

Where Do We Go from Here? – Blog des Kulturwissenschaftlichen Instituts Essen (KWI-Blog)

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08.12.2025

Where Do We Go from Here? Von: Veronica Ferreri

Syrians' Paperwork and Germany's Citizenship Regime

In the wake of 8 December 2024, just days after the collapse of the Syrian regime, a friend messaged me on WhatsApp with a seemingly simple question: “Vero, are you still working on Syrian documents?” Her question, as she explained to me, was prompted by a Facebook post that had caught her attention – written by a Syrian man, her acquaintance, living in Germany. In the post, he publicly shared his frustration due to the impossibility, or perhaps unwillingness, of German bureaucracy to issue him a (temporary) passport, despite being entitled to it. The post also announced that there was no longer a need to navigate German bureaucracy due to the new possibility to simply request a Syrian passport directly from the Syrian embassy.

At first glance, this social media post might seem trivial: a statement about the well-known forms of bureaucratic discrimination and the discretionary power of bureaucrats whom migrants and refugees experience as echoing Germany’s “exclusionary incorporation” enacted towards noncitizens.¹ Yet the post tied this condition to Syria’s political transformations and the novel possibility of treating the Syrian embassy as an institution that could represent Syrians facing bureaucratic hurdles in Germany, rather than an extension of the al-Assad regime’s oppression. This represented a dramatic shift from the reality Syrians had endured under the al-Assad regime.

Yesterday | Paper Trails between Syria and Germany

In my previous work on Syrian paper trails, I reflected on the challenges and risks that Syrians faced – in both Syria and Germany – in their attempts to obtain official documents: from birth and marriage certificates to university diplomas and extracts from civil records.² These documents, seemingly mundane, encapsulate legal, political (and existential) significance since they are in fact the foundation of legal personhood.³ The power of these documents lies precisely in how they materialize the invisible thread woven between an individual and the nation-state that issues them, encapsulating identity and belonging, protection and existence. This thread, however, is by nature fragile as a nation-state can withdraw its obligation to provide citizens with proof of legal identity at any time.

By unpacking this fragility, my work offered two different types of interventions regarding the citizenship and migration regime in Germany through Syrians’ experience of war and refuge. The first intervention was about untangling the complex paperwork

practices necessary for Syrians to start (or continue) their lives in Germany.⁴ By examining the legal and bureaucratic foundations governing these practices in Germany, I captured their inherent flaws, tensions and contradictions which forced Syrians to retrieve these papers through legally ambiguous or illegal means. This is because the legal and bureaucratic processes at the heart of German asylum constantly require Syrians to prove their legal identity by relying on the Syrian bureaucracy. However, this reliance rests on unstable ground since Syrian bureaucracy had been embedded within the regime's politics of security, led by its extensive network of security and intelligence services.

Syrians deemed a threat to Syrian political life – such as dissidents, revolutionaries or defected soldiers, for instance – were designated as “wanted citizens” [*muwaatin matluub*]. Not only did they risk imprisonment and disappearance, but wanted citizens were also excluded from accessing the Syrian passport and, after 2011, even the most basic civil documents. The bureaucratic-security nexus transformed the retrieval of documents into a political act about loyalty, blurring the lines between the categories of legality and illegality, and original and counterfeit papers. Through these paper trails and their blurred boundaries, I showed that Syrians are more than refugees without a past (or a present), extending Liisa Malkki's critique of the analytical category of “refugee” into the legal-bureaucratic realm that produces this category.⁵

A second intervention, intertwined with the first, was to unearth the nature of German bureaucracy and cultural citizenship, specifically their adherence to a strict understanding of legality in moral terms. The aim was to understand what effects this produces and why. I retraced the centrality of this legal culture to the aftermath of World War II, specifically the refoundation of (West) Germany as a liberal democracy. This refoundation was grounded upon the Rule of Law [*Rechtsstaatlichkeit*] and the Rule of Law State [*Rechtsstaat*], legal and moral principles that marked a break from the unlawfulness of the Third Reich.⁶ Indeed, I read Germany's *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [coming to terms with the past, i.e., the Nazi past and the Holocaust] not exclusively as a pillar of its memory politics.⁷ Reckoning with the past is also embedded in Germany's treatment of legal culture in moralising terms which state institutions impose upon noncitizens through integration courses and bureaucratic encounters.⁸

Today | Papers, Political Culture and Radical Transformations

I have been thinking about paper trails and their significance nowadays. This question emerged as radical changes have transformed Syria following the fall of the regime, while Germany has witnessed a series of paradigmatic shifts within its migration and citizenship regime as well. Can this analytical lens remain meaningful today, and if so, how do these reconfigurations reshape its relevance? The ramifications of the end of the al-Assad regime –what Syrians have called “the collapse of eternity”– are countless and profound. One of its concrete manifestations is the disentanglement of the Syrian bureaucracy from the regime's politics of security. Since December 2024, Syrians

previously listed as “wanted citizens” can officially request passports and other documents inside Syria and at Syrian embassies abroad – access systemically denied to them in the past.

Through their social media accounts, Syrians have documented their return home, including their border crossings where they learned with surprise from a border officer about accusations at the origin of their wanted status, as recorded in the database of the Department of Migration and Passports. Clearing this status requires navigating additional security and bureaucratic hurdles in Damascus to officially close these politically motivated accusations. The process of undoing the regime’s bureaucratic and security nexus will also require the Syrian state to tackle mundane documents, such as identity documents.

These papers still carry symbols and ideological markers bearing the legacy of the Ba’athist regime, and the new state might act upon this vestige of the past by designing and issuing new documents stripped of these symbols.⁹ This documentary transformation will impact Syrians living in Germany. The depth and significance of this impact, however, will depend on how German bureaucracy will evaluate the legitimacy, content and structure of new Syrian documents. Another crucial dimension relates to the instability of “legality” and “illegality” as categories characterising the past, and to how this transformation might illuminate new dimensions of this relation as well as its contradictions and ambiguities.

These are important questions whose answers will only emerge over time. However, their significance may be overshadowed by Germany’s current political climate, in which questions about the presence and inclusion of migrants and refugees into the body politic have become more unpredictable. The *Willkommenskultur* [welcome culture] that characterised the “long summer of migration” in 2015 has gradually given way to a more stringent approach to asylum and migration.¹⁰ This shift has partially redefined Germany’s citizenship regime, with recent policy changes exemplifying this transformation. The revoking of the short-lived fast-track naturalisation process has coincided with a reaffirmation of integration requirements for foreigners – requirements that, as Chancellor Merz recently stressed, should not only be facilitated but also mandated. Consequently, Syrian presence in Germany and the nature of noncitizens’ exclusionary incorporation has become increasingly contentious. This contentiousness goes beyond bureaucratic hurdles and paperwork, instead encompassing fundamental debates about belonging and political culture. The demand for noncitizen’s integration can be interpreted as a renewed realignment of its citizenship regime with ethnonationalism,¹¹ which has played a crucial role in the way that Germany shaped its institutionalised efforts to address its moral responsibility towards the past. The rootedness of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in ethnonationalism also has its limits when extended to migrant communities and non-ethnic Germans.¹²

The current demand for integration can be read as a call for future citizens to explicitly embrace not only Germany’s moral responsibility for historical reckoning, but also its ethnonationalist rootedness – amongst other political principles, including German

Staatsräson. Indeed, the integration requirement now includes an explicit expectation that prospective German citizens recognise and embrace in full not only Germany's legal culture but also its political culture.

Tomorrow | Where Do We Go from Here?

The grey zone between legality and illegality characterising paperwork and legal culture reveals the analytical value of the legal-bureaucratic dimension within migration and citizenship regimes in Syria and Germany. I read the contemporary radical political transformations in Syria together with Germany's reconfiguration of its citizenship regime to capture the trajectory of these changes and highlight their interconnectedness. The parallel transformations unfolding in Syria and Germany show how seemingly technical questions of paperwork and legal procedure are shaped by each country's understanding of belonging, political culture and histories of violence. By tracing these paper trails across space and time, we see how the bureaucratic and political intertwine, and how legal procedures carry moral weight. Although questions regarding tomorrow are still vague, the centrality of these dimensions and dynamics cannot be ignored.

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9. For instance, the regime’s collapse prompted the immediate removal of the Syrian Arab Republic flag in many Syrian embassies and their replacement with the revolutionary flag.
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SUGGESTED CITATION: Ferreri, Veronica: Where Do We Go from Here?, in: KWI-BLOG, [<https://blog.kulturwissenschaften.de/where-do-we-go-from-here/>], 08.12.2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37189/kwi-blog/20251208-0830>