

The Syrian Displacement Crisis: Future Durable Solutions

By Catherine Tyson

The Syrian refugee crisis, a result of the violence of the several military groups sweeping the country during the prolonged civil war, is escalating each day as more people flee their homes and seek refuge in neighbouring nations. As the crisis has already become protracted, it is now more necessary to evaluate the access to the durable solutions – resettlement, integration, and repatriation - promoted by UNHCR once the conflict ceases. I argue that currently, from a governmental viewpoint, repatriation is the most likely solution to the Syrian refugee crisis due more to the unlikelihood of integration and the small scale of resettlement rather than any potentially quick reconstruction and stabilisation of Syria after the conflict ends.

The Syrian conflict began as one of many protests against authoritarian rule that swept the Middle East during the so-called ‘Arab Spring’, and erupted into a fully-fledged civil war on 15 March 2011 when government forces killed demonstrators in the southern city of Deraa (Global News 2013). During the ensuing violence between the Syrian military and several opposition forces and among the opposition forces, the death toll has exceeded 191,000 and is predicted to be much higher (USA Today 2014). As of 30 August 2014, it is estimated that more than 3 million Syrians have become refugees with an additional 6.5 million displaced within Syria (Martin 2014). Syrian refugees have primarily fled to Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, with a smaller group fleeing to Egypt. According to its mandate, UNHCR extends protection to international refugees, including the ‘search for and implementation of durable solutions for refugees from the available choices of voluntary repatriation, resettlement, or host-country absorption’ (Akram 2002). In the case of host-country integration, or ‘absorption,’ Syrian refugees would remain in their countries of refuge and continue their lives and livelihoods there. In the case of resettlement, Syrian refugees would be relocated to third countries in which they would obtain legal status to pursue education, seek employment, and access public services. In sustainable repatriation to Syria, refugees would ultimately return home once safe return is possible and Syria’s infrastructure is rebuilt.

In evaluating the likelihood of integration as a solution to the Syrian crisis, it is necessary to consider the domestic policies of regional states of refuge, and the stability and resources of host countries. Neither Jordan, Lebanon nor Iraq are signatories to the 1951 Convention, meaning that the refugees within their borders may not receive treatment according to international standards. Although these countries have historically been welcoming of refugees from neighboring Arab states, the protracted nature of past refugee crises has also had a part in shaping more restrictive refugee policies. In terms of domestic policy, Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon resist offering full legal rights to Syrian refugees and, as a result, the refugees would likely struggle to obtain access to employment, healthcare, housing and education (Krajeski 2012). Additionally, Jordan and Lebanon have decreased the public aid available to most refugees and denied access to citizenship for the majority of refugees. These restrictive practices have not been amended to allow integration of past refugee groups; most Palestinian and Iraqi refugees in Jordan and Lebanon have not been able to attain legal status.

Regarding physical stability, Iraq continues to struggle with sectarian violence and a weak infrastructure, Egypt is undergoing acute political changes, and Lebanon is grappling with increased sectarian tensions and increased economic strife as a result of the Syrian refugee

presence (Reuters 2012; Almeida 2014). A country of 5 million currently supporting over 1 million Syrian refugees, Lebanon has recently declared that they will only accept Syrian refugees of 'exceptional circumstances' in the future (Holmes 2014). Additionally, Jordan is one of the poorest countries on earth in terms of water resources and, even if its current policies allowed for integration, would struggle to absorb its refugee population. There is currently nothing to suggest that the domestic policies, resources, or stability will change in order to provide a different situation for Syrian refugees. Due to these highly prohibitive factors that are unlikely to change, integration will be unavailable as a durable solution to the vast majority of Syrian refugees.

In terms of resettlement, a key element that must be remembered is that resettlement spaces are distributed among various refugee groups worldwide, not concentrated on a single population. According to UNHCR, there were 16.7 million refugees worldwide as of 20 June 2014 (UNHCR 2014a). However, the files of only 93,226 refugees were submitted by UNHCR in 2013 for consideration by resettlement countries and just 71,411 refugees were actually resettled (UNHCR 2014b). These numbers demonstrate that resettlement will prove woefully inadequate for the 2 million strong – and growing - Syrian refugee population. Indeed, UNHCR notes that the numbers of resettled refugees have steadily decreased over the past few years, indicating a disheartening trend. Between 2009, 2010 and 2011, resettlement submissions and departures dropped an average of 22 and 15 percent respectively (UNHCR 2012).

If this trend persists, there will only be fewer chances for resettlement in the near future, not more. Although twelve resettlement countries are currently offering emergency resettlement response mechanisms for Syrian refugees, including additional resettlement spaces and expedited resettlement processing, only 1,700 additional resettlement spaces were offered with an open-ended number of places from the United States (UNHCR 2012). However, as of April 2014, the U.S. had only accepted 121 Syrian refugees (Acer 2014). Germany has offered 4,000 temporary spaces for Syrian refugees that are not intended for permanent resettlement (Donkin 2013). Due to these severe limits of resettlement, it is unlikely that resettlement will be an accessible solution for most Syrian refugees.

There are several factors to consider in evaluating the likelihood of repatriation. According to UNHCR policy, certain conditions must be met that allow refugees to exercise their 'social, economic, civil, political and cultural rights' and enjoy 'peaceful, productive and dignified lives' (UNHCR 2008). In order for repatriation to occur, refugees must be able to return home without fear for their lives and domestic infrastructure must be strong enough to protect returning refugees' rights. The speed with which these criteria are met hinges largely upon the outcome of the conflict itself. Although talks between rebel leaders in November 2012 yielded a unified 'National Coalition of the Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces' (Gordon 2012), rebel forces then began fighting against each other in addition to fighting against Assad's forces (Khaleej Times 2013), creating greater conflict within Syria and diminishing the chances of a peaceful transition to a unified government. Additionally, more Syrian infrastructure is destroyed with each day of the conflict, reducing the likelihood of a strong infrastructure at the conflict's end.

However, the diminished capacity for immediate peace and infrastructure strength does not mean that it will never be safe or feasible to return to Syria. While safety and stability likely will not occur immediately at the conflict's end, several war-torn countries have become safe and stable enough to support repatriation according to UNHCR standards in the past. These cases lend support to a scenario of eventual peace and stability in Syria. Currently, UNHCR is ready to officially announce that it is safe for Iraqi refugees to return to their home country.

Although UNHCR's standards may remain in dispute amongst leading human rights organisations, they are far more likely to be given weight in a governmental viewpoint than the objections of activist organisations. Additionally, many refugees have voluntarily returned home in past conflicts and, therefore, seem likely do so in this case. But the largest factor in favour of repatriation as the most likely eventual solution to the Syrian refugee crisis is the fact that it is more likely to be realised than either resettlement or integration. The state policies and national issues precluding integration and the minimal international response to resettlement are highly unlikely to change anytime in the near future, as previously outlined. Because there presently remains a better chance that conditions for repatriation will occur at some point in the future, repatriation is the most likely durable solution available to Syrian refugees, even if it is still a long way off.

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