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From:	Presidency
To:	Working Party on External Aspects of Asylum and Migration (EMWP)
Subject:	The current displacement situation in Syria - Discussion paper

1. Introduction

Since the fall of the Assad regime in Damascus in December 2024, Syria (Syrian Arab Republic) is undergoing a period of significant political transition. These developments have potential implications for migration flows, asylum systems and return policy within the European Union, warranting a coordinated and informed exchange among Member States.

In its **conclusions of 23 June 2025** on Syria, the Council reaffirmed the EU's commitment to support the creation of conditions for safe, dignified, voluntary and sustainable returns to Syria and expressed its readiness to assist those who voluntarily wish to return. At the same time, the conclusions underlined the importance of maintaining asylum space for refugees, ensuring full respect for the principle of non-refoulement, and continuing EU support to refugees and host communities in order to strengthen their resilience during the transitional phase.

One year after Syria's political transition, the country stands at a decisive but fragile juncture. The political developments have created expectations of change. The UNHCR supports voluntary returns, while continuing to stress the need for more international support to create conditions in Syria to sustain this trend. For returns to be sustainable, it is important to continue supporting the socio-economic recovery and reconstruction of the country.

Since December 2024, more than 3 million Syrians have returned to Syria, including over 1.3 million refugees and more than 1.9 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) who have returned to their areas of origin. This represents one of the largest return movements globally in recent years. At the same time, around 17 million people remain in need of humanitarian assistance and approximately 6.2 million Syrian refugees continue to be hosted outside the country, primarily in neighbouring states.

In parallel, the Commission and several Member States have initiated contacts with Syria's transitional authorities, with a view to exploring future cooperation on returns, of Syrian nationals with no right to stay in the EU. At the **informal meeting of Home Affairs Ministers** held in Cyprus on 22 January 2026, returns to Syria were discussed, and the Ministers reiterated their commitment to strengthen coordination at EU level as it is essential to improve the effectiveness of returns to Syria, in particular with regard to individuals who pose a security risk. Therefore, Member States should continue to explore ways to enhance the pace and effectiveness of returns, while duly taking into account security challenges and relevant developments. Taking that into account, coordinated and sustained approach remains key to achieving tangible results.

In this context, it is **necessary to distinguish clearly** between, on the one hand, Syrian nationals holding a valid residence permit in a Member State who may decide to go back voluntarily and, on the other hand, Syrian nationals who have no right to stay in the EU and have been issued a return decision and are therefore under an obligation to leave the EU, either through voluntary or, where applicable, forced return unless there is a risk of refoulement.

The **objective of the discussion** is to enable Member States to assess the evolving situation in Syria from the perspective of EU external migration policy, including possible pathways and parameters for cooperation with the Syrian transitional authorities on migration and return-related matters. The discussion will also address the implications for refugees in the region and for the EU's continued support to host countries, with a view to ensuring a coordinated and coherent EU approach, in line with EU law, international obligations and fundamental rights.

2. Global framework of the relations between the EU and Syria

During the civil war, the EU suspended bilateral relations and adopted a policy of “three no’s”: no normalisation, no reconstruction and no lifting of sanctions until concrete steps were taken towards a political solution in line with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2254.

After the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, the EU responded promptly by engaging with the Syrian transitional authorities to support an inclusive and peaceful transition.

Responding to the new reality on the ground, the **EU lifted all economic sanctions** on Syria in May 2025, while maintaining those on Assad and his accomplices as well as those based on security grounds. Furthermore, the June 2025 Council conclusions have outlined the EU's policy priorities regarding Syria and its support for an inclusive, peaceful and Syrian-led transition.

To enhance its dialogue and cooperation with the Syrian transitional authorities, the EU substantively stepped up its **diplomatic presence in Damascus** since December 2024, with the EU Delegation relocating essential staff to the capital in November 2025. Several high-level meetings also took place between the Presidents of the European Council and of the Commission and President Mr. Ahmed Al-Sharaa, including a historic visit of the EU leaders to Syria on 9 January 2026.

Stability within Syria and in its relations with neighbouring countries is a strategic EU interest as it relates directly to the EU's Southern neighbourhood. EU's engagement with the Syrian transitional authorities is geared towards achieving internal and regional peace. The EU also has an interest in limiting the **influence of foreign actors** (in particular Russia and Iran) in Syria. Moreover, curtailing the activities of terrorist organisations such as Da'esh is of paramount importance for the EU's security interests.

A peaceful and stable Syria is likely to reduce illegal migratory flows in order to contribute to the voluntary, safe, dignified and sustainable return of Syrian nationals.

Syria's stability and its reintegration into the global economy is a shared objective. During her **visit to Damascus on 9 January 2026**, President von der Leyen announced the launch of a new political partnership, starting with a High-Level Dialogue in the first half of the year to explore how the EU can best support Syria's path towards recovery, reconstruction and civil peace. Improving living conditions and creating livelihood opportunities inside Syria remain EU priorities; failing to do so risks de-stabilising the ongoing transition in the country. Stability and economic recovery will be key drivers for voluntary returns and sustainable reintegration. Secondly, she announced readiness to resume trade with Syria and to encourage further investments. Thirdly, she announced a substantial economic support package of around EUR 620 million for 2026 and 2027 covering humanitarian aid, recovery and bilateral support.

3. Situation in the country

a) Current situation regarding economy, security and reconstruction

Despite the change of government and some relative improvements compared to the pre-transition period, Syria continues to face severe **economic** challenges. Ongoing volatility, including renewed sectarian clashes and terrorist activity in late 2025 and early 2026, has led to further displacement of at least 150,000 people and casualties. Basic services remain largely inadequate, infrastructure is heavily damaged, and mines and unexploded ordnance continue to affect civilians and agriculture. After fourteen years of conflict, over 90% of the population lives below the poverty line, food insecurity is widespread, unemployment remains high, and, according to the World Bank, an estimated USD 216 billion will be required for reconstruction. The transitional authorities' push to shift from humanitarian aid towards investment is constrained by heavy debt, dependence on external capital, and limited access to international financing.

The **security** situation in Syria also remains fragile and continues to involve a multitude of external and local actors. Clashes broke out in Aleppo on 7 January between Syrian government forces and elements linked to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), prompting the announcement of a ceasefire on 9 January. However, renewed fighting on 13 January 2026 has heightened concerns over the fragility of security in Northeast Syria. On 18 January, the Syrian government has announced an immediate ceasefire with the Kurdish-led SDF on all fronts after nearly two weeks of deadly fighting. President Ahmed al-Sharaa stated that, under the agreement, the Syrian Army will take control of three eastern and north-eastern provinces – Raqqa, Deir Az Zor and Hasakah – previously held by the SDF. The agreement further provides for the integration of the SDF into Syria’s defence and interior ministries as part of a broader 14-point framework. According to the same agreement, the government will also take over the control of the Kurdish-run autonomous region in the Northeast, including its prisons and camps where former IS affiliates and families are held. The transition has not happened in an orderly manner and various sources indicate that there have been disorders in some camps and escapes from camps and prisons.

These developments may increase the threat to EU internal security, as escaped detainees could re-join IS or attempt onward movement towards the EU. Similarly, any uncontrolled release from the camps could also pose a potential security risk to the EU. At the time of reporting, however, it remains difficult to assess the full scope and impact of these developments. The presence of external powers—Russia, the US, Israel, and Türkiye—further complicates the security landscape, contributing to a volatile and fragmented environment.

As regards the **reconstruction** perspectives, in March 2025, the EU hosted the 9th Brussels Conference on Syria, which raised in total EUR 5.8 billion in pledges for Syria and its neighbours, of which the EU pledged EUR 2.5 billion for 2025 and 2026. In addition, the EU committed EUR 424 million in 2025 across all its instruments (DG MENA/ECHO/FPI) to support Syria’s socio-economic recovery and to address urgent humanitarian and stabilisation needs.

b) Migratory situation in Syria:

After more than a decade of conflict, Syria continues to face **complex humanitarian, development, peace and migration challenges**, while also showing **gradual signs of stabilization** in parts of the country. Returnees and host communities face persistent challenges linked to poverty, loss of livelihoods, limited access to basic services, unresolved housing, land and property (HLP) issues, loss of civil documentation, and protection risks, including explosive ordnance contamination and localized insecurity (see security situation described under point A above).

Humanitarian needs remain significant: the 2025 Humanitarian Needs and Response Priorities¹ estimate that 16.5 million people require assistance, although only 10.3 million are targeted due to funding constraints under the Syria Global Humanitarian Overview.

While **returns** are occurring at scale, **conditions for sustainable reintegration remain fragile and uneven across areas of return**. Access to civil documentation remains a critical barrier, with 85% of communities reporting challenges in obtaining essential documents, undermining access to services, livelihoods and legal rights. In addition, ongoing instability continues to affect mobility decisions, with key informants in 28% of communities indicating that returnees may consider onward movement or re-displacement within the next six months. These findings underscore that return alone does not equate to durable solutions and that sustained support is required to address legal, protection and governance-related barriers in areas of return.

According to UNHCR and IOM, approximately **1.91 million IDPs have returned** to their areas of origin **since December 2024** reflecting strong aspirations among displaced Syrians to re-establish normalcy and reconnect with their communities. As of December 2025, an estimated **5.96 million people remain internally displaced** across Syria, with 19,579 new displacements in December 2025 and at least 150,000 new displacements in January 2026.

¹ <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/syrian-arab-republic-humanitarian-response-priorities-january-december-2025>

UNHCR's IDP Movement Intentions Survey (September 2025) confirms that **daily life conditions**, rather than security alone, are now the **primary determinant of sustainable return**:

- Only 27% of surveyed IDPs intend to return to their area of origin
- Over half (57%) plan to remain in their current displaced locations

These findings illustrate that sustainability of returns remains closely tied to improvements in security, housing, services and economic opportunities in areas of return. Accelerating recovery and reintegration conditions is now central to transforming return into sustainable and long-term solutions.

As of 16 January 2026, UNHCR estimates that **1,354,245 Syrian refugees** have **returned to Syria from other countries (see below)** since the political transition on 8 December 2024. Almost 90% originated from neighbouring host countries, notably:

- Türkiye*: approximately 445,000
- Lebanon*: around 501,603
- Jordan*: approximately 180,000
- Iraq*: around 7,000

(*country level figures are drawn from different sources and methodologies (return monitoring, registration data, and database inactivation) and should therefore be read as indicative rather than directly comparable).

According to UNHCR's June 2025 Enhanced Regional Perceptions and Intentions Survey (eRPIS), 18% of Syrian **refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon** report an intention to **return to Syria within the next 12 months**, while around 80% express a longer-term aspiration to return one day.

IOM December 2025 data indicates that the top three push factors influencing returns to Syria are a better security situation (32%), a need to reoccupy assets and properties (26%), and better access to livelihoods (14%). The top three pull factors of returning to Syria included a better security situation (30%), access to employment (27%) and better access to livelihoods (21%).

Syrian transitional authorities publicly support the return of displaced citizens and view returns as a central part of national recovery and reconstruction planning, aiming to restore social cohesion, reactivate local economies, and re-establish public services.

i Returns of refugees to Syria from neighbouring countries

More than 90% of Syrian returnees since December 2024 originated from neighbouring host countries.

Since the fall of the Assad regime, **Türkiye** has sought to increase influence and become the favoured interlocutor of Damascus by leveraging its longstanding support to Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS). As such, Türkiye has shown a willingness to increase cooperation on border management, security and counterterrorism.

The Syrian transitional authorities have also cultivated relatively more constructive relations with **Lebanon**, with several high-level visits occurring between the two countries. Both have increased cooperation on border management and security, looking to reduce drugs and arms trafficking linked to Hezbollah and other groups along the shared border. However, the issues of Syrian refugees (an estimated 1.14 million known to UNHCR) and detainees in Lebanon, including former regime remnants and rebel fighters, still hamper relations.

Jordan has welcomed the fall of the Assad regime and has shown willingness to facilitate an effective transition in Syria. Like Lebanon, Jordan hosts a high number of Syrian refugees (420.000 registered, UNHCR)

ii. Key challenges of Syrian asylum seekers/refugees for the EU

For the EU, one of the key challenges arising from the **evolving situation in Syria** concerns the **preservation of effective international protection** while ensuring a **coherent and coordinated approach** among Member States. Despite political developments in Syria, conditions on the ground remain fragile and uneven, necessitating continued access to asylum and full respect for the principle of non-refoulement. Diverging national practices regarding the **examination of asylum applications for Syrian nationals**, including suspensions, reassessments and variations in recognition rates, risk undermining the consistency of the Common European Asylum System and creating legal uncertainty for applicants. At the same time, increased pressure to reassess protection needs places additional strain on national asylum systems and judicial authorities.

In parallel, the EU faces **ongoing challenges related to border management, integration and social inclusion**. While irregular arrivals of Syrian nationals at the EU's external borders have significantly decreased compared to previous years, migration routes through the Eastern Mediterranean, Central Mediterranean and Western Balkans remain operational and require sustained monitoring and coordination. Beyond border management, long-term integration challenges persist for **Syrians already residing in the EU**, many of whom face prolonged uncertainty linked to temporary protection statuses, pending asylum applications or the reassessment of their residence rights. Limited access to stable legal status, employment and social services risks exacerbating social exclusion and undermining integration outcomes, with potential implications for social cohesion and secondary movements within the EU.

iii. EU strategies and policies for managing migration flows from Syria.

In response to these challenges, the EU has pursued a **multi-layered approach to managing migration flows from Syria**, combining protection-oriented measures with return-related policies and external engagement. This includes maintaining asylum space for those in need of international protection, while progressively enhancing cooperation with Syrian transitional authorities on Syrian nationals with no right to stay in the EU. EU strategies place emphasis on **voluntary return** as the preferred option, supported by information provision and reintegration assistance, while acknowledging that large-scale returns remain contingent on tangible improvements in security, governance and basic services inside Syria.

At the same time, the EU continues to support host countries in the region and to pursue a coordinated, legally sound and rights-based approach to migration management, in line with EU law, international obligations and fundamental rights.

iv. EU-Syria cooperation through international organizations

The EU, together with its Member States, supports assistance to Syria primarily through international organizations.

IOM is present with **six active or confirmed programmes** implemented nationwide in all 14 governorates. This portfolio is explicitly framed within the **humanitarian–development–peace nexus** (HDPN), combining humanitarian assistance with early recovery, stabilization, and longer-term institutional strengthening.

EU-supported interventions led by IOM focus on displacement tracking and data systems, camp coordination and management, housing, land and property (HLP), WASH, livelihoods and economic recovery, community stabilization, and returns and reintegration, while also incorporating governance-related components, including Integrated Border Governance (IBG), to strengthen institutional capacities and support more sustainable solutions. Collectively, this engagement reflects a strategic shift from short-term emergency response toward **integrated, multi-year support** that reinforces national and local systems, promotes evidence-based planning, and contributes to stability and peacebuilding outcomes across Syria.

One example of this approach is the **forthcoming DG MENA project**, which will be implemented across Lebanon and Syria with **ILO, UNHCR and IOM** and will focus on area-based coordination, institutional strengthening, improved data systems and labour pathways to help drive durable, solutions-oriented responses to displacement. IOM's interventions will specifically work to build institutional capacity on **border management**, as well as strengthen an evidence-based approach to **return and reintegration** through expanded displacement tracking activities.

Within the inter-agency coordination architecture, IOM co-chairs the **Solutions Working Group**, contributing to strategic prioritization and alignment of shelter and settlements interventions, while advancing linkages with early recovery and solutions-oriented approaches.

In parallel, the EU is stepping up its **work with regional partners, including Türkiye, Jordan and Lebanon, as well as the UNHCR**, to support **safe, dignified and voluntary returns**. A **regional and coherent approach for returns**, with Syrian Authorities engagement will be critical. The EU has concluded in December 2025 a **EUR 80 million cross-border programme** on durable solutions, implemented with UNHCR, IOM and ILO in Lebanon [EUR 40 million] and in Syria [EUR 40 million]. This pilot programme aims to improve the effective management of displacement in both countries, including voluntary returns from Lebanon and sustainable reintegration of returnees in Syria.

The EU is ready to assist Syrians wishing to return and is committed to working in parallel on **four fronts**: (i) supporting the political transition and socio-economic recovery in Syria; (ii) continued humanitarian assistance, (iii) assisting host countries in ensuring access to basic services, protection, and opportunities where relevant for refugees and vulnerable populations; and (iv) developing a coherent regional approach to durable solutions.

4. Actions at EU level

a) Latest trends in irregular arrivals to the EU and in asylum applications of Syrian nationals

Illegal border crossings (IBCs) by Syrians at the EU external borders decreased sharply from around 44 870 between January and November 2024 to just over 5 900 during the same period in 2025 (-87%). The most notable decrease was registered along the Eastern Mediterranean route and along the Western Balkans route, where Syrians were the top nationality among irregular arrivals in the previous years.

Between January and October 2025, around 36 000 **asylum applications** were lodged by Syrian nationals in the EU, a 72 % decrease compared to 2024 (128 000).

Given the unclear situation in Syria, some Member States (fully or partially) **suspended the processing of Syrian asylum applications**. As of December 2025, 22 Member States were examining applications for international protection from Syrian nationals [AT, BE, BG, CY, EE, ES, DK, FI, FR, EL, HU, LU, LV, LT, MT, NL, PL, PT, RO, SE, SI, SK], three Member States had generally suspended the examination of applications with exceptions in place [CZ, DE, IE], and in two Member States the examination of asylum applications lodged by Syrians was suspended completely [HR, IT].

b) EU response to the situation in neighbouring countries

For the period 2025-27, **EUR 1.5 billion** has been allocated for **refugee assistance** and related support in **Türkiye**. Out of this total, a **package of EUR 1.15 billion in refugee and migration management support** was adopted by the Commission on 15 December. The package provides for the continuation of essential needs – basic needs, integrated health care and integrated education - to ensure uninterrupted delivery until end-2027. **EUR 311 million** of this was also allocated to **border management and voluntary returns**. Together with EUR 200 million in education and humanitarian support allocated separately this leaves a balance of EUR 195 million still to be allocated under the 2027 budget.

The **Commission** has an **ongoing project on voluntary returns** from Türkiye to Syria of **EUR 95 million**, implemented by UNHCR, signed on 13 August 2025 with the specific objective of increasing the effectiveness of the Turkish authorities in facilitating voluntary, safe, dignified and orderly returns to Syria in line with international standards.

In Lebanon, the EU allocated **EUR 368 million for 2024-2025** in support of access to basic services and protection for both refugees and vulnerable Lebanese, as well as durable solutions to protracted displacement, including voluntary returns to Syria. In addition, the ongoing **EUR 7 million** action with **IOM**, funded from 2023 EU budget, is aiming to support integrated border management in Lebanon. **Frontex's** management board has authorised the agency to negotiate a **working arrangement** with the relevant border management authorities of Lebanon.

In Jordan, the EU adopted EUR 80 million for 2025 to provide social assistance and services to Syrian refugees and to contribute to sustainable skills development, with a view to expand access to durable solutions, including voluntary returns.

c) Returns to Syria from the EU

Several Member States, due to the changed political situation in Syria, now assess that conditions allow for **forced returns** and have taken active steps to be able to proceed with forced returns of certain groups, i.e. those posing a security risk and convicted criminals subject to fundamental rights considerations, in particular the principle of non-refoulement.

i Number of returns

According to Frontex, **in 2025, 16 092 return decisions** have been issued to third country nationals from Syria from EU Member States and SAC.² The number of return decisions issued by Member States decreased between January and September 2025, compared to the same period in 2024.

Effective returns of Syrians with no right to stay in the EU increased significantly between January and September 2025 compared to the same period last year, though remaining at low numbers (5 634 vs 1 540).

The **EU Reintegration Programme (EURP), managed by Frontex**, has been available to Member States for the implementation of reintegration support for Syrian nationals returning voluntarily to Syria since 2 June 2025.

Operational support on the ground is currently delivered through **two reintegration partners, ETTC and IRARA**.

Since the rollout of support, 20 Member States have made use of the programme, submitting 1,923 cases covering 3.195 persons. The caseload has increased steadily over time, with additional Member States joining the programme almost every month since its activation, reflecting growing uptake and confidence in the operational setup.

Frontex and participating Member States also anticipate continued and increased use of the programme in the coming months, in line with evolving return dynamics and Member State planning.

² Data as of (12/01/2026). **RDC 1A (Return decisions issued)** figures are not available for Bulgaria, Switzerland, Cyprus, France, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia (November 2025), Norway (September to November 2025).

As of 7 January, **IOM** has supported 84 Syrians through Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration support **from the EU**, among which 23 were unaccompanied or separated children returning to their families in Syria, and 4 were migrants with medical needs. IOM has also supported 152 Syrians through Voluntary Humanitarian Returns (VHR) **from Libya** and 73 **from Sudan**. All were supported through the national return programmes and received corresponding return assistance, support with the issuance of travel documents and liaison with the Syrian diplomatic representations in EU Member States, virtual pre-departure counselling with IOM in the host country and in Syria, as well as individual reintegration support.

Pre-departure procedures for **unaccompanied children** (UAC) and **migrants with medical needs** were closely coordinated among IOM missions through family assessments and the development of individual reintegration plans to promote sustainability, including access to available housing, schooling, and employment in the country.

The main sending countries under AVRR in the EU are Greece, Germany, Finland, and Bulgaria.

UNHCR underlines that **returns**, whether spontaneous or organised, **must remain voluntary, safe and dignified**, and should be accompanied by reintegration support and post-return monitoring where feasible. Any operational cooperation should preserve asylum space, respect non-refoulement, and avoid creating direct or indirect pressure on individuals to return prematurely. Sustained EU support to Syria and neighbouring host countries remains central to preventing destabilising secondary movements and to enabling return decisions to become sustainable over time rather than cyclical.

ii. Reaction of Syrian Authorities

The Commission held preliminary discussions on the return of Syrian nationals without the right to stay in the EU with the Syrian authorities in June 2025.

Syrian Authorities expressed repeatedly their willingness to **prioritise returns from IDPs**, then **from neighbouring countries** and finally **from other countries**. They also recalled the risk that large-scale returns would entail regarding the pressure on access to basic services. At the exchange between the Presidents of the Council and the EU Commission on 9 January 2026 with interim President Al-Sharaa, he also expressed caution about Syria's capacity to welcome back criminals in large numbers. Support for reconstruction, economic recovery and basic service delivery is necessary to foster the best conditions for the ongoing movement of people.

iii. Intentions (short and long term) of those who haven't returned yet

Evidence from recent UNHCR and IOM surveys indicates that **return intentions** among Syrians remain **very limited in the short term**. An EU-wide UNHCR survey in early 2025 shows that the vast majority of Syrian refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe plan to stay in their host countries over the next year, citing security concerns in Syria, widespread destruction, limited livelihood opportunities and strong legal and protection considerations in the EU. While some express openness to return **in the longer term**, this is conditional on substantial improvements in safety, housing, services and economic prospects. Overall, the findings suggest that non-return is driven primarily by pragmatic assessments of security and living conditions, underscoring the need for sustained investments in recovery, services and livelihoods to enable future voluntary, safe and dignified returns.

iv Frontex's support on voluntary returns – reintegration.

The **EU Reintegration Programme (EURP), managed by Frontex**, has been available to Member States for the implementation of reintegration support for Syrian nationals returning voluntarily to Syria since 2 June 2025.

Operational support on the ground is currently delivered through **two reintegration partners, ETTC and IRARA**.

Since the rollout of support, 20 Member States have made use of the programme, submitting 1,717 cases covering 2,889 persons. The caseload has increased steadily over time, with additional Member States joining the programme almost every month since its activation, reflecting growing uptake and confidence in the operational setup.

Frontex and participating Member States also anticipate continued and increased use of the programme in the coming months, in line with evolving return dynamics and Member State planning.

QUESTIONS:

The following questions are intended to support a strategic and evidence-based discussion, taking into account the sequencing between returns, reintegration capacity and regional stability.

1. How do Member States assess the way forward for the EU's overall migration cooperation with Syria?
2. How do Member States currently engage in migration cooperation in/with Syria, including in the area of returns?
3. How can the EU and Member States best support recovery and reconstruction in Syria to create conditions conducive in Syria for larger scale voluntary and sustainable returns?
4. How will the EU and EU Member States sustain their support to refugee-hosting countries in the region to avoid premature and unsustainable returns, thereby avoiding the risk of onward movement?