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The Syrian crisis and its repercussions: internally displaced persons and refugees

Salam Kawakibi

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ROBERT SCHUMAN CENTRE FOR ADVANCED STUDIES
MIGRATION POLICY CENTRE (MPC)

**The Syrian crisis and its repercussions:
internally displaced persons and refugees**

SALAM KAWAKIBI
Syrian Political Scientist

MIGRATION POLICY CENTRE (MPC)
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European University Institute
Badia Fiesolana
I – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI)
Italy

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The Migration Policy Centre (MPC)

Mission statement

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society.

Rationale

Migration represents both an opportunity and a challenge. While well-managed migration may foster progress and welfare in origin- as well as destination countries, its mismanagement may put social cohesion, security and national sovereignty at risk. Sound policy-making on migration and related matters must be based on knowledge, but the construction of knowledge must in turn address policy priorities. Because migration is rapidly evolving, knowledge thereof needs to be constantly updated. Given that migration links each individual country with the rest of the world, its study requires innovative cooperation between scholars around the world.

The MPC conducts field as well as archival research, both of which are scientifically robust and policy-relevant, not only at European level, but also globally, targeting policy-makers as well as politicians. This research provides tools for addressing migration challenges, by: 1) producing policy-oriented research on aspects of migration, asylum and mobility in Europe and in countries located along migration routes to Europe, that are regarded as priorities; 2) bridging research with action by providing policy-makers and other stakeholders with results required by evidence-based policy-making, as well as necessary methodologies that address migration governance needs; 3) pooling scholars, experts, policy makers, and influential thinkers in order to identify problems, research their causes and consequences, and devise policy solutions.

The MPC's research includes a core programme and several projects, most of them co-financed by the European Union.

Results of the above activities are made available for public consultation through the website of the project: www.migrationpolicycentre.eu

For more information:

Migration Policy Centre (MPC)
Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies (EUI)
Via delle Fontanelle 19
50014 San Domenico di Fiesole
Italy
Tel: +39 055 46 85 817
Fax: + 39 055 46 85 770
Email: migration@eui.eu

Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies

<http://www.eui.eu/RSCAS/>

Despite the instability Syria suffered between its independence in 1946 and its union with Egypt in 1958, Syrian society was, from the outset, politically and culturally active. Serious attempts were made to put down the foundations of the nation State.

On 8 March 1963, a *coup d'état* brought the Ba'ath party to power. This meant a new State authoritarianism, imposed by the regime, which had favoured union with Egypt. Here the country entered a totalitarian era. Political life was extinguished to “promote the progress and emancipation of the people”¹.

Hafez al-Assad's arrival into power in 1970 came with promises of economic reform and the softening of restrictive policies. But the reality was very different. The following years, in fact, saw increasingly authoritarian control of public life. State capitalism was reinforced and vote-catching within public machinery meant systematic corruption. The political system framed all societal components to its own satisfaction through “people's organisations”, which are organisms controlling, channelling and redistributing privileges.

Between 1979 and 1982, the country saw peaceful protest and armed violence. These were followed by bloody repression. The bloody repression reserved for the armed rebels did not spare the disputants.

When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000, Syrians began to hope for change. However, economic liberation led to harmful consequences at the social level. After the failure of *'Printemps de Damas'* (“the Damascus Spring”) in 2001, an opposition alliance was formed in 2005 under the name “The Damascus Declaration for Democratic Change”. This alliance wished to promote change through dialogue. The authorities' reaction was to incarcerate the *'Printemps'* leaders and to close the few spaces for national debate which had survived to that time.

Between legitimacy and revolts

Numerous Arab regimes saw their absolute domination evaporate with the Arab uprisings that came at the end of 2010. Even though most of these regimes were the result of a *coup d'état*, they had won for themselves a certain legitimacy. They had won this legitimacy through participation in the fight for independence against the colonial powers, or from confrontation with an external enemy, or even from a developmentalist ideology and modernising social policy.

However, as these regimes began to lose power they became repressive and put in place a “securitocratic” system². According to this logic, civil society was corrupted, becoming simply a means of perpetuating power. Furthermore, public expression itself became treasonable. The media was, it goes without saying, silenced and became enablers of these at-risk regimes.

The nature of the legitimacy of power in Syria did not seem so very different to that of other regimes. The country had built up “legitimacy” through its fight against Israel and by exploiting minorities. Finally, the culture of fear was rooted in a society that had seen thousands of deaths and detainees in the 1980s.

When the dissenting movements in Tunisia began, the Syrian regime did not, at first, sense any danger. It failed to understand that in the shadows of a failing economy, systematic corruption and inexistent political liberties protest was slowly mounting.

¹ Examples of official propaganda slogans.

² <http://www.arab-reform.net/arab-securitocracies-and-security-sector-reform>

In the face of the demands of frustrated populaces, the regime explained the slowness of political reforms with reference to the regional situation and to external threats. President Assad³ even declared that his country was “sheltered from trouble”, since power was “close to the people”. Moreover, the regime spoke of successful economic progress, publishing baseless statistics. The regime did not deign to answer appeals, nor did it take the outstretched hands of the opposition to “rebuild confidence and build bridges of dialogue”.

The Syrian exception

Since the very outbreak of protests in the Arab world in December 2010, observers had not questioned “the Syrian exception” and had assumed that the regime would survive. Analysts, in fact, were almost unanimous in claiming that the regime benefited from advantages that protected it from these kinds of crises. Its geographical position as well as its management of different portfolios at the regional and international levels gave it an advantage, according to certain observers. Of course, internal analyses were duly given, but they were not taken seriously and their role in the coming protests was underestimated. After all, there had been decades of stagnation and “stability”.

However, now fear, which had taken hold of Syrian society, switched sides. The protest movements had begun with small, limited gatherings in February 2011. Young people expressed their anger at specific incidents. This was notably the case in the demonstration of young people within the old town of Damascus, with its slogan “Syrians will not be humiliated!” during which, one of the protestors was harassed by a police officer. The Minister of Interior went to meet the protestors, criticising them: “Have you no shame? This is a protest, you know!” It was impossible for power to admit that the young might express their worries, needs and anger.

On 18 March, in the southern town of Daraa, school children were arrested and tortured for having dared to write “down with the regime” on the walls of their school, words that had not ceased to be heard on the television from protests in Tunis and Cairo. Underground protests suddenly became massive movements. From this date onwards, protests spread through much of the country.

Given the new situation, the opposition demanded that the authorities assume “their responsibilities [...] and adopt an audacious and wise position with respect to the question of democratic transition [...], through the voice of national dialogue [...]”. To make this dialogue possible, the *Damascus Declaration* demanded the liberation of political prisoners, the abrogation of emergency laws and the respect of rights to public freedom and association. The regime’s response was quick and violent. The demonstrations were denounced and the demonstrators were accused of being manipulated by Syria’s “enemies”.

After a period of confusion, the Syrian president delivered two speeches that did not respond to the expectations of the disputants, who were thirsty for reforms and freedom. In fact, their regional and international political supporters, such as Turkey, Qatar and France, saw their attempts at mediation haughtily spurned.

The dissenting movement adopted the same tools, slogans and procedures as the previous dissenting movements in Tunisia and Egypt. Social networks played an important role in the absence of neutral media coverage. The international press was removed. Any “corrective” operations needed to take place out of the sight of the world.

National unity has been put first by protestors to avoid a dangerous confessional dimension in a minority-rich society. The protestors’ slogan “God, Syria and freedom, that is all” was shouted in answer to the regime’s “God, Syria and Bachar, that is all”. This effectively translates the desire to take up freedom in the face of the durability of the system and its symbols.

³ Wall Street Journal, 31 January 2011.

At the beginning of the people's uprising, the demands were "measures" and they were linked to the need for gradual democratisation. The protestors did not cease to reaffirm that the desire for a free life was about Syria: it did not depend on the wishes of foreign powers.

The desire for dialogue with the regime was a genuine one. In fact, the opposition and independent intellectuals had proposed several points. But the regime was obstinate and securitarian and military abuses of power were preferred and the risk of the community base cracking up increased.

Syrians, who did not fear national division, organised themselves to assure a peaceful and progressive transition in the hope that violence would cease. They are convinced that their future is linked to the unity of the country and to a democratic and secular State. Admittedly this last point – the secular state – risks splitting the different belligerents. But this problem will be resolved in a national framework of dialogue and reciprocal concessions. Syrian history has long been about the peaceful coexistence of different religious communities.

It became commonplace to say that in Syria there is no opposition only opponents. Everyone questions whether there is the political organisation to guarantee a transition should Bashar al Assad leave. Here is something that worries not only observers, but also a large part of Syrian society. However, any fear is based on a misunderstanding of the protest movement. There are links between the various communities, demonstrating this country's ability to take control.

The refugees of freedom

The repressive management of the crisis resulted in the emergence of armed opposition five months after it had begun. First, this resulted in numerous withdrawals as the Syrian army committed atrocities. The armed resistance was then reinforced by thousands of civilians, who took up weapons in order to defend their families and belongings or to avenge the fallen, victims to the regime's military and securitarian machine.

The armed repression of peaceful disputes and the militarisation of the resistance have contributed to a massive exodus from targeted towns. This exodus has taken several forms, depending on the resources of the victims. Thousands of civilians living in the border regions sought refuge in Turkey, Jordan, Libya and Iraq. We have also seen the departure of thousands upon thousands of individuals towards Cyprus from along the Syrian coast. These first refugees came from the regions most affected by the massive bombing and the arbitrary incursions of loyalist forces. In fact, millions of people were obliged to leave of their district or town.

With regard to departures from the country, the regional situation of the Syrian refugees came to depend on the problems of the host country.

In **Lebanon**, there were Syrian tensions between pro and anti-Assad forces. This phenomenon was amplified by the already unstable Lebanese political alliances and the economic, social and securitarian impact of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon more generally.

The presence of refugees represents a securitarian challenge. Indeed, militias close to the Syrian regime try to intimidate or even terrorise these refugees, notably those who are politically active. The control of paramilitary forces outside the State machine also help to impose rules on Syrians exiled in Lebanon.

Numerous refugees find themselves in a precarious situation with little or no financial resources. Lebanon, which is officially neutral, refuses to set up refugee camps and sometimes pushes Syrian immigrants back across the border. This has naturally provoked outrage on the part of NGOs.

The Lebanese government has avoided setting up official camps, but that does not prevent clandestine camps, which give rise to a new form of exploitation; a tent is sold for between 300 and 700 dollars or rented for 200 dollars a month.

There is solidarity, but this only comes out at the community level. The risk of this humanitarian crisis being exploited is real in Lebanon.

Unlike Lebanon, **Jordan**, with about 100,000 Syrian refugees, has set up camps in the desert. A large proportion of these refugees are based in the Zaatari camp. The life conditions there are poor. Furthermore, Jordan's capacity to host a refugee population is modest and the country is no longer able to give appropriate aid to the refugees. The economic crisis and general political instability play a negative role in the humanitarian aspect of the crisis. This means internal tensions within the country.

Syrian refugees are also scattered through Jordanian towns, which has a negative effect on an Jordan's already weak economy. The Jordanian government has used the crisis as a "bargaining tool" to request more international aid. An assisted economy like that of Jordan will inevitably exploit the situation in the refugee camps in order to launch aid appeals. Also, the increase in fruit and vegetable prices between July 2010 and July 2011 was connected to the arrival of refugees, according to the central statistics office in Amman⁴. It should also be noted that Jordanian leaders do not act on the global increase in prices, something compounded by poor local management. High prices are the result of the export of Jordanian products towards the Gulf and Iraq and the absence of Syrian products.

In **Turkey**, c. 175,000 Syrian refugees are hosted mainly in the provinces of Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis and Urfa in camps. The Turkish government has apparently assumed responsibility for their assistance, shelter and protection. The frontier posts were provisionally closed by Ankara: a signal to the international community that too many had crossed the border. Syrians, indeed, found themselves blocked at the border before being able to pass through. Turkey also talks of setting up a buffer zone to allow for refugees to be looked after on Syrian territory.

For the Turkish government, the situation is further complicated by regional politics within the country. In the region of Hatay, which is mainly inhabited by Alevies, there is strong prejudice against the refugees. The Alevies accuse the central government of wanting to change the demographic composition by implanting "Sunnites/Syrians" on "their" ground. It was shocking to see during the hostile demonstrations there three juxtaposed portraits: Ali, the cousin of the Prophet, Kamal Atatürk and Bachar al-Assad. And this despite the welcome policy advocated by the AKP.

The government allowed only one humanitarian Turkish association to be active in the camps: the HHK, a group which is close to the AKP. Despite the good humanitarian work of this association this organisation is essentially religious. Indeed, being close to the conservative tradition, it took advantage of its privileged position to spread religious teachings among the refugees.

With the worsening humanitarian situation and with more refugees arriving in Turkey, the Turkish government has now opened the field to different national and international organisations with relative restrictions.

In addition to the exile of disadvantaged people to the camps and the middle class to the city, it should be noted that tens of thousands of Syrians have fled to distant countries using their resources or their savings. Europe has received thousands of Syrians, including activists. In Egypt, the number of Syrians in the Cairo area is estimated to be 100,000.

The **figures** vary for the number of refugees in the different countries. The UN authorities or humanitarian organisations talk of registered refugees. However, thousands of Syrian refugees do not register themselves because of ignorance or fear. In fact, some Syrians avoid initiating a registration procedure that seems very complicated and bureaucratic to them. UN organisations give estimates⁵ thanks to the existence of established camps under their authority and visits by their representatives. But other charitable organisations offer estimates that are twice as high: for example, Caritas in the case of Lebanon⁶.

⁴ http://www.dos.gov.jo/dos_home_e/main/archive/inflation/2012/CPI_sep.pdf

⁵ <http://www.unhcr.org/508671c36.html>

⁶ <http://www.caritas.org/activities/emergencies/ToughTimesAhead.html>

Displaced Syrians and refugees: what is their future?

Alongside the hundreds of thousands of refugees that flee abroad, there are also many internal exiles in Syria itself. The majority of displaced people inside Syria are today found in the regions of Damascus, Alep, Homs, Deir Ez-Zor and Idlib. The numbers go up and up. We can talk of at least 5 million displaced across the country: an enormous number when it is remembered that Syria had a pre-revolt population of some 23 million.

Given the extreme violence worked against the civil population, which have seen the destruction of houses and food and water provisions, today there are three forms of interior displacement:

- Families that have been able to find accommodation with friends or relatives.
- Families that have free or paid individual accommodation. These lodgings are often unsanitary. It is common to find several families living together.
- Families who are living out of schools and public buildings.

It is important to note that many families have been displaced several times.

There are naturally consequences in terms of **health** and **education**, which particularly affect children. The main consequence of violent displacement is the disintegration of family structures. Part of this relates to the increase in violence within families resulting from proximity, tensions, anxieties and the violence endured by adults.

In the two situations, that of the refugees in camps outside the country and that of displaced people inside the country, children evidently have the same basic needs as adults regarding security, health and nutrition. But children also have other special needs, which are worth stressing. We can classify their needs into four categories:

- **Medical needs:** displacement, lack of hygiene, malnutrition, poor health levels in their temporary homes and stress linked to violence are all direct causes of numerous illnesses. Infants are particularly affected by stress and malnutrition from the mother during and after pregnancy. Finally, children should be the object of a vaccination campaign for the most common illnesses.
- **Nutritional needs:** the major difficulty is in obtaining sufficient quantities of milk for babies, which is adapted to the large number of very young children. This kind of milk is evidently more expensive than ordinary milk or bread, which efficiently nourishes a lot of older children.
- **Schooling needs:** an important proportion of Syrian children went without education following the outbreak of war, either because schools hosted displaced people and their teachers had left, or because of displacement(s). Some schools were set up in the camps, but with little funding and with a chronic lack of teachers.
- **Psychological needs:** these needs are the ones least taken into account. Yet all areas affected by violence, report the psychological distress of children. Common symptoms include: incontinence, fear, and repeated crying attacks. In addition, amongst the hundreds of raped adolescents, a certain number of young girls find themselves pregnant at 14 or 15 years of age.

Children, given the poverty of their families, either start begging, or look for all sorts of small jobs. All too often they are driven to minor acts of delinquency and then criminality.

The regime, considers that the displaced form part of the population which dared to contest its absolute power. It, therefore, prevents emergency aid from getting through. No NGO installed in Syria can distribute aid without authorisation, and the regime determines in which region and by whom this aid must be distributed. The regions chosen are evidently not those where refugees are found. Therefore, the regime exploits international aid to build up a client base to which it delivers emergency aid meant for refugees.

Observers estimate that 80% of international aid and, more specifically, aid brought by the Red Cross, is wasted through corruption and political instrumentalisation. This takes place through the direction of the Syrian Red Crescent (RC), which is not properly neutral. The Syrian RC agents who wish to conform to their mission are constrained to do so clandestinely.

Consequently, displaced people do not have any confidence in emergency aid organisations patronised by the regime. The western NGOs that want to help displaced Syrians effectively have to make contact with informal networks and support associations. Today, this is the only way to pass on aid. These are the weak local partners that send aid directly from various support committees.

The situation has now evolved due to shortages in medicine and milk for children. Shortages are due to the closure or the destruction of the relevant factories and businesses. Aid for the disabled has become equally problematic.

The relentless repression against doctors providing care to displaced people or caring for the injured has considerably reduced the number of medical professionals available. And when there are doctors, all too often medicine is lacking.

The shared life imposed by the displacement and exile of thousands upon thousands of families raises the question of cohabitation for people from many different backgrounds: rural and city-dwellers, **Turcoman**, Kurds and Arabs.

Finally, the experiences of displaced people and the management of humanitarian aid have created dynamics that will have unpredictable consequences for the country: the emergence and empowerment of civil society; cross-community solidarity, even though ethnic and community fragmentation, encouraged by the regime are also evident; a better understanding of “otherness” (in terms of Syrian citizenship) and the notion of shared space; family re-composition and the slow modification of relations between men and women; not to mention deep disruption in the education system at all levels. And last but not least there is the desperate need to respond to the psychological traumas that affect the majority of Syrians, and especially the most vulnerable: Syrian children.

What perspectives and what hopes?

Given the closure of the Syrian political system and the repression that has been the lot of political activists for decades, there are a significant number of Syrian opponents abroad from many different backgrounds. Hoping for the end of the dictatorship, several attempts to regroup have taken place to prepare Syria for a new future.

There are political but also more concrete initiatives. Technocrats, technicians, scientists from all disciplines, businessmen and bankers organise meetings to develop **plans for the Syria of tomorrow**⁷. These actors try to develop concrete projects so that they will be able to help reconstruct Syria when the regime finally collapses. In fact, efforts to set up truth commissions in the framework of transitional justice should reassure a large number of Syrians and help circumvent any desire for rough justice.

The only positive thing to do in the present period of waiting is to use the time available to prepare for the future.

Through almost 20 months of uprising, the regime of Bacher Al Assad has persisted. However, the rebellion does not weaken either. The result? The country is dragged towards civil war. The efforts of the regime in trying to bring about this civil war are there for all to see. The regime has used every means at its disposal. Consequently, the social fabric is threatened: though so far it has proved resistant. Social

⁷ http://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publications/swp-comments-en/swp-aktuelle-details/article/the_day_after_democratic_transition_in_syria.html

communitarianism has long been present in Syria and it has never been a source of conflict. However, political power has exploited religion since the 1970s and has taken minorities hostage.

The divisive discourse that accompanies repression risks seeping down into society. Political and social efforts are necessary to prevent any such thing from happening. There is a real danger that otherwise Syria will experience this kind of conflict. It is desperately important to break free from the logic of reaction to provoke action.

The regime was brought into being to manage just such a situation. Indeed, fear within the managerial class plays an important role in preventing the system's final collapse. Furthermore, it is important to underline that the regime has succeeded in elevating and supplying certain groups over the decades by distributing privileges and allowing profitable corruption.

On the other hand, political projects proposed by the Syrian opposition have not completely succeeded in reassuring society's "silent" party. This is not a question of power. There is though the fear of instability and of the unknown, while the alternative project drags its feet.

The regional and international dimension adds to the complexity of this situation. The role of Russia and Iran is crucial in maintaining the *status quo*. Indeed, foreign intervention from Iran and Russia consolidate the regime, which continues in its securitarian policy and its bloody practices.

The Russians negotiate their portfolios at the price of new Syrian victims. They consider themselves to have been mistreated on the international scene since the collapse of the Soviet bloc. For them, it is time to erase the humiliation. Then also, two essential factors emerge from the Arab revolt in general: political Islam and democracy. They both present a source of fear for Russia, with its sham democracy and its 25% Muslim population.

The outcome of the crisis in Syria will depend on civil resistance and political mobilisation. The Syrians are showing their ability to resist. The involuntary militarisation provoked by bloody repression has civilian and peaceful roots. Increasing help for the resistance movement, which is more and more important amongst those who initially held back, has been noticed. However, the political opposition had consumed a lot of energy in its internal conflicts and in the selfishness of some of its figures.

Several decades without political life or culture, the exile and imprisonment of activists, the development of a suspicious culture and distrust within society in general and with opponents in particular, are factors that do not favour the creation of an efficient and united opposition. However, it is also normal that political and tactical divergences find their place in any authority that works for its country's "democratic" future.

The creation of a Syrian National Coalition for the Revolution and Opposition in November 2012 allowed the political opposition to become more efficient. Such a project will contribute to consolidating the Syrians' position and will allow them to have a future without confrontations and repression.

For a long time, Syrians have very much counted on the international community. The disillusionment felt at present is very strong and it has led to resignation and indifference. International civil societies can compensate the gap left by the absence of political decision-making. The Syrians have proven their ability to resist. The different forms of resistance that they have been able to "invent" over the last 20 months will allow them to consolidate. It is also important to count on their political and societal conscience in order to avoid the communitarian conflict, which the regime has worked so hard to bring about.

There is a strong national conscience within the dissenting movement: certainly, all peaceful demonstrations *are in favour* of national unity. However, it is clear that the fear of sectarian division is gaining ground. This has been brought about quite transparently by the regime and means that those religious leaders, who produce a unifying discourse to reassure the other communities, are silenced.

This dangerous game on the part of the authorities sows doubt in the “silent minority”, despite the relentless attempts by the opposition to try to explain this exploitation of religious differences and to alert society to the danger of such manipulation. This manipulation, which tries to label the dissenting movement as “Salafism Jihadism”, sometimes succeeds in winning over hesitant spirits in Syrian society. It also succeeds, at times, in the diplomatic circles of certain western chancelleries.

Among the many challenges that Syria faces in the near future, there is the danger that a war against civilians will become a civil war. The regime, with the active or passive complicity of the international “community”, favours this inversion, which would take the country towards a more complex and more uncertain future. To avoid such a situation, civil society is systematically strengthening itself before the hoped for change.

A second challenge stems from the catastrophic humanitarian situation, which has not yet woken the sleepy international conscience. Declarations and good intentions do not feed the starving and they do not shelter refugees. The harmful consequences of such a situation risk having very profound impacts on Syrian society, as well as on neighbouring countries.

By the end of this “crisis”, the economic situation in Syria will have reached catastrophic levels with problems at the level of human security. Consequently, a “Marshal plan” is necessary and it must depend, above all, on the Syrian Diaspora, already engaged in humanitarian aid, as well as on foreign donors.

The democratic transition will need to overcome five decades of the total absence of political practice. The transition must too replace the culture of fear with citizen engagement. Syrians will be able to concretise the end of the dictatorship which will be decisive in terms of the democratic process in the years to come.

The reconstruction of the social fabric, which has been methodically ripped, will need meticulous work within an emerging civil society. The economy, which has been despoiled and corrupted over the decades, will need rigorous reconstruction. To do so, it is necessary to reassure society by applying efficient transitional justice, with a series of reforms in, inter alia, justice, security and the armed forces.

International relations do not work according to the logic of charity and moral principles. However, the help of rich countries (not to mention the international “community”, which is a harebrained concept) in reconstructing civil society will be inevitable. These countries should invest in the reconstruction of a devastated Syria, not least to make amends for their present indifference.