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Syrian labour mobility: legal status, employment opportunities, and institutional responses in neighbouring countries

Key points

- Before 2011, Syrian labour mobility to neighbouring countries was predominantly circular, seasonal and temporary. It was facilitated by a combination of relatively permissive bilateral agreements and cross-border labour practices shaped by longstanding social and economic ties. Employment was largely informal, with limited labour protection and weak enforcement of labour standards.
- The 2011 conflict triggered large-scale displacement and a humanitarian crisis, disrupting longstanding labour mobility patterns and reshaping regional mobility responses through a humanitarian and refugee protection framework. Variations in protection, residency and work authorisation regimes across host countries resulted in unequal and, in some cases, restricted access to formal employment, reinforcing Syrian refugees' reliance on informal and often precarious forms of work.
- Since the political transition in Syria in December 2024, new mobility dynamics have emerged across the region, linked to the return of 1.8 million refugees to Syria, regularization processes in host countries, and growing labour demand associated with reconstruction efforts. Labour mobility is becoming an increasing prominent feature of regional mobility patterns, alongside ongoing displacement with the continued hosting of large numbers of Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries, as well as return movements.
- Regularization processes in host countries, including the granting or renewal of legal residency and work authorization, can expand access to labour markets and social protection, including through pathways that enable refugees to take up migrant workers status where provided for under national frameworks. However, where residency and work authorization are tied to specific employers or sponsorship arrangements, such transitions may restrict workers' mobility, increase their dependency on employers, and heighten the risks of exploitation and forced labour.
- The emerging patterns of labour mobility across the region is an opportunity to build a regional rights-based labour migration governance framework that provides adequate protection to workers, responds to labour market needs and involves workers' and employers' organisations. both within the countries concerned as well as through a cross-border social dialogue.

Introduction

Background and objectives

This policy brief provides an overview of the history of Syrian labour mobility across the region, maps relevant legal frameworks and suggests policy options for rights-based mobility pathways. It is based on a desk review undertaken to inform the Regional Tripartite Forum to be held on 26-27 November 2026.

As Syria has entered a period of transition, with nearly two million refugees having returned to the country, this brief addresses a central question:

How can bilateral and regional labour mobility frameworks, informed and complemented by robust national measures, effectively respond to the evolving labour market needs, while supporting safe, regular and rights-based labour mobility pathways for Syrian migrant workers and refugees?

To respond to this question, the brief examines:

1. The past: What lessons can be drawn from pre-2011 bilateral labour mobility arrangements involving Syria and neighbouring countries?
2. The present: How are refugee returns, regularisation processes and reconstruction-related labour demand reshaping Syrian labour mobility, and how are existing legal and policy frameworks responding to these developments?
3. The future: How should national, bilateral and regional frameworks evolve to promote safe, regular, fair and rights-based labour mobility pathways, including through strengthened cross-border tripartite dialogue?

Current labour mobility dynamics among Syrians, including circular movement patterns, are poorly documented. Likewise, there is limited information on the employment situation of those who have returned to Syria. Most available data focus on humanitarian and protection concerns rather than labour mobility, decent work and labour market outcomes. This brief aims to contribute to the evidence base by tracing the evolution of Syrian labour mobility across different phases, including the pre-2011 period, the displacement period following the onset of the Syrian crisis, and recent return and mobility dynamics, while mapping the relevant legal, policy, and institutional frameworks.

Labour markets in the region

While labour market conditions differ markedly across the region, particularly in Türkiye's larger and more diversified economy, Syria and neighbouring countries nonetheless face a number of shared structural challenges, including high youth unemployment, low female labour force participation, and persistent informality, alongside country-specific constraints related to economic growth and job creation. The conflict that began in Syria in 2011 further exacerbated these pressures, disrupting labour markets, livelihoods, and generating large-scale displacement across the region. Most Syrian refugees sought protection in neighbouring countries, particularly Türkiye, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, significantly increasing labour supply, especially in low-skilled and informal segments of the labour market, and to a lesser extent in Egypt and other North African countries.

With the support of the international community, host governments gradually introduced measures aimed at facilitating refugees' access to formal employment. Regional initiatives such as the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) promoted livelihood and economic inclusion, while the 2016 Jordan Compact and Türkiye's 2016 regulations granting work permits to Syrians under temporary protection marked significant policy developments. Despite these efforts, the majority of Syrian refugees continued to work informally, often for low wages and with limited access to labour and social protection.

These dynamics unfolded against a backdrop of persistent labour market challenges in host countries, including high unemployment and underemployment, particularly among young people and women, alongside mounting pressures on public services and labour market institutions. They were compounded by successive economic and social shocks, including Lebanon's economic and financial crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, the devastating earthquakes that struck

Türkiye and Syria in 2023, and the continued regional instability as well as deteriorating security situation, particularly since late 2023.

Since 2025, Syria has entered a new phase of recovery and reconstruction following the change of government in December 2024 and the easing of international sanctions. Returns have increased overall, with an estimated 1.8 million Syrians having returned since December 2024,[1] although return trends have moderated over time. Yet returnees continue to face a highly constrained labour market, characterized by limited decent work opportunities, low wages, high levels of working poverty and informality, inadequate social protection, weakened institutions and severely damaged infrastructure.

At the same time, recovery and reconstruction in Syria are expected to generate new demand for labour, particularly in sectors such as light manufacturing, construction, agriculture and services and trade (ILO, 2025). In parallel, host countries across the region have been adjusting their migration and mobility policy frameworks in response to evolving displacement and return dynamics, including through changes to residency arrangements, work authorization frameworks, regularization initiatives, and return-related measures.

Against this evolving backdrop, cross-border labour mobility between Syria and neighbouring countries is likely to remain an important feature of Syrians' livelihood strategies and of regional labour markets more broadly. These developments highlight the importance of examining how existing legal and policy frameworks can facilitate safe, regular and rights-based labour mobility, while ensuring decent work and adequate labour and social protection for workers, including those transitioning from refugee to migrant worker status.

Before 2011: circular, flexible and lightly regulated labour mobility

Prior to the 2011 Syrian crisis, labour mobility from Syria to neighbouring countries was largely circular, seasonal and temporary, with Lebanon's agriculture and construction sectors representing important employment destinations for Syrian workers. This mobility took place within relatively permissive bilateral arrangements but remained predominantly informal, with limited access to labour and social protection.

While these mobility patterns helped address labour shortages in specific sectors and provided income-generating opportunities to low-skilled Syrian workers, gaps in regulatory and enforcement frameworks contributed to the persistence of substandard working conditions.

This period was marked by the development of bilateral and regional labour mobility frameworks, including Arab regional agreements[2] and conventions on labour mobility that sought to facilitate the mobility and employment of Arab workers across the region and promote cooperation among Arab States on labour migration governance. However, their implementation was uneven and their practical impact on labour mobility varied across countries.

In practice, Syrian labour mobility was shaped largely by a combination of bilateral agreements, historical labour market linkages, and national labour and migration policies. Lebanese-Syrian cooperation was particularly developed, notably through the 1991 Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination, the 1993 Economic and Social Cooperation Agreement, and the 1994 Lebanese-Syrian Labour Agreement, which facilitated relatively easy access for Syrian workers to the Lebanese labour market and supported circular and seasonal labour migration (El Daif, 2022: 17). Similarly in Jordan, bilateral frameworks, notably the 2001 Workforce Cooperation Agreement and a 2008 Workforce Recruitment Agreement, facilitated the employment of Jordanians and Syrians in either country on the basis of reciprocity, protected the right of workers to transfer earnings home, and required recruitment to adhere

[1] As of 5 November, 1.84 million Syrians have returned, 895,357 men (49 per cent) and 945,904 women (51 per cent). UNHCR Operational Data Portal - Comprehensive Overview of Refugee Returns Dashboard – Syrian Arab Republic. Available at https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/124774.

[2] For example, the League of Arab States Revised Arab Charter on Human Rights (2004) contains a provision on labour migration and the protection of migrant workers: "Each State party shall ensure to workers who migrate to its territory the requisite protection in accordance with the laws in force" (Article 34(5)).

strictly to each country's domestic regulations.[3] Alongside these formal legal agreements, longstanding cross-border mobility and labour-market linkages facilitated the movement of Syrian workers to Jordan. Prior to 2011, many Syrians were employed, often on a seasonal or informal basis, in sectors such as agriculture and construction, filling important labour shortages and contributing to the development of transnational labour networks between the two countries (ILO and Fafo, 2015). In Türkiye, Syrians benefited from increasingly favourable mobility arrangements during the 2000s, supported by growing bilateral economic cooperation and the lifting of visa requirements in 2009. The Türkiye-Syria Free Trade Agreement, which entered into force in 2007, promoted trade, economic integration and cross-border mobility, particularly in border regions. However, unlike the seasonal labour migration arrangements between Syria and Lebanon, mobility between Türkiye and Syria was largely linked to trade and business activities rather than formal labour migration programmes. This underscores the distinction between commercial mobility and regulated labour migration. In Egypt, until July 2013, Syrians generally benefited from facilitated mobility arrangements due to close political ties between the two countries and broader Arab mobility frameworks. They could typically enter Egypt with no prior visa or security clearance and be granted a three-month allowance, extend their stay easily through either the Department of Immigration or the Ministry of Interior, reside there, and engage in economic activities more easily than many other foreign nationals. Iraq, in contrast was not a significant destination for Syrian migrant workers prior to 2011, given its own instability, although cross-border movement continued through commercial, family, and other longstanding social ties.

Prior to the conflict, Syria functioned simultaneously as a country of origin, transit and destination for migrant workers, while also serving as an important host country for refugees in the region. In addition to the long-standing presence of Palestinian refugees, the country received large numbers of Iraqis fleeing successive conflicts and instability. Reflecting its long-standing engagement with labour migration issues, Syria ratified the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families in 2005, joining Türkiye and Egypt as well as a relatively small number of other countries in the Middle East and North Africa that have become parties to the Convention.[4]

▶ 2011–2024: migration statuses and access to work during forced displacement

The outbreak of the conflict in 2011 triggered mass displacement, fundamentally altering patterns of Syrian mobility across the region, from a predominantly labour-related migration to forced displacement. The large-scale arrival of Syrian refugees significantly increased labour supply in host countries, particularly in low-skilled segments of the labour market, against a backdrop of slow economic growth, high unemployment and institutional constraints. While Türkiye hosted the largest number of Syrian refugees in absolute terms, Lebanon experienced one of the highest levels of Syrian refugees' presence relative to its population, having received more than one million Syrian refugees since 2011 for an estimated population of less than six million. In Jordan, UNHCR had registered approximately 650,000 Syrians, while the Jordanian government estimated the total number—including unregistered individuals—to exceed 1.4 million.

During the initial years of the crisis (2011–2014), most host countries maintained legal and administrative barriers that limited refugees' access to formal employment, either by restricting access to a narrow range of sectors or by excluding refugees from formal employment altogether. As a result, many Syrian refugees relied on informal work, often characterized by low wages, income insecurity, long working hours, inadequate occupational safety and health protections, and limited access to labour rights.

[3] Agreement of Workforce Cooperation between the Government of The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic, 8 October 2001. Available at www.jedco.gov.jo; 2008 Agreement on Regulation of Recruitment and Hiring Workforce between Jordan and Syria. See legalizing-labour-work-rights-and-conditions-for-syrian-refugees-in-jordan.pdf, p. 13.

[4] International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, available at https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-convention-protection-rights-all-migrant-workers. The Convention has also been ratified by Algeria, Libya, Mauritania and Morocco.

Refugees' access to labour markets was also shaped by policies extending beyond labour regulation, notably those governing residency, personal identification, and family reunification and labour mobility. In many cases, valid residency status became a prerequisite for accessing employment and obtaining work authorization. Yet, residency status alone did not necessarily ensure effective access to labour markets, as regulatory and administrative restrictions often limited workers' ability to take up employment, change employers, or access a wider range of sectors and occupations. Frequent changes to administrative rules and requirements in several countries also increased the risk of refugees falling into irregular migratory status. This, in turn, further constrained their access to formal employment and heightened their vulnerability to exploitation and abusive working conditions.

From 2016 onwards, however, host countries increasingly adopted legal and policy measures aimed at facilitating Syrian refugees' access to formal employment. These included the Jordan Compact, Türkiye's work permit regulations, and sector-specific employment arrangements in Lebanon, as well as efforts in Egypt, Iraq and Morocco to strengthen refugees' access to legal residency, documentation and employment opportunities. While these measures created new pathways to formal employment, significant legal, administrative and practical obstacles to accessing them remained.

Table 1- Host countries' legal and policy frameworks governing Syrian Refugees' access to the labour market

Country	Party to the 1951 Refugee Convention & 1967 Protocol	National legal framework for refugees	Main protection regime for Syrians	Conditions for accessing the labour market
Jordan	No	No dedicated refugee law; protection provided primarily through the 1998 MoU with UNHCR and related administrative arrangements.	UNHCR registration combined with administrative arrangements permitting legal stay, access to services, complemented by evolving work authorization frameworks.	**Access to labour market is conditional on obtaining a work permit**: Following the launch of the Jordan Compact in 2016, a series of measures progressively facilitated access to formal employment, including the issuance of work permits at reduced or waived cost, greater flexibility to change employers, and expanded access to selected sectors and occupations. However, employment opportunities remained concentrated in sectors such as agriculture, construction, manufacturing and selected services, particularly in areas targeted by Compact-related initiatives and Special Economic Zones, with restrictions persisting elsewhere. Work permit fees were largely waived during the Jordan Compact period but permit-related costs and social security contributions resumed from 2024 onwards.
Lebanon	No	No dedicated refugee law.	No formal refugee status recognized under national law; protection based on UNHCR registration (until registration was halted in 2015 at the request of the Government); temporary residency arrangements.	**Restricted pathways to formal employment**: Access to work permits remained constrained by sector-specific restrictions and administrative requirements linked to legal residency. Given these limitations, alongside the pre-existing informality of the Lebanese labour market, many Syrian refugees remained undocumented and continued to work informally

				with limited labour protections.
Türkiye	Yes, but maintains a geographical limitation to refugees fleeing events occurring in European countries and regulates Syrians under the Temporary Protection regime.	Law on Foreigners and International Protection (2013).	Temporary Protection regime (formalized by the 2014 Temporary Protection Regulation).	**Evolving labour market access arrangements**: Since 2016, Syrians under Temporary Protection (SuTPs) have been able to access formal employment through the work permit system under the International Labour Force framework and regulations applicable to foreigners under Temporary Protection. Work permits remain an important route to formal employment, alongside applicable work permit exemption mechanisms. Access is subject to eligibility and administrative requirements, including provisions related to place of registration, occupation and employment, while applicable social security obligations remain relevant to formal employment. Despite progressive measures to facilitate access, informality continues to affect the labour market participation of Syrians.
Egypt	Yes, with several reservations to specific provisions related to socio-economic rights.	No dedicated refugee law for most of the period under review; A national asylum law was adopted in 2024, with its Executive Regulations issued in May 2026. The transition towards a fully operational national asylum system is still under way. Together with the 2025 Labour Law, the new framework	Refugee status determination conducted by UNHCR under a 1954 MoU. Syrians have generally accessed protection through UNHCR registration and government-issued residency arrangements under an urban refugee model.	**Subject to work permit and foreign worker regulations:** Significant administrative and practical barriers persist, contributing to a high prevalence of informal employment among refugees. Recent policy initiatives, including the new National Employment Strategy, have nonetheless emphasized labour market inclusion of refugees.

		expands the legal basis for refugees' access to employment, including self-employment and certain professions, subject to recognition and licensing requirements.		
Iraq	Yes	No comprehensive national refugee law; refugee protection governed through administrative arrangements and regional frameworks, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.	UNHCR registration combined with temporary protection and residency arrangements, primarily in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.	**Access subject to labour and residency regulations:** Generally, there is greater access in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, although barriers remain, particularly regarding work permits, access to public sector employment, and recognition of qualifications.

The role of social partners:

Trade unions generally played a limited but evolving role in refugees' labour market inclusion, advocating for decent work, access to labour rights and protection from exploitation. In Jordan, the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions (GFJTU) assumed a particularly significant role by facilitating access to flexible work permits for Syrian refugees, helping to expand pathways to formal employment. However, the model remained constrained by the predominance of informal work and limited unionization among the refugee population. In Lebanon, trade unions in the construction sector involved Syrian refugees in their structures. In Türkiye, trade unions were primarily engaged in social dialogue, awareness-raising and the promotion of labour rights and decent work, including efforts to address labour market informality and improve working conditions in sectors employing both refugees and host-community workers. However, high levels of informal employment continue to constrain effective representation and access to labour rights for many refugee and migrant workers.

Employers' and business membership organizations in Jordan and Türkiye contributed to policy dialogue on refugee labour market inclusion, particularly with respect to work permit systems and labour market needs. In Jordan, employer representatives were engaged in discussions on the implementation of the Jordan Compact, together with the trade unions, and on employment in sectors open to Syrian refugees yet facing labour supply shortages. In Türkiye, where work permits were largely employer-sponsored, employers and their representative organizations played an important role in facilitating formal employment and supporting initiatives on skills development and labour market integration. At the same time, employers frequently highlighted the need for simpler administrative procedures and lower compliance costs to encourage formal hiring.

▶ Since 2024: emerging patterns of Syrian labour mobility

Since the political transition in Syria in December 2024 , three interlinked dynamics have begun to reshape regional mobility, namely refugee returns to Syria, evolving legal and administrative arrangements for Syrians across host countries, and the emergence of new patterns of circular migration between Syria and neighbouring countries.

Return and reconstruction in Syria

As of October 2026, an estimated 1.8 million Syrian refugees returned to their country. Yet labour market conditions in Syria remain difficult. While reconstruction is generating new labour demand, socioeconomic recovery continues to be constrained by limited investments, an unconducive business environment, low wages, high levels of informality, weak social protection systems, and gaps in technical and institutional capacities. As a result, the labour market faces structural challenges, requiring a comprehensive and coordinated approach to tackle the underlying constraints and strengthen the effectiveness and inclusiveness of labour market institutions and policies.

Emerging responses from the Syrian government include the Syria Recovery Plan, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour (MOSAL) Strategic Plan, and the Solutions Working Group,[5] alongside efforts to strengthen employment, livelihoods and the socio-economic reintegration of returnees. Positive developments in the registration of new enterprises and in the expansion of workers covered by social security provide encouraging signals of an emerging socioeconomic recovery. Investments in skills and enterprise development, employment support, and in public works programmes that generate employment while rebuilding essential infrastructure and local economies are increasing. Increased regional engagement, particularly from Türkiye and Gulf countries, could support Syria's economic recovery and attract foreign investment. An increase in private foreign investments is also likely to attract a migrant workforce, making the need to discuss the adoption of a right-based labour migration policy as a priority in the context of a wider national employment strategy. Such a policy would need to build on past experiences and assess the opportunities and risks, including the risks associated with the sponsorship system commonly applied in the region.

Evolving legal, residency and labour market arrangements in host countries

Syrian refugees who have opted to remain in their host countries, at least for the time being, are increasingly affected by evolving legal, residency, and labour market arrangements. While approaches vary across countries, some governments are exploring or introducing pathways that facilitate access to employment, regularize certain categories of workers, or in some cases, support a transition towards employment-based migration statuses, while adapting labour market access and labour migration frameworks accordingly.

In Lebanon, the regularization of Syrian nationals' presence in the country and their access to employment involves interlinked residency and work authorization procedures, administered primarily by the General Security Office and the Ministry of Labour. For working-age Syrians seeking to regularize their legal status through employment, the process generally requires securing or renewing their legal residency and obtaining a work permit, through compliance with applicable eligibility criteria, documentation requirements, fees payment and, where relevant, an employment relationship with a Lebanese employer. Lebanon has recently introduced time-bound regularization measures aimed at facilitating the transition of foreign workers, including Syrian workers under specific conditions, from irregular to regular employment and residence status. For Syrian workers specifically, the Lebanese General Security introduced a specific regularization mechanism and created pathways for different categories subject to specified conditions. Syrians registered with UNHCR who were engaged in paid employment can regularize their situation under this mechanism after signing a voluntary declaration requesting closure of their UNHCR file. Syrians not registered with UNHCR who had entered Lebanon legally before November 2025 can also benefit from this arrangement.

[5] The Solutions Working Group (SWG), co-led by IOM, UNHCR and UNDP, aligns strategies across the humanitarian-development--development nexus (HDPN) and strengthens links between national and regional efforts.

While recent measures have sought to facilitate access to regular migrant status, the process remains challenging for many displaced Syrians, particularly those working informally or without a stable employer. As of October 2026, approximately 17,500 work permit applications were submitted by Syrian nationals, while more than 4,000 Syrians had their UNHCR files inactivated following successful regularization procedures. This represents only a small proportion of the estimated 250,000-300,000 working-age displaced Syrians engaged in income-generating activities in Lebanon. High financial costs, complex administrative requirements, limited pathways for workers in informal employment, and concerns about penalties or enforcement actions are among the main reasons for this low uptake.

Jordan introduced a work permit scheme for Syrian refugees under the 2016 Jordan Compact to facilitate access to formal employment and reduce informality. The scheme evolved from employer-specific permits towards more flexible arrangements, including permits allowing eligible Syrians to work without being legally tied to a single employer. Flexible permits, facilitated through trade unions and agricultural cooperatives, have been particularly relevant for workers in agriculture, construction and other occupations characterized by temporary or multiple employment relationships. Initially, Jordan waived work permit fees for Syrians, contributing to a significant uptake at almost 500,000 work permits issued between 2016 and 2024. However, since the broad fee exemptions ended in 2024, costs associated with formal employment increased considerably, including social security contributions and other work permit-related charges. As a result, the number of work permits issued declined sharply. Despite some progress in facilitating refugees' access to formal employment, challenges remain, particularly around the affordability of work authorization, restrictions on access to certain occupations, and the persistently very low market participation among women. Jordan's experience highlights the importance of affordable fees, simplified procedures and flexible permits that reflect actual employment patterns.

In Türkiye, the evolution of labour market access does not necessarily entail a transition from temporary protection to regular migrant-worker status, as Syrians under Temporary Protection can participate in formal employment while retaining their protection status. Türkiye has regulated access to formal employment for Syrians under Temporary Protection since 2016 through the Regulation on Work Permits of Foreigners under Temporary Protection. Traditionally, Syrians under Temporary Protection could apply for a work permit six months after registration, generally through an employer and in their registered province, with permits linked to a specific workplace and subject to employment quotas. In October 2024, Türkiye introduced measures to expand the use of work permit exemptions for eligible Syrians under Temporary Protection, with the aim of facilitating access to formal employment through free and simplified procedures. The regular employer-sponsored work permit route nevertheless remains available to Syrians under Temporary Protection. Despite the more flexible framework, informality remains widespread, leaving many Syrians exposed to decent work deficits, including lower wages, longer working hours and increased occupational safety and health risks. At the same time, geographical restrictions, occupational limitations, registration requirements and employers' responsibility for social insurance continue to affect access to formal employment.

Türkiye's experience also illustrates the importance of linking access to work authorization with formalization and social protection. While work permit and work permit exemption mechanisms can help reduce administrative barriers to formal employment, work authorization alone does not necessarily result in formalization. Social security registration, employer compliance, awareness of applicable procedures and effective coordination among relevant labour market institutions remain important. These issues are particularly relevant in the evolving context, as Türkiye considers both the continued labour market participation of Syrians who remain in the country and the potential labour market implications of voluntary return and other forms of mobility.

Iraq allows refugees and asylum-seekers to access employment, but the applicable procedures differ between Federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). In Federal Iraq, refugees and asylum-seekers, registered with the Ministry of Interior's Permanent Committee for Refugees, can in principle obtain a work permit from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs; UNHCR documentation alone does not constitute work authorization. In 2026, Iraq adopted new Instructions No. 1 of 2026 regulating the recruitment, employment and work permits of foreign workers, replacing the previous 1987 instructions. In the KRI, where the majority of Syrian refugees live, access to employment is closely linked to the obtention of valid humanitarian residency documentation. However, KRI residency does not automatically authorize movement or employment in Federal Iraq. Overall, refugees in KRI have relatively broad legal access to private-sector employment, but in practice, much employment remains informal, with limited labour and social protection.

In Egypt, refugees and asylum-seekers do not currently benefit from a dedicated or simplified work-permit scheme comparable to those established in Jordan or Türkiye. Access to formal employment remains subject to the regulations governing the employment of foreign nationals, with significant administrative and practical barriers persisting. Egypt

adopted its first national Asylum Law in 2024 (Law No. 164), recognising refugees' rights to employment and self-employment, subject to applicable national regulations. Its Executive Regulations were issued in May 2026 and entered into force in August 2026, although the transition towards a fully operational national asylum system remains ongoing. Refugees registered with UNHCR obtain asylum-based residence permits, whose validity was extended from six months to one year in 2025. These permits do not in themselves constitute work authorization. The inclusion of refugees and migrant workers in the National Employment Strategy (2026) and its implementation plan is a positive policy development, although its operationalisation will require substantial resources and institutional capacity. Taken together, the new asylum legislation, the Labour Law and the National Employment Strategy reflect growing policy recognition of the interlinkages between asylum, labour market inclusion and the need for greater policy coherence.

Circular mobility across the region

Finally, the movement of Syrians can no longer be viewed as a one-directional process of return. Emerging patterns in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Türkiye point to growing forms of circular mobility – as was the case in the pre-2011 period – but now including temporary "go-and-see" visits, livelihood-related travel, and engagement in reconstruction and investment. Some Syrian employers have also moved their businesses to neighbouring countries. Similarly, the political and economic transition in Syria gives rise to a need to explore how temporary labour mobility of nationals with a diverse range of skills from neighbouring countries might also benefit the Syrian labour market. Understanding these dynamics is essential to assess how labour mobility legal frameworks can respond to such movements in line with labour market needs, international labour standards and protection status.

In the case of Türkiye, emerging movements between Türkiye and Syria raise particular questions concerning the relationship between temporary protection, voluntary return and possible future labour mobility. Temporary or authorized cross-border visits, voluntary return and future employment-based mobility should be distinguished, as they may have different implications for legal and protection status and subsequent access to employment. Any future arrangements facilitating labour mobility between Türkiye and Syria would therefore need to clarify the conditions governing lawful cross-border movement, work authorization, re-entry and access to social protection, taking into account the distinct legal implications of temporary visits, voluntary return and employment-based migration. Such arrangements should be developed in a manner that safeguards workers' rights and avoids unintended consequences for their legal or protection status.

▶ The way forward: towards a rights-based labour mobility framework through bilateral and regional cooperation

Recommendations

Labour mobility in the region has become a reality that requires adapted legal, policy, and institutional frameworks, starting with the national level and complemented by enhanced bilateral and regional cooperation. In this regard, the following initial recommendations may be considered:

- As a first step, participating governments should review their existing national legal and policy frameworks relating to employment and labour mobility in consultation with workers' and employers' organisations to identify adjustments that could promote the rights-based labour mobility of Syrians.
- Drawing on the evaluations at the national level and with due attention to the issues identified in this policy brief, it would be important to assess how flexible, rights-based and demand-driven labour mobility arrangements can be incorporated into existing and future regional and bilateral legislative, policy and institutional frameworks relating to Syrian refugees and Syrian workers. In sectors largely operating outside the scope of labour laws, such arrangements should contribute to a formalisation process of both employment and relevant economic units. The assessment should consider how such frameworks can support recovery, reconstruction and regional economic integration, including through peer-to-peer learning and exchange, while aligning with international labour standards, labour market needs, fair recruitment principles and decent work objectives.
- Particular attention should be given to legal and policy measures that can respond to the labour and skills demands associated with Syria's reconstruction and economic development, including in construction,

infrastructure rehabilitation, agriculture, manufacturing and services, while also addressing labour market needs in neighbouring countries. The assessment could examine mechanisms to facilitate skills circulation, labour mobility and labour market integration across the region, including through leveraging the complementary roles for Lebanon, Jordan, Türkiye, Iraq and Egypt.[6]

- The analysis should identify legislative, policy and institutional provisions that can support temporary, seasonal and circular labour mobility; skills partnerships, including skills development and qualifications recognition; job matching mechanisms; and pathways enabling returnees to transfer skills, capital and business networks to Syria. It should further examine the institutional arrangements required for implementation, including regional coordination mechanisms, bilateral cooperation frameworks and tripartite social dialogue, to ensure that labour mobility responds to labour market demand while safeguarding wages, social security, occupational safety and health, freedom of association and other fundamental workers' rights.
- A further consideration would be to explore how such arrangements can also support the labour mobility of nationals of host countries across the region (Lebanon, Jordan, Türkiye, Iraq and Egypt) on a reciprocal basis and how this mobility can bring benefits to the Syrian labour market.

[6] In this context, Türkiye's experience in supporting the formal employment, skills development and entrepreneurship of Syrians, together with its manufacturing capacity and established trade and business linkages with Syria, could provide opportunities for future bilateral cooperation on skills partnerships, recognition of qualifications, labour market matching, enterprise development and rights-based labour mobility. Such cooperation could be informed by evolving labour and skills needs in both countries, including those associated with Syria's recovery and reconstruction.

Key resources

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