of refugees, but also at establishing an inclusive, just, and sustainable peace for all Syrians and the surrounding region.

4. CONCLUSION

This Research confirms that the Syrian post-conflict repatriation and reconstruction policy cannot be understood solely as a humanitarian process, but rather as an integral part of regional security diplomacy in the Middle East. The repatriation of Syrian refugees has become a political and economic instrument for various domestic, regional, and international actors with divergent interests. The Syrian government seeks to leverage the return policy as a symbol of political victory and the regime's

legitimacy in the eyes of the world. At the same time, host countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan use the refugee issue as a bargaining chip in negotiations with the European Union and international donor agencies.

From an international perspective, the involvement of major actors such as Russia, Iran, and the European Union demonstrates a struggle for influence over the direction of Syrian reconstruction. Russia emphasizes a “stabilization first” approach to strengthen Damascus’s political position, while Western countries demand political reforms and human rights guarantees before providing reconstruction assistance. This tension illustrates that reconstruction is not merely a development project, but an arena of geopolitical competition reflecting the global polarization between the Eastern and Western blocs.

This Research also found that the main challenge in repatriation is the unpreparedness of security and social conditions in the regions of origin. Many refugees face the risk of detention, violence, or loss of property rights upon return, indicating that the principle of “voluntary, safe, and dignified return” has not been fully implemented. In this context, an overly politicized repatriation process could create new instability and exacerbate the humanitarian crisis in the region.

From a security-diplomacy perspective, this study demonstrates that the Syrian refugee issue has become a strategic bargaining tool in interstate relations in the Middle East. Regional security depends not only on resolving the military conflict but also on regional states’ ability to manage migration flows, economic reconstruction, and sustainable social reconciliation. Therefore, this study concludes that the repatriation and reconstruction of Syria constitute a multidimensional security-diplomacy arena that requires coordination among humanitarian, political, and economic aspects. The success of this process depends on three main factors: first, guarantees of security and protection of human rights for refugees; second, the involvement of civil society and local communities in reconstruction planning; and third, inclusive diplomatic cooperation between regional and international actors. Without these three elements, repatriation risks becoming a mere political instrument that perpetuates the cycle of conflict and instability in the Middle East.

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