IPC–MERCATOR ANALYSIS

August 2026

BEYOND "DURABLE SOLUTIONS": THE PORTABILITY OF SOCIAL PROTECTION AND SYRIA AS A POTENTIAL TEST CASE

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Introduction

Refugees are continually on the move, yet the international system designed to safeguard their rights and dignity remains fundamentally oriented toward containing their mobility rather than enabling it. Traditionally, this framework has relied on three "durable solutions" to address forced displacement: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and third-country resettlement. Over recent decades, however, criticism of the 1951 Geneva Convention and the actual durability of these solutions has steadily grown amid protracted and intertwined crises. Critics point to the Convention's limited scope and the chronic failure of nation-states to implement its provisions, which together resign those in search of international protection to a state of "permanent temporariness."[1] A core flaw of these solutions is their underlying premise: they are "predicated on a goal of ending movement." As Arar and Fitzgerald argue, this rigid objective cannot "accommodate refugees' ongoing mobility and their sustained ties to both host countries and countries of origin."[2] This oversight demands a far broader array of policy responses, including mechanisms that allow essential social protections to cross borders alongside the displaced populations that they protect.

This limitation has led legal scholars such as Aleinikoff to propose alternative frameworks that treat displacement as part of a wider lifecycle of migration, granting refugees "the ability to travel to other states to take up work, reunite with family, or pursue an education."[3] Specifically, Aleinikoff advocates for "a new form of the Nansen Passport." Much like this internationally recognized document that was issued during the interwar period of the early twentieth century and allowed stateless people and refugees to travel internationally, this modernized version would function simultaneously as an identity card and a travel permit. Unlike the current paradigm, where refugees are "in effect, given one shot at safety and security," mobility under the original Nansen system was "generally understood as important to attaining self-reliance."[4] By permitting displaced individuals to actively move in search of gainful employment, this historical model resonates strongly today. Furthermore, the 2018 Global Compact for Refugees designates refugee self-reliance as a core objective, bringing renewed relevance to alternative solutions that would support refugees' mobility rights.

In contrast to the early twentieth century, however, contemporary refugees increasingly reside in host countries with established social security systems. In recent years, international organizations have promoted the integration of refugees into contributory and non-contributory national schemes to support their self-reliance. These measures are often framed as "sustainable, cost-effective solutions" that enable displaced populations "to move out of humanitarian assistance" and reduce tensions with host communities.[5] Yet access to such schemes alone offers only a partial answer to refugees' social protection needs, raising the question of social protection portability, which has so far received only limited attention. This paper asks whether the portability or exportability of accumulated social security rights could offer what durable solutions have so far failed to provide. It argues that such solutions have the potential to both incentivize the formalization of refugees' labor market inclusion and open a rights-based pathway toward facilitating refugee mobility as an expression of self-reliance and agency.

Unpacking Portability

The right to social security is firmly rooted in international law, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966).

This right was later extended to migrant workers through the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, alongside several regional treaties such as the 1972 European Convention on Social Security[6] and the 1996 CARICOM Agreement on Social Security.[7] The International Labour Organization (ILO), for its part, has long addressed the transnational dimension of these rights through a series of conventions and recommendations, including Conventions No. 97, 102, 118, 143, and 157, Recommendations No. 167 and 202, and the Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work[8] on equality of treatment, the maintenance of accrued rights, and the payment of benefits abroad. Over recent decades, the cross-border portability of social benefits has become a pressing policy issue, because a growing number of people—labor migrants and refugees alike—spend part of their lives in host countries with established social security systems, acquiring pensions, healthcare, and other entitlements they seek to retain upon return or further movement.[9] This issue gained renewed normative recognition through Objective 22 of the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration,[10] which commits states to ensure migrant workers' access to social protection and benefit portability through national reforms and bilateral and multilateral agreements.

Despite this burgeoning interest, portability remains a contested and difficult concept to operationalize, particularly as it lacks an internationally agreed definition. Fundamentally, it denotes a person's right to keep the social security that they have built up in one country when they relocate to another. The concept encompasses benefits currently in the process of being built as well as those already vested, alongside the capacity to draw on such provisions from abroad.[11] In practice, portability mechanisms can entail two distinct arrangements. The first, totalization, involves aggregating periods of insurance, employment, or residence accumulated under different national schemes and demands cooperation between host and origin countries. The second, exportability, refers more narrowly to the payment of already acquired benefits upon mobility, typically through lump sum disbursement. Unlike totalization, exportability can be executed unilaterally, with the issuing nation independently determining eligibility and payment levels.[12] Even within labor migration contexts, realizing totalization is highly complex, requiring not only well-functioning welfare or social security systems in both countries but also bilateral or multilateral agreements backed by sustained collaboration and information exchange between social security institutions. In response to these challenges, international organizations like the ILO, International Organization for Migration (IOM), and International Social Security Association (ISSA) actively promote standards and tools aimed at extending social protection to nationals to migrants while also coordinating the portability of social security entitlements through bilateral social security or labor agreements.

The inception of such international treaties dates back to the 1940s, while their modern distribution is starkly regionalized. Out of the 627 bilateral and 19 multilateral agreements in force globally in June 2024, European countries and territories participated in over 80 percent.[13] While these intergovernmental frameworks offer a viable pathway for labor migrants, they often prove incompatible with the realities of forced displacement. For refugees, securing portable rights is notably more challenging, because access to formal social security systems is frequently constrained from the start. By definition, refugees have fled their country of origin due to a well-founded fear of persecution,

thereby losing the ability to avail themselves of that state's protection.[14] This rupture effectively severs the foundational "social contract," a reciprocal relationship between the payment of taxes and other obligations in return for access to social protection, healthcare, education, and other rights. Moreover, many forcibly displaced persons originate from nations where social security coverage was already limited or non-existent. Although many individuals contributed to a national scheme before their flight, accessing these contributions acquired in their country of origin is often not possible due to internal conflict or a lack of effective governance.[15]

This pattern of exclusion continues in host countries. Many refugees and asylum seekers struggle to access formal employment, particularly in developing countries already characterized by high levels of informality. Legal frameworks add a further barrier; an analysis of legislation across 120 countries showed that only 56 explicitly grant refugees entry into social security, and only 40 extend such protections to asylum seekers.[16] Despite these challenges, experts argue that the portability or exportability of benefits could support refugees' incorporation into social security systems and formal employment, mitigate uncertainty about their future and also foster their local integration. Research on Syrian refugees in Jordan reveals that uncertainty about the long-term return on social security contributions leads refugees to perceive such contributions as a burden rather than an investment, reducing their willingness to formalize their work.[17]

Interestingly, portability for refugees is not entirely without legal foundation. It is enshrined, in various forms, across several instruments, even if refugees are more often covered implicitly than explicitly. As early as 1953, the Council of Europe's Interim Agreement on Social Security Schemes relating to Old Age, Invalidity and Survivors provided for both the aggregation of insurance periods across contracting parties and the payment of benefits to persons residing in another party's territory.[18] A Protocol signed the same year extended these provisions to refugees defined under the 1951 Geneva Convention, "under the same conditions as they apply to the nationals of the Contracting Parties."[19] Three decades later, ILO Recommendation No. 167 (1983) reaffirmed this approach, calling on states bound by a bilateral or multilateral social security instrument to grant its benefits to "refugees and stateless persons resident in the territory." The recommendation specifically covers the determination of applicable legislation, the maintenance of rights in the course of acquisition through totalization, and the maintenance of acquired rights and payment of benefits abroad.[20] In alignment with that precedent, the ILO's non-binding Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and Other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market (2016) and the 2021 guide, Extending Social Protection to Migrant Workers, Refugees and Their Families, have recommended the integration of refugees into national protection schemes.[21] The clearest and arguably most direct international recognition of this principle comes from ILO Recommendation No. 205 on Employment and Decent Work for Peace and Resilience (2017), which indicates that:

> Consistent with the guidance provided in Parts IV, VI and VII, Members should include refugees in the actions taken with respect to employment, training and labor market access, as appropriate, and in particular: [...] facilitate, as appropriate, the portability of work-related and social security benefit entitlements, including pensions, in accordance with the national provisions of the host country.[22]

Beyond multilateral frameworks, numerous bilateral social security agreements (BSSAs) broaden their coverage to refugees and stateless persons. For example, Türkiye's agreement with Germany, which entered into force in 1965, defines its personal scope to include refugees and stateless populations and grants them equal treatment with nationals of either contracting party.[23] The Council of Europe's 1998 Model Provisions for a Bilateral Social Security Agreement later codified this standard. Article 3 offers states two alternative formulations for the agreement's personal scope, one of which explicitly accords coverage to "refugees and stateless persons who are or have been subject to the legislation of either or both Contracting Parties," along with members of their family and survivors insofar as their rights derive from those persons.[24] Yet, to date, neither this paper's research nor the experts consulted have found evidence that this clause, or similar refugee-inclusive provisions, has ever been executed in reality.

Regional regimes demonstrate a similar complexity when transitioning from bilateral to supranational coordination. In the European Union, Regulation (EC) No. 883/2004,[25] the primary multilateral instrument that coordinates social security across member states, explicitly incorporates refugees and stateless persons within its scope. It entitles them to the same principles of equal treatment, aggregation of periods, and exportability of benefits that apply to EU nationals who relocate across borders. Yet even this most developed example of refugee portability has a narrower reach in practice than its text suggests. One expert noted that the EU's coordination system functions primarily as reciprocal portability between member states' own nationals and treats refugees from third countries differently. Consequently, their full portability, even within the EU, frequently depends on additional bilateral arrangements.

Syria as a Potential Test Case

Since 2011, the governance of Syrian displacement has become one of the clearest illustrations of a refugee regime caught between collapse and necessary reinvention. Over the past decade, there has been a concerted effort on the part of national governments, international organizations, and civil society organizations to secure refugees' access to healthcare, education, and labor markets, especially in periods of mass influxes and in host countries where the 1951 Convention's provisions are not fully applicable. Countries such as Türkiye, which hosts the world's largest refugee population, have borne a disproportionate share of this effort, though their approach is characterized by policy inconsistency and an increasingly precarious legal status for those under protection. Simultaneously, this period has seen deepening crises of governance, as neoliberal austerity, resurgent right-wing populism, and the externalization of migration and asylum has hardened borders and constricted political space for refugee inclusion.[26] Furthermore, the contrast between the treatment afforded to Syrians and the rapid reception granted to Ukrainian refugees in European countries has raised questions about whose mobility is treated as legitimate. The Syrian case is thus a critical case to examine in an era in which existing frameworks for managing displacement face pressure while their future trajectory is uncertain.

Within this volatile context, the portability or exportability of social benefits for Syrians under temporary protection in Türkiye has emerged as a nascent debate, despite expert acknowledgment of significant theoretical and practical challenges. Türkiye's social security system operates as a hybrid model: it combines mandatory contributory insurance, overseen by the Social Security Institution (SGK), with non-contributory social assistance for vulnerable populations, administered by the

Ministry of Family and Social Services (MFSS). Türkiye has finalized social security agreements with 35 countries to protect the rights and interests of its citizens employed abroad and further secured a specific accord with Bulgaria to facilitate pension transfers for individuals who migrated to Türkiye after May 1, 1989.[27]

Syrians in Türkiye, however, fall outside this framework, primarily because the two countries do not have a social security agreement. Following the 2011 onset of displacement, the majority of Syrians received temporary protection status in 2014. This status provided incremental access to livelihood support, social assistance, healthcare, and education through the Turkish state and projects backed by international donors, most notably the European Union's Facility for Refugees in Türkiye (FRIT). While Syrians with residence permits had limited access to work permits, those under temporary protection gained the right to work only upon the enactment of the 2016 Regulation on Work Permits. Despite this reform, the number of Syrians who obtained work permits was low, partly due to the requirement that employers submit applications, the associated bureaucratic hurdles, and a perception that the benefits of formalization failed to outweigh the costs—a situation that was also seen in the Jordanian case.

More recently, the Turkish government has taken further steps toward the formalization of refugee employment. Since 2024, Syrians with legal employment and SGK contributions are entitled to full healthcare coverage through the social insurance system. Those who are unemployed or impoverished may apply to the Presidency of Migration Management for means-tested state coverage, while informally employed or uninsured Syrians receive treatment equivalent to uninsured Turkish citizens. Authorities also introduced a significant procedural change: any registered Syrian can now secure a work permit exemption document through e-Devlet (Türkiye's e-government platform) and work legally across all sectors, provided employers register them and remit SGK contributions as they would for Turkish citizens.[28] To further incentivize formalization, the Transition to Formality Programme (KİGEP), backed by the ILO Office for Türkiye, offers employers financial support for each newly registered Syrian employee on the condition that they hire an equivalent number of Turkish citizens, with a maximum of five Syrian and five Turkish workers per employer.[29] IOM Türkiye also executes several initiatives to this end, such as the Provision of Jobs and Socio-Economic Inclusion to Support the Transition to Formal Employment (Formalization) and Promoting a Sustainable and Socially Inclusive Labour Market Integration (Employability),[30] while the World Bank Group carries out the Formal Employment Creation Project.[31] These developments suggest a gradual shift toward greater formalization of Syrian employment in Türkiye.

On the other hand, the domestic infrastructure within Syria poses a distinct challenge. Prior to the conflict, Syria's social protection system had a narrow scope and coverage. Social insurance fell under the jurisdiction of the General Establishment for Social Insurance (GESI), created by the Social Insurance Act No. 92 of 1959 and the Law No. 24 of 1962, covering old age, disability, and survivor and employment injury pensions for employees in the public and private sectors. Effective coverage remained low: a 2004 Labour Force Survey indicated that only 9.5% of private sector workers were registered with GESI, compared to 89.5% of public sector counterparts. The system faced deep structural obstacles, including a large informal sector that accounted for over 40% of the labor force, contribution evasion, a limited range of benefits, and concerns about financial sustainability.[32] More recently, Syria's Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor convened a broad assembly in

Damascus in March 2026 that brought together state institutions, international organizations, and civil society to develop a Strategic Plan for 2026–2028. The plan aims to establish a comprehensive national social protection system grounded in social justice, decent work, and labor market regulation, with specific objectives to expand social insurance coverage, reduce informal employment, and foster community reintegration.[33] This context renders the prospect of portability between Türkiye and Syria particularly complex: not only do the two nations lack a bilateral social security agreement but the Syrian system is also fragile and in the initial stages of reconstruction.

Against this backdrop, the issue of portability or exportability for Syrians in Türkiye has begun to surface in expert and intergovernmental debates, though it sits at an early and tentative stage. With voluntary return prominent on the agenda, whether social security rights earned through formal employment in Türkiye could be made portable or exportable becomes relevant to these discussions. In 2025, 105,096 Syrians were given work permits in Türkiye, down from 117,334 the previous year[34]—though this figure is expected to rise following recent changes in work permit exemption procedures. Still, the formalization of Syrian employment is low relative to the overall Syrian population in Türkiye, and many individuals lack the documentation and formal employment history that portability mechanisms require. The absence of a bilateral social security agreement between the two states, combined with the fragility of Syria's social security and domestic infrastructure, means that both the legal architecture and the institutional capacity necessary for any portability arrangement are largely absent—positioning this concept, for now, more as an emerging question rather than an actionable policy agenda.

Conclusion

This paper argues that the portability and exportability of social security rights offer a new way of looking at international protection. Rather than the static logic of durable solutions, this approach is attentive to refugees' ongoing mobility and transnational lives. It better responds to the multidirectional, non-linear realities of displacement, defined by complex trajectories that go beyond traditionally durable solutions.

First, integrating refugees into host countries' social protection schemes, with accumulated rights made portable, would help "reduce vulnerability, promote formal employment and advance decent work," while it concurrently alleviates labor market competition and tensions with local populations.[35] Second, portability would support return as a possible choice available to refugees, as it increases return preparedness[36] and facilitates reintegration and recovery efforts in countries of origin once conditions allow for return. Third, portability would bolster labor mobility pathways for refugees toward third countries, beyond both home and host states. Such mechanisms would bring together international protection and decent work from a transnational perspective, in the spirit of the original Nansen Passport.

The Syrian case illustrates both the relevance and the difficulty of this mechanism. Recent efforts toward greater formalization of Syrian employment in Türkiye—including changes to work permit procedures, incentives, and international projects such as KİGEP, Employability, and Formalization—create new avenues to accrue social security rights. Yet the absence of a bilateral social security agreement between the two states, low rates of formal employment among Syrians, and the fragility of Syria's own social protection infrastructure mean that portability stands, for now, as

a question on the horizon. It is significant in itself that this question is beginning to emerge in expert and intergovernmental discussions.

Two risks arise in this early discussion. First, calls for self-reliance and labor market integration, however well-intentioned, risk reproducing the very precarity they aim to resolve. As Jung and Spehar argue,[37] self-reliance is not a neutral goal but an ideology bound up with logics of capital accumulation and austerity in which the fragmentation of refugee governance is not state failure but a strategic feature that shifts responsibility onto refugees themselves. Making social protection in host countries contingent on formal employment ties social protection to labor markets that are often characterized by high informality and mainly precarious or low-wage work. Promoted as a route "out of humanitarian assistance," formalization can enable the withdrawal of assistance before stable alternatives exist. Unless paired with enforceable safeguards, such as secure legal status, functioning claim and payment mechanisms, and protection against contribution loss, portability risks becoming another means of displacing uncertainty onto those least able to bear it.

Second, while portability could make voluntary return more viable and enhance return preparedness for refugees who choose to return when conditions in their countries of origin permit, this voluntariness should be distinguished from the increasingly prominent state-led return agenda in many asylum countries. Under these policies, governments seek to encourage, incentivize, or even coerce refugees into repatriation, often without sufficient regard for the conditions in countries of origin. The voluntariness of return becomes questionable if host states create economic, legal, or administrative barriers to continued residence. Because exportability can be executed unilaterally by host countries, typically as a lump-sum payment upon departure, it can be appropriated as a policy instrument for inducing refugees to leave. In such a context, a mechanism intended to preserve a refugee's accumulated rights could instead be instrumentalized to pressure or channel refugees toward repatriation, potentially transforming a right to mobility and social protection into a mechanism of managed departure. Portability should therefore not be designed or evaluated primarily in terms of its capacity to produce return but in terms of whether it preserves refugees' ability to choose to return, continue residence in the host country, or move onward to a third state.

The gap between portability's normative recognition and implementation remains wide as the Syrian case makes clear. Closing this gap requires both political will and institutional coordination, which are difficult to achieve in most contexts. Further research is needed to understand under what conditions refugees and stateless persons were incorporated into social security agreements in the first place; how social security coordination unfolds in practice, both in bilateral and multilateral contexts; and what mechanisms would need to be in place for this long-standing but largely dormant legal architecture to become a rights-based pathway for refugees in the future.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the interviewed experts who shared their insights and time for this study. We gratefully acknowledge Megan Gisclon for her editorial support and helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

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Beyond "Durable Solutions": The Portability of Social Protection and Syria as a Potential Test Case
13 p.; 25 cm. - (Istanbul Policy Center-Sabancı University-Stiftung Mercator Initiative)

Cover Design and Page Layout: MYRA

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