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▶ **To cite this version:**

Leila Vignal. Perspectives on the return of Syrian refugees. Forced Migration Review, 2018, 57. hal-02057056

HAL Id: hal-02057056

https://univ-rennes2.hal.science/hal-02057056

Submitted on 5 Mar 2019

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Perspectives on the return of Syrian refugees

Leïla Vignal

There are many reasons why discussions about the imminent return of large numbers of Syrian refugees are premature.

Since 2015, the military dynamics of the Syrian conflict have shifted in favour of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. Damascus has retaken control of many cities and areas that were previously held by armed opposition groups, with the battle for the eastern neighbourhoods of Aleppo – concluded in December 2016 – a significant turning point in this regard. By late 2017, the Islamic State group had been expelled from the last towns and regions under its control in eastern Syria.

These developments, as well as the implementation of 'de-escalation zones', agreed in May 2017 and guaranteed by Russia, Iran and Turkey, have given new impetus to discussions about the future of the country, post-war reconstruction and the return of Syrian refugees to Syria. With the conflict far from over and the prospects for a genuine peace still remote, however, the terms of discussions on return need to be examined thoroughly.

The number of refugees is generally reported by the media to be 5.2 million. However, this only accounts for Syrians registered with UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, in the Middle East. It does not include the non-registered Syrians in Syria's neighbouring countries, estimated to be 610,000 people in Jordan (in addition to the 655,000 registered refugees), 500,000 in Lebanon (one million registered) or 175,000 in Egypt (125,000 registered). For the Gulf states, figures oscillate between half a million to a (probably excessive) two million. To this must be added the one million Syrians who have applied for asylum in the European Union since 2011. Finally, several tens of thousands of Syrians have made their way through resettlement programmes or other means to countries such as the United States (US), Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Thailand. In total, it is not unrealistic to estimate the number of Syrians outside Syria at seven to eight million, if not more.

The adding up of these numbers is important. If the number of Syrians outside Syria is added to the 6.3 million Syrians currently internally displaced, it means that almost two thirds of the former 21 million inhabitants of Syria have been forced to leave their homes. Previously populated areas have been largely destroyed and emptied of their inhabitants, while other areas, mostly in the regions held by the al-Assad regime, are now crammed with displaced Syrians. The magnitude of this displacement and the transformation of the spatial and political features of Syria are the result of a specific type of warfare: tactics that have targeted the civilian population in opposition-held areas since 2012, including with systematic and large-scale destruction of the urban fabric, and besieging of cities or neighbourhoods.[1]

'Safe and quiet spaces' in Syria?

The need for refugees to remain in exile is now being questioned, given the new military situation in Syria, the progressive closure of borders by the main neighbouring countries hosting refugees, the hardening of conditions in Jordan and Lebanon, and the costs to the international community incurred by the deployment of the largest humanitarian response ever.

In Lebanon, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Hezbollah party and a close ally of Damascus, declared in February 2017 that "military victories… have turned large areas into safe and quiet spaces". In October 2017, the Lebanese president Michel Aoun went further and stated that "the return of displaced to stable and low-tension areas must be carried out without attaching it to reaching a political solution". Such statements obviously reflect the political proximity of those two leaders to Damascus

but are also directed at the international community whose provision of financial and humanitarian support is deemed insufficient. This is a recurring issue from one donor conference to the other. Meanwhile, in Jordan, observers report conversations in which Jordanian officials have been privately floating the idea of the establishment of 'safe zones' inside Syria, guaranteed by Damascus, to which refugees could return.

Return to what?

Stating that the conditions for repatriation are ripe is a clear distortion of the reality in Syria; the conflict continues, and the 'quiet' places of today may not be quite so quiet tomorrow. Besides, the Syrian refugees do not want to go back to 'stable and low-tension areas' (whatever this would mean) but to their own homes and places of origin. Finally, in Syria, beyond the physical destruction, the depth of disruption is of historical magnitude, and the population has been plunged into poverty, with 85% of Syrians now living in poverty.[2] Access to livelihoods, homes, infrastructure, basic services, education and health provision has disintegrated.

In this respect, the few thousand Syrians who returned in 2017 are probably not the vanguard of a larger movement. Throughout the war, there have been movements of refugees to check on property, look after a family member, collect a pension and so on. The returns of 2017 were limited in number, either organised by Hezbollah (from the border city of Arsal) or undertaken on the initiative of families exhausted by dire conditions. More importantly, internal displacement and outward movements have continued.

Contrary to Michel Aoun's declaration, return cannot precede the political settlement of the war. From the point of view of Syrian refugees, conditions for return are two-fold: first, the guarantee of safety, security and absence of retaliation for individuals returning, including for young men escaping forced conscription in the army, and, second, some prospect of a future in Syria, including reconstruction of the country.

Reconstruction strategy

The first discussions about post-war reconstruction took place very early in the conflict, with international organisations and governments saying that the lessons from previous conflicts had to be learned – referring in particular to the lack of post-war planning of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. For instance, the United Nations (UN) Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia initiated a programme called the National Agenda for the Future of Syria that, since 2013, has been gathering expertise, building scenarios and identifying needs. Impressive figures have been given of the potential economic opportunities linked to reconstruction, and the potential gains for international and regional business, as well as for private economic actors, are significant.

There is interest in neighbouring countries too; Lebanon, for example, is aiming to become the base for Syria's reconstruction, citing its business-friendly legal environment and its logistics facilities, in particular the port of Tripoli – in the north of the country and close to the Syrian border – whose capacity is being increased with this future role in mind. In Damascus too discussions are taking place openly. The Syrian government's reconstruction committee, set up in 2012 but with a limited mandate, met in September 2017 to discuss for the first time the devising of a broad reconstruction strategy.

However, the question of the funding of the reconstruction has not been addressed. The finances needed would be more than could be provided by Syrian banks or Syria's allies. Hence, any genuine reconstruction of Syria could only be based on a collective international effort that would first require finding a political solution vetted by the UN but the Geneva-track peace talks – the UN-sponsored process – are struggling to make headway because of the parallel Sochi track, the discussions sponsored by Russia and Iran. Meanwhile, Damascus has repeatedly said that it would favour its allies in the allocation of reconstruction projects.

Whose peace?

A genuine political solution would also mean that the return of Syrian refugees could be addressed in a way that reflects the international legal framework for the protection of refugees and the provision of safe and voluntary repatriation. Yet, for all the talks that are taking place outside Syria, this issue is not on the agenda of the government in Damascus, nor are refugees included in its reconstruction plans. According to informed sources, the regime's plans for reconstruction are to cater for a population of only 17 million people. The military strategy of driving out large sections of the population has been for years one of the devices used by a weakened regime to remain in power. It has resulted in the emergence of a new social reality that is thought – at least by al-Assad's government – to be politically and militarily more manageable. Clearly, this new reality does not include those Syrians who are outside the country.

If al-Assad is to remain in power in the coming years, he may try to use the fate of this remaining third of the population as a bargaining chip with the international community in return for normalisation of relations between his regime and the international community and for access to the reconstruction business. However, for such a plan to be successful, it would require a strong political power in Damascus: a stable authority, able to plan for the future, and legitimate enough to be in a position to reach out to forge new partnerships with Syrians as well as with the international community. The reality of al-Assad's power, however, is far from this: without the support of its allies, it is weaker than ever. Besides, the foreseeable establishment of an Iranian-Russian political order in Syria (at least for the time being) will not resolve the conflict; indeed, it could lead to the emergence of new lines of confrontation.

With little immediate prospect of a genuine political solution and a stable peaceful Syria, ambitious reconstruction plans may need to be shelved until a future date and the return of Syrian refugees remain a remote prospect.

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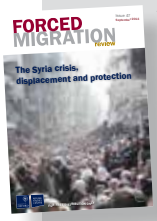
1. Vignal L (2014) 'Destruction-in-Progress: Revolution, Repression and War Planning in Syria (2011 Onwards)', *Built Environment*, Special issue 'Urban Violence', Vol 40, no 3. http://bit.ly/Vignal-BuiltEnvironment-2014

2. UNOCHA *2017 Humanitarian Needs Overview: Syrian Arab Republic* http://bit.ly/UNOCHA-SyriaOverview-2017

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Also worth reading...

***Forced Migration Review* issue 47**
'The Syria crisis, displacement and protection'
September 2014 www.fmreview.org/syria



At the time of FMR 47's publication, the 6.45 million people who were then displaced inside Syria made this the largest IDP crisis in the world, with possibly also the largest number of people who were 'trapped', while the number of refugees from Syria was continuing to increase. The articles in this issue emphasised how the international community had an opportunity to set up an effective response to what would clearly become protracted displacement. These 20 articles discussed how to increase protection for the displaced and how to shape assistance to both the displaced and their 'hosts'.

FMR 47 was supported by the Regional Development and Protection Programme for the Middle East, as is this latest 2018 issue. http://rdpp-me.org/RDPP/index.php



We are aware that, regrettably, this February 2018 issue does not include any articles on peace processes or peace building. We would therefore like to draw attention to our thematic listing on '**Peace processes and peace building**' from December 2017 at: www.fmreview.org/thematic-listings

This document provides links to a selection of full issues and articles published by FMR focusing on peace processes and peace building.

We would welcome future articles on this topic. If you would like to discuss an idea for an article please email the Editors at fmr@qeh.ox.ac.uk.