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The downfall of Assad: Syrian refugees' settlement intentions after the unexpected regime change

IAB-Discussion Paper, No. 09/2025

Provided in Cooperation with:
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Suggested Citation: Hammer, Luisa et al. (2025) : The downfall of Assad: Syrian refugees' settlement intentions after the unexpected regime change, IAB-Discussion Paper, No. 09/2025, Institut für Arbeitsmarkt- und Berufsforschung (IAB), Nürnberg, https://doi.org/10.48720/IAB.DP.2509

This Version is available at:
https://hdl.handle.net/10419/324910

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09|2025 The Downfall of Assad: Syrian Refugees' Settlement Intentions after the Unexpected Regime Change

Luisa Hammer, Kamal Kassam, Yuliya Kosyakova, Katia Gallegos-Torres, Lukas Olbrich, Theresa Koch, Simon Wagner

ISSN 2195-2663

The Downfall of Assad: Syrian Refugees' Settlement Intentions after the Unexpected Regime Change

Luisa Hammer (IAB), Kamal Kassam (IAB), Yuliya Kosyakova (IAB and Otto-Friedrich-Universität Bamberg), Katia Gallegos-Torres (IAB and ZEW), Lukas Olbrich (IAB), Theresa Koch (IAB) and Simon Wagner (IAB)

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Abstract

On December 8, 2024, the sudden collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime, abruptly changed Syria's political landscape and reshaped the return prospects for millions of Syrians living abroad. We exploit this unanticipated regime change as a natural experiment to estimate the causal impact of homeland developments on refugees' settlement and return intentions. Drawing on novel survey data from Germany, launched just days before Assad's fall, we find that the regime collapse significantly affected the expressed settlement intentions of Syrians in Germany. Respondents interviewed afterward were more likely to express temporary settlement intentions, more likely to report emigration considerations, and more likely to express uncertainty about their future in Germany. However, we find no effect on concrete short-term emigration plans, suggesting that increased return aspirations reflect forward-looking intentions rather than immediate behavioral change. Further analyses shows that legal security in Germany and weaker social or emotional integration correlate with a stronger preference for temporary stay.

Zusammenfassung

Am 8. Dezember 2024 veränderte der plötzliche Zusammenbruch des Regimes von Bashar al-Assad die politische Landschaft Syriens und die Rückkehraussichten für Millionen von im Ausland lebenden Syrern abrupt. Wir nutzen diesen unerwarteten Regimewechsel als natürliches Experiment, um die kausalen Auswirkungen der Entwicklungen im Heimatland auf die Ansiedlungs- und Rückkehrabsichten von Flüchtlingen zu schätzen. Auf der Grundlage neuartiger Umfragedaten aus Deutschland, die nur wenige Tage vor dem Sturz Assads erhoben wurden, stellen wir fest, dass der Zusammenbruch des Regimes die Ansiedlungsabsichten der Syrer in Deutschland erheblich beeinflusste. Befragte, die danach befragt wurden, äußerten eher temporäre Niederlassungsabsichten, gaben eher an, Auswanderungsüberlegungen zu haben, und äußerten eher Unsicherheit über ihre Zukunft in Deutschland. Wir finden jedoch keine Auswirkungen auf konkrete kurzfristige Auswanderungspläne, was darauf hindeutet, dass die erhöhten Rückkehrwünsche eher zukunftsorientierte Absichten als unmittelbare Verhaltensänderungen widerspiegeln. Weitere Analysen zeigen, dass Rechtssicherheit in Deutschland und eine schwächere soziale oder emotionale Integration mit einer stärkeren Präferenz für einen vorübergehenden Aufenthalt korrelieren.

JEL

F22, J15, D74

Keywords

Migration, Settlement Intentions, Conflict, Syria, Germany, International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany (IMPa)

Acknowledgments

We thank participants at the IAB brownbag seminar for valuable comments.

1 Introduction

Unexpectedly, Bashar al-Assad's regime collapsed on December 8, 2024, bringing an end, at least provisionally, to decades of authoritarian rule, conflict, and widespread suffering among the Syrian population. In the immediate aftermath, several European countries – including Germany, Austria, France, Greece, and the United Kingdom – postponed the processing of asylum applications from Syrian nationals (e.g., LeMonde/AFP, 2024) and began reconsidering policies which facilitate voluntary return. However, despite this political turning point, conditions in Syria remain deeply insecure. A central and unresolved question is whether the approximately 6.2 million Syrian refugees living abroad (UNHCR, 2025) are now willing to return to their country of origin. This study offers first empirical insights into this question by leveraging newly collected, large-scale survey data, the *International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany* (IMPa) (Kosyakova et al., 2025) and exploiting the natural experiment distilled from the unexpected timing of Assad's fall, which occurred five days after the start of the fieldwork. This exogenous shock enables us to estimate the causal effect of a sudden and significant change in the homeland's political situation on the return intentions of Syrian migrants residing in Germany.

This question cannot be answered without understanding the current situation in Syria. Although Assad's departure ended an era of authoritarianism and war, it did not bring immediate peace or stability. The war left deep scars: an estimated 500,000 people were killed (Daher, 2024), more than 13 million had been displaced – more than half internally, about 5 million in neighboring countries, over 1 million in Europe, and especially in Germany which hosts the largest number of Syrians outside of the Middle East (UNHCR, 2025). By 2024, 15.3 million Syrians required humanitarian aid. Basic needs remained unmet – with 90 percent of the population living in poverty, 13.6 million lacking access to clean water and sanitation, and food prices over 100 times higher than in 2013 (OCHA, 2025). The economy shrank by 54 percent from 2010 to 2021, and public spending remained devastated across sectors including health, education, and infrastructure (World Bank, 2024),

The fall of Assad has further complicated the political landscape. The rebel group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) announced a transitional government and declared a general amnesty. However, HTS remains designated as a terrorist organization by the United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), United States (US), and other countries (National Counterterrorism Center, 2022). Many religious and ethnic minorities now fear renewed persecution, particularly in regions such as Homs (France24, 2025), coastal cities (Bachega/Lapham, 2025), and Kurdish-inhabited areas in northeast Syria (Gol, 2025). The UN Special Envoy for Syria has emphasized that "the conflict has not ended yet" (Pedersen, 2024).

In contrast, Germany has become a central destination and host country for Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011 (Brücker/Kosyakova/Vallizadeh, 2020). Nearly 1 million Syrians reside in Germany today, including over 80,000 with permanent residence status and 165,000 who have acquired citizenship since 2014 (Destatis, 2025a,b) . By 2023, more than 287,000 Syrian nationals were employed, with 82 percent contributing to social insurance. Economic and sociocultural integration has progressed notably with longer duration of stay (Kanas/Kosyakova, 2023; Brücker et al., 2024). Syrian doctors now represent the largest foreign medical group in Germany, with 5,758 licensed practitioners (Brücker et al., 2024). These figures reflect both the scale of Syrian displacement and the degree of integration many refugees have achieved.

To understand how such populations respond to homeland developments, we draw on theoretical models of return migration that emphasize both *push* and *pull* factors (e.g., Borjas, 1987), also specifically for the case of refugees (Onder/Sayed, 2020). Push factors refer to conditions in the host country (e.g., social isolation, legal insecurity, poor job prospects), while pull factors relate to the situation in the country of origin. Alrababah et al. (2023), studying Syrian refugees in Lebanon, identify four key determinants of return: (1) individual circumstances in the host country, (2) developments in the country of origin, (3) reallocation costs, and (4) the availability of credible information about the risks and opportunities regarding potential return. Their findings suggest that homeland conditions are the strongest predictors of return intentions—and only once these are perceived as secure do host-country push factors (e.g., economic situation) begin to matter. We extend this literature by studying how a major political shock in the country of origin – the sudden collapse of Assad's regime – shapes return preferences. Our framework also draws on Cassarino's conceptual distinction between the *willingness* and the *readiness* to return (Cassarino, 2013). While willingness captures subjective aspirations, readiness reflects the capacity and preparedness to act (Cassarino, 2013). In line with this distinction, we examine three dimensions of migration decision-making: general settlement preferences in Germany, emigration considerations, and concrete short-term migration plans.

Our empirical setting offers a rare natural experiment. The first wave of the International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany (IMPa) began fieldwork on December 3, 2024 – just five days before Assad's fall. This timing enables us to compare the return intentions of Syrian refugees surveyed before and after the event. We use a *Difference-in-Differences* (DiD) approach to identify the causal effect of Assad's fall, drawing on a control group of migrants from countries experiencing ongoing conflict and low return feasibility: Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. To ensure internal validity, we restrict our analysis to respondents interviewed between December 3 and 20, 2024 – a period during which 85 percent of the interviews were completed.[1] This restriction minimizes the risk of contamination by longer-term policy changes or delayed information diffusion.

[1] We present robustness checks using the full sample period, extending until the end of the survey on April 15th, 2025.

Our study makes several important contributions. First, we provide causal evidence on how sudden political developments in the country of origin affect refugees' behavior in the host country. Second, we distinguish between long-term settlement intentions and short-term emigration plans, capturing different temporal dimensions of return-related decision making. Third, we test the potential channels for the regime change effect on refugees' settlement intentions such as changes in the feeling of belonging to Syria or to the host-country, discrimination experiences, and health status. Fourth, we examine heterogeneous treatment effects in the push- and pull factor framework by legal status, economic situation, and social integration. These analyses help disentangle the roles of host- and origin-country factors in shaping migration decisions. Together, our findings provide new insights into the behavioral responses of refugees to homeland political change, and offer implications for policy debates about return, reintegration, and host-country obligations in the wake of regime transitions.

2 Method

2.1 Data

We use the first wave of the *International Mobility Panel of Migrants in Germany* (IMPa) (Kosyakova et al., 2025) a large-scale survey conducted by the Institute for Employment Research (IAB). The panel targets immigrants currently residing in Germany, with a particular focus on return and onward migration dynamics. The survey is conducted online to enable future follow-ups, even after participants have already left Germany. The questionnaire was offered in 19 different languages to facilitate the understanding for the respondents.[2] Participation was incentivized by a voucher of the value of 5 €. The overall response rate amounts to 5.9 percent. In its first wave, approximately 40,000 participants completed the survey. Fieldwork began on December 2, 2024, with the first responses recorded on December 3—five days before the unexpected collapse of the Assad regime. The majority of interviews (85 percent) were completed by December 20, 2024.

Our main outcomes measure respondents' settlement and migration intentions. The primary variable captures permanent stay intentions in Germany, based on the question: "Do you want to stay in Germany forever?" with response options: "Yes," "No," and "Don't

[2] These languages are: German, English, Polish, Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese, Hungarian, Bulgarian, Czech, Greek, Dari, Arabic, Russian, Ukrainian, Croatian, Romanian, Serbian, Turkish.

know." We derive two binary indicators: (1) *Temporary stay intentions*, coded as 1 if the response is "No," and 0 if "Yes.", (2) *Uncertain intentions*, coded as 1 if the response is "Don't know," and 0 if "Yes."

In addition, we examine a measure of *emigration considerations*, based on whether the respondent reported having thought about leaving Germany within the past 12 months (yes/no). To assess more concrete mobility behavior, we use a binary indicator for *short-term emigration plans*, which captures whether the respondent has made concrete plans to emigrate in the next 12 months. For those with such plans, we further distinguish between *short-term plans to return* to the country of origin and *short-term plans of onward migration* to a third country. The exact phrasing of all survey questions is provided in Supplementary Table A.7.

2.2 Empirical Strategy

To estimate the causal effect of the regime change in Syria on Syrian migrants' intentions to stay in or to leave Germany, we employ a *Difference-in-Differences* (DiD) approach. The DiD estimator relies on comparing the changes in outcomes before and after a *treatment* for the treatment group to the difference before and after the treatment in the control group. If the before-after difference in the control group is deducted from the same difference in the treatment group, two things are achieved (Fredriksson/Oliveira, 2019): First, time-varying factors that affect both groups are netted out. That is, if other changes over time affect both groups similarly, their influence is eliminated by subtracting the control group's before-after change. Second, time-invariant differences between the treatment and control groups—whether observable or unobservable—are also eliminated as the DiD approach studies changes over time rather than absolute levels.

The key identifying assumption in DiD models is the parallel trends assumption, i.e., that in the absence of the treatment, the average change in outcome for the treatment and control groups would have followed similar (parallel) trends. This assumption is not directly testable but we run some tests below to support its plausibility (Cunningham, 2021; Lechner, 2011). Additionally, the Stable Unit Treatment Value assumption (SUTVA) must hold. This assumption implies that (1) there are no interactions between units, i.e. also no direct spillover effects between the two groups, and (2) that the treatment is uniquely defined and consistent across individuals. Further (3), there should be no changes in the composition of the groups over time (Sant'Anna/Zhao, 2020).

Estimation equation Let Y_i be the outcome for individual i observed at time $Post_i \in \{0, 1\}$, where $\text{Post}_i = 1$ indicates the post-treatment period. Let $D_i \in \{0, 1\}$ equal 1 if individual i belongs to the treatment group and 0 if it is part of the control group. The DiD model is specified as:

$$Y_{it} = \alpha + \delta D_i + \lambda \cdot \text{Post}_t + \beta(D_i \times \text{Post}_t) + X_i'\gamma + \varepsilon_i, \tag{2.1}$$

where X_i is a vector of observed covariates and ε_{it} is the error term. Coefficient β is the DiD estimator of the *average treatment effect on the treated (ATT)*

As control group we use all migrants from the largest migrant populations coming from regions under a comparable current (civil) conflict or war situation, which hinder return options for these migrants in Germany. These are Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. For the estimations and descriptive analysis, we restrict the sample period to observations between December 3-20, 2024.[3] The treatment is the sudden fall of the Assad regime on December 8. Therefore, the dummy variable Post_t equals 1 for observations registered from the collapse of the Assad regime on December 8, 2024 onward, and 0 for the observations that were surveyed before December 8.

2.2.1 Investigating the identifying assumptions

SUTVA We argue that the treatment corresponds to a sudden political event—the fall of the Assad regime—which is an exogenous event and is uniformly defined across all individuals in the treatment group (Syrians). Therefore, the second component of the SUTVA is likely to hold. Regarding the no-interference assumption, it is plausible in our setting for two reasons. First, the treatment is defined at the group level (nationality-based shock) and the effects are measured within a short time frame, minimizing the risk of behavioral or informational spillovers to the control group. Moreover, as the control group consists of migrants from other origin countries, it is unlikely that their outcomes (e.g., intentions to stay) would be immediately influenced by regime changes in Syria. In a robustness check in Table A.1, we further show that the results do not change significantly when using alternative control groups of persons from asylum countries that were given good prospects to stay in (1) 2015/16 (Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Somalia) and (2) in 2022-2024 (Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia). The latter group does not include any direct neighboring countries of Syria. This supports the credibility of the SUTVA assumption in our empirical design.

[3] Until December 20, 2024, 85% of the interviews had been completed. In robustness checks we use observations from the full sample period until April 15, 2025.

Parallel trends Since the event occurred on December 8, 2024 and the IMPa panel only started on December 3, 2024, we cannot directly observe pre-treatment trends within our data. Instead, we examine long-term time trends in intentions to stay in Germany using the IAB-BAMF-SOEP data over the past ten years, as shown in Figure A.1 in the Appendix. While our main analysis focuses on a narrow window of approximately three weeks during which we would not expect major structural changes in migration intentions, the long-term trends serve as a plausibility check. The data suggest that there are no systematic shocks or diverging developments in the control groups that would raise concerns about violations of the parallel trends assumption within such a short time frame. One notable exception is the drop in intentions to stay among Ukrainians in 2022, coinciding with the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the arrival of newly displaced individuals. However, from 2023 onward, their trend stabilizes at a lower level.

Stability of group characteristics pre- and post-treatment It is reasonable that the regime collapse in Syria posited an exogenous event. However, the participation in the survey is voluntary. In addition, the timing of participation can be chosen individually since it is an online survey. Thus, it would be possible that after the regime change, a different group of Syrians (or in the control groups) decides to participate in the survey. Therefore, in Table A.4 we compare the composition of Syrian respondents before and after the fall of Assad with respect to observed characteristics. We choose to include only characteristics that are assumed to be constant over time, and thus not directly affected by Assad's downfall, i.e., they might also change through a different selection into participating in the survey. Most of the characteristics did not change significantly after the collapse of the regime (see the last column which shows the p-values for a t-test for significant differences). A notable exception is gender—Syrian women are less likely to participate in the survey from December 8 onward. Also persons with a university degree are more likely to participate in the survey after the regime change. We repeat the exercise for the control group in Table A.5.[4] Again, there are only few differences in observable characteristics prior and post treatment (duration of stay in Germany, Ukraine permit, family in Germany and partner abroad). In fact, also within the control group of war countries, the share of participating university graduates seemed to have increased after the regime change in Syria (significant at a level of 10.4%).

We control for any minor imbalances using any covariates that showed significant before-after differences among Syrians as control variables X_i in a robustness check, ensuring robustness of our DiD estimator.[5]

[4] When adjusted for multiple testing by using the Bonferroni correction, we do not find any statistically significant differences.

[5] These covariates include gender, an indicator for the posting tranche[6], family abroad, indicator for university degree.

2.3 Descriptive statistics for Syrians and for control groups

In Table A.6, we show the average characteristics for Syrians and for persons who originate from countries from the control group. Syrians have a lower share of females than in the control groups, are younger, on average, and have been in Germany, on average, since 5 years.

3 Results

3.1 Changes in Settlement Intentions of Syrians in Germany following Assad's Fall

To better understand the dynamics in our data, we first examine descriptive changes in return intentions around the time of Assad's fall on December 8, 2024. Figure 1 shows the proportions of the overall settlement intentions—distinguishing between those who intended to stay permanently, those who wish a temporary stay, and those who reported uncertainty—separately for Syrians and the conflict country control group.

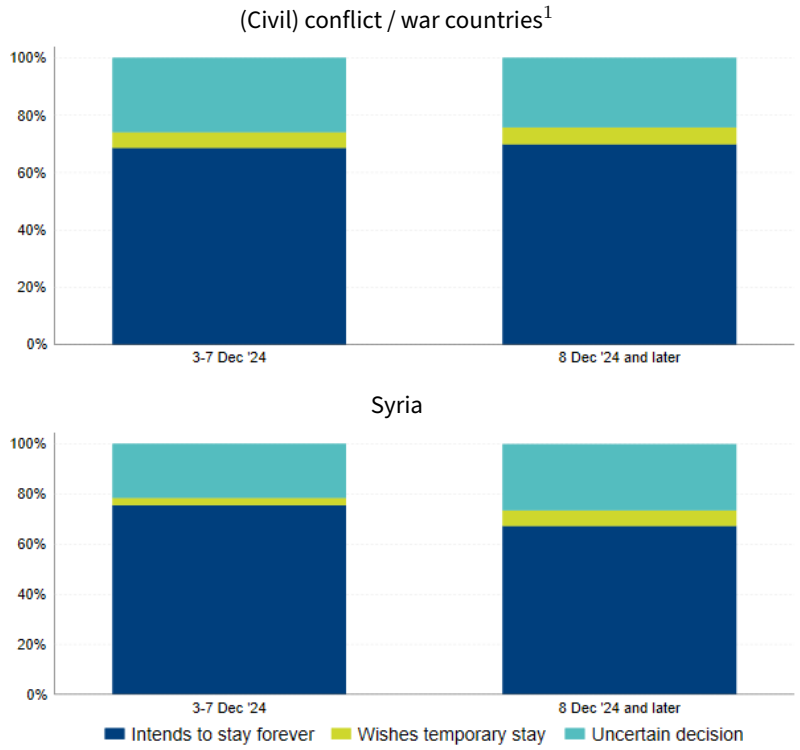
For the control group, composed of individuals from conflict- or war-affected countries where return remains unlikely (Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine), settlement intentions in Germany remained largely stable.

In contrast, Syrian respondents show a clear and significant shift in permanent stay intentions immediately following the collapse of the Assad regime. The share of Syrians intending to stay permanently in Germany declined by 8.4 percentage points from the share of 76% before Assad's fall, accompanied by increases in both the share expressing a desire of staying temporarily and the share of persons indicating uncertainty. These descriptive findings provide first suggestive evidence on the impact of the changed political situation in Syria on the subjective return preferences of Syrians.

3.2 DiD Evidence on Refugees' Responses to Assad's Fall

We next estimate the causal impact of Assad's fall on respondents stated intentions using a DiD framework (see Section 2). Table 1 presents the results for three outcomes: (1)

Figure 1: Difference in stay intentions between groups before and after Assad's fall



Notes: The sample includes persons surveyed between December 3-20, 2024. The y-axis measures the share of persons agreeing with the statements. [1] War- or (civil) conflict–affected regions are Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine. N = 1,013 Syrians, and 4,242 persons from (civil) conflict / war countries.

temporary settlement intentions in Germany[7], (2) uncertainty about settlement[8], and (3) emigration considerations formed within the last 12 months.

The results for temporary stay intentions (Column 1, Table 1) indicate a significant increase of 4 percentage points among Syrians surveyed from December 8 onward compared to the conflict-country control group (post × Syria = 4.381; p-val = 0.027; 95% CI, 0.503 to 8.259). This implies that the collapse of Assad's regime triggered a shift away from long-term settlement intentions toward a more temporary outlook. Notably, Syrians expressed lower baseline levels of temporary stay intentions than the comparison group prior to the political shock (coefficient *Syria*).

In Column 2 (Table 1), we observe a statistically significant increase of 8 percentage points in uncertainty among Syrian respondents compared to the control group (post × Syria = 7.576; p-val = 0.020; 95% CI, 1.170 to 13.982) suggesting that the regime collapse introduced greater ambivalence around their future in Germany.

[7] As opposed to permanent settlement intentions.
[8] As opposed to permanent settlement intentions.

Table 1: Long-term intentions

	Temporary stay intentions	Uncertain settlement intentions	Emigration considerations
Syria vs. conflict/war countries	-3.595*	-5.179*	-5.046*
	(1.426)	(2.602)	(1.989)
Post	0.234	-1.585	-2.011^{+}
	(0.987)	(1.478)	(1.180)
Post × Syria	4.381*	7.576*	4.070^{+}
	(1.978)	(3.268)	(2.471)
Constant	7.397***	27.333***	16.389***
	(0.801)	(1.209)	(0.976)
Observations	3,953	4,963	5,257
Pre-treatment mean (SD)			
Syria	3.80	22.15	11.34
	(19.16)	(41.59)	(31.76)
Conflict / war countries	7.40	27.33	16.39
	(26.18)	(44.58)	(37.03)

Notes: The dependent variable *Temporary stay intentions in Germany* measures the proportion of persons with an intention to stay temporarily in Germany, as opposed to those intending to remain permanently, *Uncertain settlement intentions* captures the proportion of persons stating that they are uncertain as opposed to those intending to remain permanently, and *Emigration considerations* reflect whether respondents had thought in the past 12 months about moving abroad. The dummy variable *post* equals 1 from 8 December onwards (Assad's fall), the variable *Syria* equals 1 if the respondent's country of origin is Syria, or 0 if it belongs to the control group. The interaction term *Post* × *Syria* measures the effect of being Syrian and being surveyed in the Post Assad era. The regressions include observations collected between December 3-20, 2024. The control group *Conflict/war countries* consists of persons originating from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Ukraine. Robust standard errors are reported in brackets. The pre-treatment means measure the average before Assad's fall. The standard deviation is shown in parentheses below.
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.01$.

To test this further, we inspect the effect on emigration considerations, which capture whether respondents had thought about leaving Germany in the past 12 months (Column 3; Table 1). The likelihood of reporting such considerations increased by 4 percentage points (post × Syria = 4.070; p-val = 0.100; 95% CI, -0.774 to 8.915). Although the exact timing of these considerations is ambiguous, they are best understood as short- to medium-term reflections rather than concrete plans. Taken together, the results – showing increased temporary stay intentions, heightened uncertainty, and a rise in emigration considerations – suggest that the major political shock in Syria influenced the subjective migration outlook of Syrians in Germany.

Do these subjective shifts in intentions and considerations translate into concrete short-term migration plans? According to the results in Table 2, the answer is no. We find no statistically significant effects on whether respondents have concrete plans to emigrate

(post × Syria = 1.221; p-val = 0.212; 95% CI, -0.695 to 3.138), nor on plans to return to the country of origin (post × Syria = 0.723; p-val = 0.239; 95% CI, -0.481 to 1.926) or to move to a third country (post × Syria = 0.821; p-val = 0.254; 95% CI, -0.591 to 2.233). Still, point estimates suggest a weak positive trend. The averages confirm that only a small number of Syrians and of the control group reported concrete plans to leave Germany within the next 12 months.

To link these results with our findings on shifts in settlement intentions and emigration considerations, it appears that while Assad's fall prompted significant changes in long-term and abstract migration preferences, it did not immediately lead to changes in refugees' concrete migration plans.

Table 2: Concrete emigration plans for the next 12 months

	Emigration plans	Return plans	Onward migration plans
Syria vs. conflict/war countries	-0.889	-0.682^{+}	-0.521
	(0.703)	(0.399)	(0.507)
Post	0.236	0.172	0.069
	(0.472)	(0.331)	(0.347)
Post × Syria	1.221	0.723	0.821
	(0.977)	(0.614)	(0.720)
Constant	2.083***	0.983***	1.122***
	(0.377)	(0.262)	(0.279)
Observations	5,257	5,195	5,201
Pre-treatment mean (SD)			
Syria	2.17	0.90	1.19
	(14.57)	(9.44)	(10.87)
Conflict / war countries	2.23	1.10	1.17
	(14.57)	(9.44)	(10.87)

Notes: The dummy variable *Emigration plans* equals 1 if the respondent reported having concrete plans to emigrate from Germany within the next 12 months, and 0 otherwise. *Return plans* indicates whether the respondent plans to return to their country of origin within the next 12 months, as opposed to having no emigration plans. *Onward migration plans* captures whether the respondent intends to move to a third country within the next 12 months, as opposed to having no emigration plans. The dummy variable *post* equals 1 from December 8, 2024 onwards (Assad's fall), the variable *Syria* equals 1 if the respondent's country of origin is Syria, or 0 if it belongs to the control group. The interaction term *Post* × *Syria* measures the effect of being Syrian and being surveyed in the Post Assad era. The regressions include observations collected between December 3-20, 2024. The control group *Conflict/war countries* consists of persons originating from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Ukraine. Robust standard errors are reported in parentheses. The pre-treatment means measure the average before Assad's fall. The standard deviation is shown in parentheses below. $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.01$.

3.3 Potential Mechanisms

Since we found significant effects of the regime change in Syria on Syrians' settlement intentions and emigration considerations, we next examine potential mechanisms behind this behavioral response. Specifically, we assess whether and how the political shift in Syria influenced other attitudes and conditions among Syrians in Germany.

Estimates from Supplementary Table A.3 suggest that following Assad's fall, Syrian respondents expressed a higher emotional attachment to their home country compared to the control group (Column 1, Panel A, Table A.3). This effect may reflect a renewed connection to Syria, likely driven by the collapse of the regime that had previously forced them to flee.

In parallel, the German political debate quickly pivoted toward questions of return, with prominent media outlets reporting calls to "send Syrians back to Syria" (e.g. Tagesschau, 2024). This raised the question of whether perceptions of Germany had also changed. However, Column 2 in Panel A of Table A.3 shows no evidence of a decline in Syrians' emotional attachment to Germany. Moreover, we do not observe an increase in perceived experiences of unfair treatment in public (Panel B of Table A.3) – on the contrary, such perceptions slightly decreased.

Finally, we find a modest decline in the share of Syrians reporting plans to reunite with family members in Germany (Column 4 in Panel A of Table A.3). Taken together with the observed increases in emigration considerations and decreases in permanent settlement intentions in Germany, this may suggest a subtle reorientation of future reunification plans away from Germany and toward the country of origin. For other outcomes, such as remittances, life or job satisfaction, social isolation, perceived welcome, time spent with Germans or co-ethnics, and broader experiences of discrimination—we find no significant changes (see Table A.3).

3.4 Differential Responses Across Legal, Economic, and Social Dimensions

To better understand which factors may "push" Syrians out of Germany, we draw on the push-and-pull framework and examine whether different subgroups responded differently to the political shock. Specifically, we re-estimate our DiD models including a triple interaction for being surveyed after Assad's fall, being of Syrian origin and subgroup characteristics. Figure 2 plots the coefficients for these triple interaction terms, capturing differential effects across groups.

We classify host-country push factors in four domains: *legal security* (secure residence status, i.e., possession of German or EU citizenship or a permanent residence permit), *economic integration* (employment, unemployment, and receipt of state welfare benefits), and *social integration* (no emotional attachment to Germany, no emotional attachment to local place of living, low life satisfaction and perceived social isolation). The main pull factor—Syria's changed security outlook after Assad's fall—is captured by the interaction term $post \times Syria$ (not included in the figure).[9]

Legal security appears to function as a strong positive push factor. Syrians with secure residence status in Germany — such as citizenship or a permanent residence permit — were more likely to express temporary stay intentions and report emigration considerations, but also indicate greater uncertainty about their future settlement. This may reflect lower perceived barriers to reallocation, as individuals with secure legal status typically retain the right to return to Germany if needed. In contrast, asylum seekers often face significant legal and logistical obstacles that restrict mobility, particularly in relation to return to Syria.

Economic integration, as measured by employment and unemployment status[10], does not significantly influence migration intentions. However, reliance on state welfare benefits is associated with a significantly lower likelihood of expressing temporary stay intentions. This may indicate that the financial costs of relocating—such as travel and reintegration expenses—are prohibitively high for individuals dependent on state support. Alternatively, it may reflect the limited reintegration opportunities available in Syria. At the same time, reliance on welfare benefits is likely closely tied to legal status, as recipients are typically required to remain in Germany and demonstrate efforts to integrate into the labor market.

A low level of social integration appears to be an important push factor. Syrians who report lower emotional attachment to the host country and their local communities, and who display lower life satisfaction are significantly more likely to express temporary stay intentions.

3.5 Robustness analyses

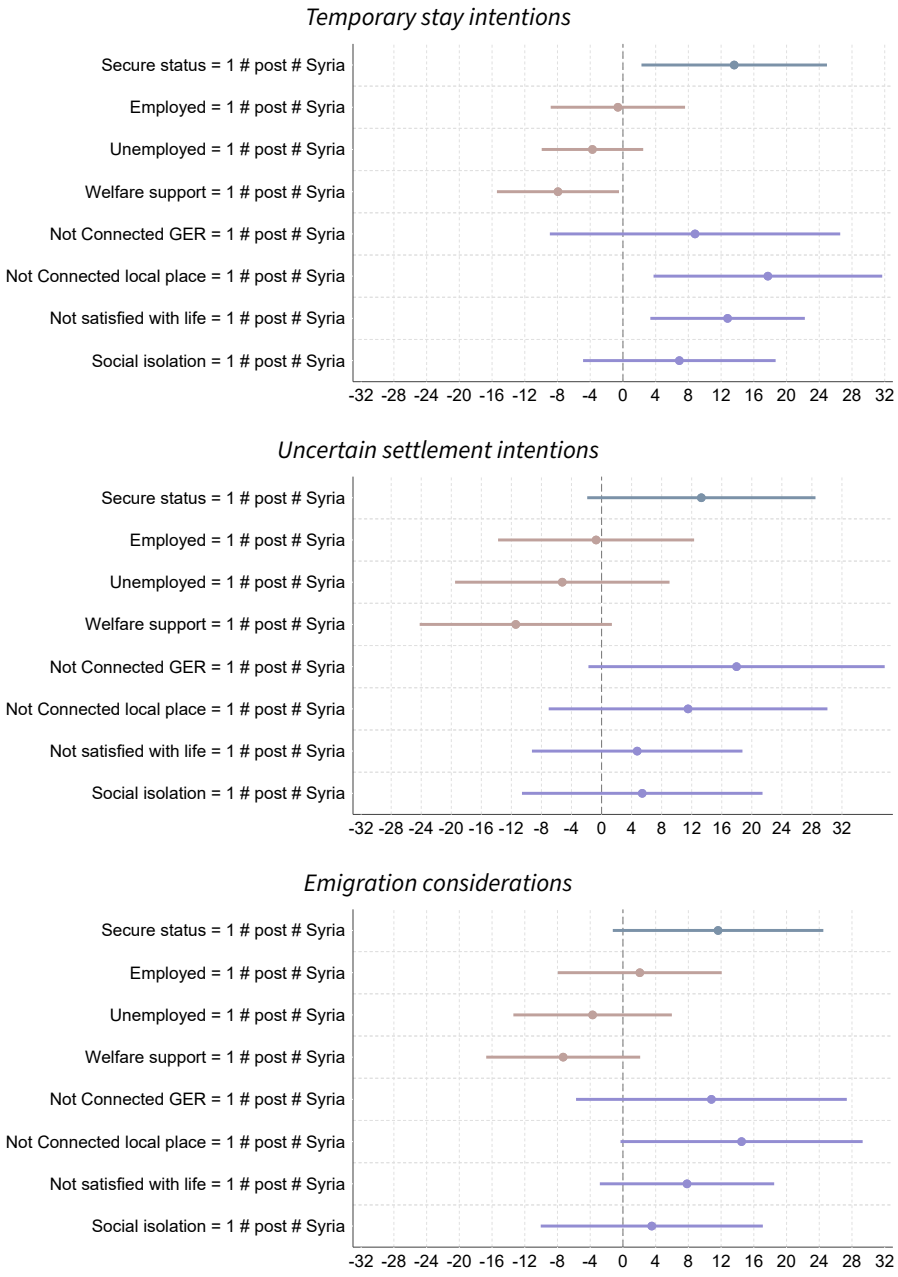
To assess the robustness of our findings, we conduct several additional analyses.

Panels A and B in Supplementary Table A.1 test two **alternative control groups**: (1) asylum-seeking populations with strong prospects of remaining in Germany during the

[9] The overall effect on temporary settlement intentions is 4.31, on uncertain settlement intentions 7.58 and on emigration considerations 4.01

[10] *Employment* is defined as having a paid job. *Unemployment* is defined as being registered as unemployed. A large fraction of people without jobs are not registered as unemployed.

Figure 2: Coefficient plots for the probability of temporary and uncertain settlement intentions in Germany, and emigration considerations, by group



Notes: The graphs plot the coefficients for the triple interaction *group*Syria*post*, that is the differential treatment effect for the specific group. The outcome variables are the intention not to stay forever in Germany, the uncertainty about this choice, and emigration aspirations formed within the last 12 months. *Secure status* = German / EU citizen / permanent residence permit, *Employed* = having a paid job, *Unemployed* = being registered as unemployed, *Welfare support* indicates the reception of public welfare support. The measures for social integration indicate subjective perceptions. The plots include 95% confidence intervals, so that each coefficient for which the confidence interval does not exceed the vertical line at 0% is statistically significant from 0 at the 5% level.

2015–2016 refugee peak—namely Iraqis, Iranians, Eritreans, and Somalis (Kosyakova/Brenzel, 2020), and (2) asylum seekers from countries with a good prospect of remaining in Germany in 2022–2024, such as Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Somalia (BAMF, 2022). The estimated effects on temporary stay intentions remain robust and even increase in size. However, differences in uncertainty and emigration considerations compared to these groups are no longer statistically significant.

Panel C in Table A.1 shows that results are stable when including **observations through April 15, 2025**. The coefficients remain qualitatively unchanged. Panel D restricts the observational period to the symmetric window of 5 days before and after the regime collapse, i.e., from **December 3 - 12, 2024**. While the point estimates go in the same direction as in our main results, due to the smaller sample, the standard errors are very large such that they are not statistically significant.

In Panel E, we introduce a rich set of **individual-level confounders** into the DiD models, including gender, tranche of survey invitation, family location, and possession of a university degree.[11] The results remain robust, although the effect on emigration considerations becomes statistically insignificant. In Section 2method we discuss possible selection into participation in the survey in more detail.

As a complementary check, we estimate a **regression discontinuity (RD) design** focusing on Syrian respondents only using December 8 as the cut-off date.[12] Table A.2 shows that RD estimates generally align in direction with our DiD results but lack statistical significance, likely due to the local nature of RD and limited sample size near the threshold.

4 Conclusion

This study provides novel causal evidence on how sudden geopolitical developments in refugees' countries of origin—specifically, the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria—can shape immigrants' settlement and return intentions. Leveraging the unique timing of the IMPa survey in Germany, we show that this political turning point led to a significant and immediate reduction in the share of Syrians expressing a desire to stay permanently in

[11] These covariates were selected based on (marginally) significant pre-post imbalances within the group of Syrians (see Table A.4).

[12] The RD approach uses only Syrians to test for a discontinuous break at the cut-off date of December 8, 2024. The approach uses few observations, which are determined by the *optimal bandwidth* using the *rdrobust* command. The approach can apply different trends (no trend, linear, or higher order polynomials) before and after the cut-off which we report in the Table A.2.

Germany. This reduction in permanent settlement intentions was accompanied by an increase in both uncertainty and emigration considerations.

When examining potential underlying mechanisms, we find that while emotional attachment to Germany remained largely unchanged, Syrian respondents reported a significant increase in attachment to their home country following Assad's fall. This suggests that the regime collapse reactivated a symbolic or affective connection to Syria, rather than reflecting disillusionment with life in Germany. This interpretation resonates with theoretical perspectives that emphasize the role of identity, belonging, and perceived political opportunity in shaping return aspirations (Carling/Pettersen, 2014).

Our heterogeneity analysis further refines this picture and highlights key host-country conditions that shape responses to the regime change. Legal security—such as holding permanent residency or citizenship—emerges as a strong push factor, likely because it lowers the perceived risks of return since these migrants still possess the right to return to Germany any time. In contrast, reliance on welfare benefits is associated with lower mobility intentions, possibly due to institutional obligations or limited means. Social integration factors, such as feeling welcome, emotionally connected, and satisfied with life in Germany, are linked to stronger settlement intentions, while social isolation increases openness to emigration. These results confirm that social embeddedness can serve as a powerful anchor against mobility (De Haas/Fokkema, 2011).

Despite the marked shifts in settlement intentions and emigration considerations, these changes were not mirrored in respondents' short-term emigration plans: only about one percent of Syrians reported concrete plans to emigrate in the following year. This apparent discrepancy points to a common gap between willingness and readiness to return (Cassarino, 2013), likely shaped by logistical, legal, and emotional constraints, particularly in post-conflict or uncertain return scenarios (Müller-Funk/Fransen, 2023).

Our findings must be interpreted in light of some limitations. First, our data capture immediate attitudinal shifts following a singular political event: longer-term panel data would be needed to assess the persistence of these effects and their connection to actual behavior. Second, although our identification strategy offers strong internal validity, the generalizability of results may be limited to Syrian refugees in Germany. Third, the sequencing of questions and the self-selection of interview timing[13] may have influenced the way respondents reported their intentions and considerations.

In conclusion, the study demonstrates that political developments in origin countries can have rapid and measurable effects on refugees' aspirations—even among those who appear

[13] We do show in the methods section that the comparison of characteristics before and after Assad's fall doesn't point towards major selection issues.

well-integrated in their host society. However, it also shows that policymakers should not interpret such shifts as signals of readiness to return. Return remains a complex process shaped by emotional ties, legal realities, and structural constraints. Policy responses to regime change in countries of origin must therefore avoid simplistic assumptions about voluntary return and recognize the enduring weight of integration experiences in the host country.

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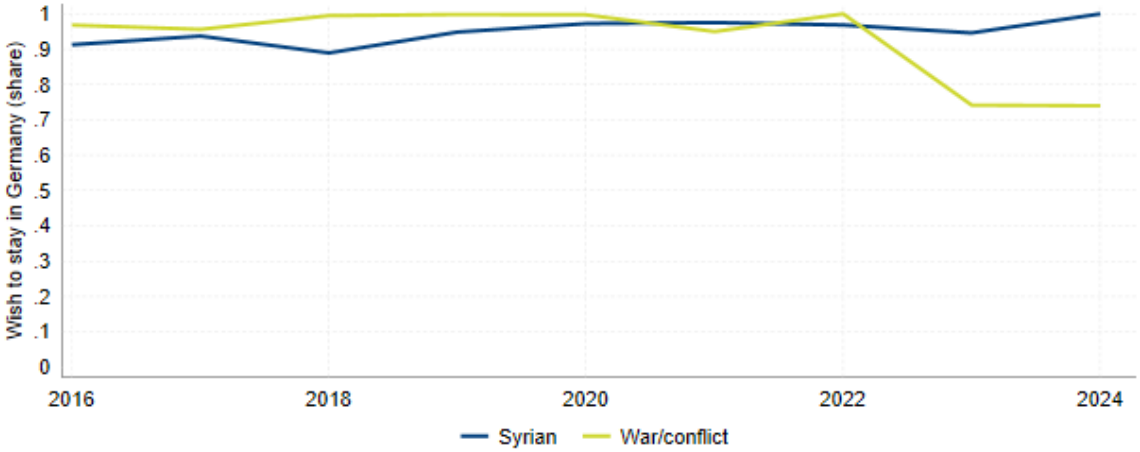
Appendix

Figure A.1: Pre-trends – the wish to stay in Germany permanently



Notes: Annual averages. *Conflict/war countries* include Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Ukraine. All observations are weighted by their survey weight. *Source:* IAB-BAMF-SOEP.

Table A.1: Robustness – Long-term intentions

	Temporary settlement intentions	Uncertain decision	Emigration aspirations
Panel A: Asylum countries with good prospects of staying in 2015/16 control group			
Syria vs. asylum countries 2015	-12.174***	-10.865**	-16.272***
	(3.060)	(3.972)	(3.375)
Post	-5.013	1.615	1.279
	(3.350)	(3.999)	(3.610)
Post × Syria	9.627*	4.376	0.780
	(3.764)	(4.950)	(4.214)
Constant	15.976***	33.019***	27.615***
	(2.823)	(3.234)	(2.895)
Observations	1,232	1,583	1,696
Panel B: Asylum countries with good perspectives of staying in 2024 control group			
Syria vs. asylum countries 2024	-1.715	2.742	-2.702
	(2.237)	(3.814)	(3.132)
Post	-1.368	0.380	-1.293
	(2.294)	(3.841)	(3.247)
Post × Syria	5.982*	5.611	3.352
	(2.865)	(4.823)	(3.907)
Constant	5.517**	19.412***	14.045***
	(1.899)	(3.038)	(2.608)
Observations	1,148	1,419	1,490
Panel C: (Civil) conflict/war control group (full period)			
Syria vs. conflict/war countries	-3.595*	-5.179*	-5.046*
	(1.426)	(2.602)	(1.989)
Post	0.373	-1.138	-1.321
	(0.949)	(1.420)	(1.140)
Post × Syria	4.291*	7.716*	4.197^{+}
	(1.879)	(3.143)	(2.393)
Constant	7.397***	27.333***	16.389***
	(0.801)	(1.208)	(0.976)
Observations	4,737	5,964	6,323
Panel D: (Civil) conflict/war control group (3-12 December)			
Syria vs. conflict/war countries	-3.595*	-5.179*	-5.046*
	(1.426)	(2.602)	(1.989)
Post	-0.429	-2.318	-2.463^{+}
	(1.053)	(1.596)	(1.269)
Post × Syria	2.876	4.806	1.575
	(2.061)	(3.508)	(2.597)
Constant	7.397***	27.333***	16.389***
	(0.801)	(1.209)	(0.976)
Observations	3,059	3,831	4,039
Panel E: (Civil) conflict/war control group + covariates			
Syria vs. conflict/war countries	-3.159*	-3.224	-3.621^{+}
	(1.452)	(2.620)	(1.994)
Post	-0.380	-2.723	-2.821*
	(1.123)	(1.697)	(1.346)
Post × Syria	4.456*	7.802*	3.688
	(1.979)	(3.262)	(2.445)
Constant	4.282**	17.627***	8.457***
	(1.524)	(2.247)	(1.731)
Observations	3,951	4,961	5,255

Notes: The dummy variable *post* equals 1 from 8 December onwards (Assad's fall), the variable *Syria* equals 1 if the respondent's country of origin is Syria, or 0 if it belongs to the control group. The regressions include observations from 3-20 December. *Asylum countries with good prospects of staying 2015/16* = Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Somalia. *Conflict/war countries* = Syria, Iraq, Somalia, Ukraine. *Asylum countries with good prospects of staying 2022-2024* = Afghanistan, Eritrea, Somalia. The full sample period covers December 3, 2024 - April 15, 2025. The covariates include gender, an indicator for the posting tranche, family abroad, and an indicator for university degree. These variables displayed significant differences in the pre- and post treatment composition of the treatment or control group (Table A.4). Robust standard errors. $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.2: RD regressions – Long-term intentions

	Temporary Settlement	Uncertain decision	Emigration aspirations
No polynomial			
RD estimate	3.714	6.206	0.018
	(3.504)	(4.898)	(0.047)
Bandwidth	2.29	2.42	2.10
N left of cut-off	112	132	137
N right of cut-off	218	269	284
Linear			
RD estimate	4.933	8.611	0.058
	(5.908)	(9.576)	(0.075)
Bandwidth	4.03	3.38	3.87
N left of cut-off	255	222	231
N right of cut-off	327	372	392
2^{nd} order polynomial			
RD estimate	4.365	12.468	0.046
	(9.744)	(15.428)	(0.123)
Bandwidth	4.80	4.61	4.58
N left of cut-off	255	303	315
N right of cut-off	327	420	441
Linear + covariates			
RD estimate	4.933	8.611	0.058
	(5.908)	(9.576)	(0.075)
Bandwidth	4.03	3.38	3.87
N left of cut-off	255	222	231
N right of cut-off	327	372	392

Notes: RD regressions include observations around the cut-off on December 8 according to the chosen bandwidth. The running variable is the date of the survey, with the cutoff set at December 8, 2024. The coefficients represent the local average treatment effect (LATE) of the political change on outcome. Robust standard errors.
$^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.3: Potential channels

Panel A: Attachment, remittances, well-being						
	Attached to home country	Attached to Germany	Sending remittances	Plans for family reunification	Happy with life	Happy with job
Post	-0.043	-0.289	-0.244	-0.478	0.010	2.063
	(1.593)	(1.621)	(1.319)	(1.293)	(0.016)	(2.547)
Syria vs. conflict/war countries	-3.499	20.018***	4.102	17.910***	0.068*	-1.245
	(2.940)	(2.846)	(2.601)	(2.854)	(0.029)	(4.711)
Post × Syria	8.375*	3.159	4.521	-6.071^{+}	-0.036	-0.297
	(3.628)	(3.458)	(3.227)	(3.448)	(0.035)	(5.687)
Constant	40.514***	49.236***	20.972***	20.000***	0.612***	64.603***
	(1.295)	(1.318)	(1.073)	(1.054)	(0.013)	(2.105)
Observations	5,253	5,256	5,256	5,253	5,256	2,012
Panel B: Perceived discrimination						
	Unfair: authorities	Unfair: education	Unfair: work	Unfair: housing market	Unfair: public	Unfair: police
Post	6.235	4.585	-3.806	-0.921	6.901*	2.247
	(3.814)	(4.060)	(4.559)	(5.361)	(3.487)	(3.642)
Syria vs. conflict/war countries	-7.953	-25.464***	-23.550**	-39.659***	-25.844***	-24.145**
	(7.320)	(7.712)	(8.513)	(9.458)	(7.116)	(8.397)
Post × Syria	-4.002	10.583	6.214	-0.086	-17.358*	2.406
	(9.017)	(9.476)	(10.473)	(11.724)	(8.614)	(9.875)
Constant	388.587***	418.646***	387.624***	354.753***	415.606***	468.826***
	(3.140)	(3.333)	(3.700)	(4.396)	(2.885)	(3.029)
Observations	4,674	3,894	4,120	4,042	4,682	2,749
Panel C: Social contact and health						
	Time with Germans	Time with co-ethnics	Feeling socially isolated	Feeling welcome in Germany	Good health	
Post	-0.100^{+}	0.015	0.069	0.011	-1.228	
	(0.059)	(0.053)	(1.359)	(0.016)	(1.588)	
Syria vs. conflict/war countries	0.158	-0.467***	1.769	0.148***	16.529***	
	(0.110)	(0.088)	(2.597)	(0.029)	(2.636)	
Post × Syria	0.184	0.148	-1.130	-0.002	4.744	
	(0.133)	(0.109)	(3.164)	(0.035)	(3.182)	
Constant	3.944***	3.518***	22.708***	0.539***	60.486***	
	(0.048)	(0.043)	(1.104)	(0.013)	(1.289)	
Observations	5,255	5,255	5,255	5,257	5,256	

Notes: Each panel displays regression results for a set of outcome variables. Panel A outcomes are binary indicators (yes =1, no =0). Panel B outcomes range from 1 to 5 (perceived feeling of being treated unfair in certain contexts). Panel C includes the outcomes time rate the amount of spent with a group on a range from 1 to 5 (maximum), and the remaining outcomes are a dummy variable. The dummy variable *post* equals 1 from 8 December onwards (Assad's fall), *Syria* equals 1 if the respondent's country of origin is Syria. The interaction *Post* × *Syria* identifies effects of the Assad regime's fall. Sample: December 3–20, 2024. The control group are Conflict/war countries which includes Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Ukraine. Robust standard errors. $^{+}$ $p < 0.10$, * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table A.4: Characteristics of Syrian respondents before and after Assad's downfall

	3-7 Dec. 2024	8-20 Dec. 2024	Difference	p-value
Female dummy	0.35	0.29	-0.06	0.046
Age respondent	32.14	32.52	0.38	0.589
Duration of stay (in years)	5.52	5.43	-0.08	0.795
Asylum seeker	0.11	0.13	0.02	0.355
Recognised refugee	0.39	0.39	-0.00	0.982
Permanent residence permit	0.10	0.08	-0.02	0.311
Ukraine permit	0.01	0.00	-0.00	0.740
Work permit	0.07	0.08	0.01	0.650
German citizen	0.22	0.22	-0.00	0.873
Secure status	0.34	0.31	-0.03	0.394
Came as asylum seeker	0.70	0.69	-0.01	0.740
Moved to G for economic reasons	0.37	0.32	-0.05	0.145
Moved to G for personal reasons	0.48	0.50	0.02	0.518
Moved to G for legal reasons	0.35	0.37	0.02	0.556
Intention to stay at arrival	0.66	0.63	-0.02	0.436
Good German skills	0.32	0.32	0.00	0.919
Training	0.19	0.18	-0.01	0.789
University	0.30	0.36	0.06	0.055
Employed in paid work	0.43	0.47	0.03	0.328
Fixed-term job	1.50	1.46	-0.04	0.574
Net wage per hour	12.87	27.42	14.55	0.462
Partner in Germany	0.48	0.47	-0.01	0.680
Partner abroad	0.09	0.07	-0.01	0.470
Family in Germany	1.77	1.72	-0.05	0.282
Family abroad	0.88	0.92	0.03	0.097
Consent to link data	0.92	0.94	0.02	0.274
Panel Consent	0.82	0.84	0.02	0.454
N	335	679		

Notes: The sample includes Syrian respondents between December 3-20, 2024. Secure status = German / EU nationality or permanent residence permit. The last column shows the p-value for a t-test of significant differences.

Table A.5: Characteristics of respondents from conflict / war countries before and after Assad's downfall

	3-7 Dec. 2024	8-20 Dec. 2024	Difference	p-value
Female dummy	0.54	0.56	0.02	0.136
Age respondent	35.59	36.06	0.47	0.215
Duration of stay (in years)	3.23	2.92	-0.31	0.044
Asylum seeker	0.04	0.05	0.01	0.394
Recognised refugee	0.09	0.08	-0.01	0.182
Permanent residence permit	0.07	0.06	-0.01	0.243
Ukraine permit	0.59	0.63	0.04	0.011
Work permit	0.08	0.08	0.00	0.746
German citizen	0.07	0.06	-0.01	0.068
Secure status	0.16	0.13	-0.02	0.039
Came as asylum seeker	0.71	0.72	0.01	0.695
Moved to G for economic reasons	0.36	0.39	0.02	0.113
Moved to G for personal reasons	0.56	0.59	0.04	0.023
Moved to G for legal reasons	0.31	0.30	-0.01	0.449
Intention to stay at arrival	0.50	0.49	-0.01	0.438
Good German skills	0.14	0.13	-0.01	0.250
Training	0.24	0.22	-0.02	0.181
University	0.53	0.55	0.03	0.104
Employed in paid work	0.42	0.43	0.02	0.287
Fixed-term job	1.44	1.46	0.03	0.381
Net wage per hour	14.27	15.75	1.48	0.561
Partner in Germany	0.55	0.53	-0.01	0.404
Partner abroad	0.05	0.06	0.01	0.065
Family in Germany	1.79	1.82	0.03	0.084
Family abroad	0.85	0.86	0.01	0.253
Consent to link data	0.94	0.94	-0.00	0.566
Panel Consent	0.89	0.90	0.01	0.370
N	1,440	2,803		

Notes: The sample includes respondents from conflict / war countries between December 3-20, 2024. Secure status = German / EU nationality or permanent residence permit. The last column shows the p-value for a t-test of significant differences.

Table A.6: Summary statistics of treatment and control groups

	Syria	(Civil) conflict / war
Female dummy	0.31	0.55
	(0.46)	(0.50)
Age respondent	32.39	35.90
	(10.43)	(11.63)
Duration of stay (in years)	5.46	3.03
	(4.88)	(4.82)
Asylum seeker	0.13	0.05
	(0.33)	(0.21)
Recognised refugee	0.39	0.09
	(0.49)	(0.28)
Permanent residence permit	0.09	0.06
	(0.28)	(0.24)
Ukraine permit	0.00	0.61
	(0.07)	(0.49)
Work permit	0.07	0.08
	(0.26)	(0.27)
German citizen	0.22	0.06
	(0.42)	(0.24)
Secure status	0.32	0.14
	(0.47)	(0.35)
Came as asylum seeker	0.69	0.72
	(0.46)	(0.45)
N	1,014	4,243

Notes: The sample include observations collected between December 3-20, 2024. Secure status = German / EU nationality or permanent residence permit. The control group contains respondents from (civil) conflict or war situation = Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

Table A.7: Questions concerning settlement plans

ID	Question	Answer	Variables
BR0200	Do you want to stay in Germany forever?	1 Yes, 2 No, 3 I don't know	Temporary stay (2 vs. 1) + uncertain
BR0300	Have you thought about moving to another country in the last 12 months?	1 Yes, 2 No	Emigration considerations (1 vs. 2) choice (3 vs. 1)
BR0400	Are you planning to move away from Germany in the next 12 months?	1 Yes, 2 No	Emigration plans (1 vs. 2)
BR0500	Which country are you planning to move to in the next 12 months?	List of countries	Return plans (to home country)
(if BR0400 = 1)			+ Onward migration plans (to third country)

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Imprint

IAB-Discussion Paper 09|2025

Publication Date
June 26, 2025

Publisher
Institute for Employment Research
of the Federal Employment Agency
Regensburger Straße 104
90478 Nürnberg
Germany

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Website
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ISSN
2195-2663

DOI
10.48720/IAB.DP.2509

Corresponding author
Luisa Hammer
++49 0911 1773004
E-Mail luisa.hammer@iab.de