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جبهة الانتصرة

م السلامة

تقدمة شركة محمد ماهر البستاني

A poster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad that reads “Welcome in victorious Syria” is displayed on the border with Lebanon in July 2018. (Hassan Ammar/AP)

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BEIRUT — Hundreds of Syrian refugees have been arrested after returning home as the war they fled winds down — then interrogated, forced to inform on close family members and in some cases tortured, say returnees and human rights monitors.

Many more who weathered the conflict in rebel-held territory now retaken by government forces are meeting a similar fate as President Bashar al-Assad's regime deepens its longtime dependence on informers and surveillance.

For Syrian refugees, going home usually requires permission from the government and a willingness to provide a full accounting of any involvement they had with the political opposition. But in many cases the guarantees offered by the government as part of this “reconciliation” process turn out to be hollow, with returnees subjected to harassment or extortion by security agencies or detention and torture to extract information about the refugees' activities while they were away, according to the returnees and monitoring groups.

Almost 2,000 people have been detained after returning to Syria during the past two years, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, while hundreds more in areas once controlled by the rebels have also been arrested.

“If I knew then what I know now, I would never have gone back,” said a young man who returned to a government-controlled area outside Damascus. He said he has been harassed for months by members of security forces who repeatedly turn up at his home and stop him at checkpoints to search his phone.

“People are still being taken by the secret police, and communities are living between suspicion and fear,” he said. “When they come to your door, you cannot say no. You just have to go with them.”

Returnees interviewed for this report spoke on the condition of anonymity or on the understanding that their family names would be withheld because of security threats.

Since the war erupted in 2011, more than 5 million people have fled Syria and 6 million others have been displaced to another part of the country, according to the United Nations — together representing slightly more than half the Syrian population.



Refugees returning to Syria stand next to trucks with belongings at the Jdeidet Yabous border crossing in August. (Sergei Grits/AP)

In the past two years, as Assad's forces have largely routed the rebels and recaptured much of the country, refugees have begun to trickle back. The United Nations says that at least 164,000 refugees have returned to the country since 2016. But, citing a lack of access, the United Nations has not been able to document whether they have come back to government- or opposition-held areas.

Assad has called for more homecomings, encouraging returnees in a televised address in February to "carry out their national duties." He said forgiveness would be afforded to returnees "when they are honest."

A recent survey of Syrians who returned to government-held areas found that about 75 percent had been harassed at checkpoints, in government registry offices or in the street, conscripted into the military despite promises they would be exempted, or arrested.

"According to our data, you are the exception if nothing happens to you," said Nader Othman, a trustee with the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, which said it had interviewed 350 returnees across Syria. "One of our most important takeaways is that most of those people who came back had thought that they were cleared by the regime. They thought their lack of opposition would protect them."

The Syrian government did not respond to multiple requests for comment about the treatment of returnees and other Syrians now back under government control.

Outside Syria, many refugees say they were already apprehensive about going home, with fears over a lack of personal security only growing with reports that the government is reneging on its guarantees. Aid groups say there are few signs that a large-scale return will begin anytime soon.

And in conversations with U.N. representatives, senior Syrian officials have made it clear that not all returnees are equally welcome. According to two European officials who recounted the conversations, individuals with links to opposition groups, media activism or humanitarian work will be least well-received.

But pressure on the refugees to return is rising across the Middle East, with Syria's neighbors tightening restrictions on them in part to get them to leave.

'They knew everything'

Hassan, 30, left his home in the western province of Homs in 2013. Before returning at the end of last year, he secured what he believed were guarantees for his safety after paying a large bribe to a high-ranking security official.

But officers from the state security directorate met him at the airport and took him for interrogation. "They knew everything — what I'd done abroad, which cafes I'd sat in, even the time I had sat with opposition supporters during football matches," he recalled.

A week later, he was arrested during a visit to a government registry office and taken to a nearby police station. In a dingy room, officers took turns beating and questioning him, he said, accusing him of ferrying ammunition for an armed opposition group inside Syria in 2014.

"I kept telling them that they knew I wasn't in the country then," he said. "All they did was ask me for money and tell me that it was the way to my freedom."

At one point, he said, the guards dragged in a young woman he had never met. "They beat her with a water pipe until she screamed, [then] told me they would do the same if I didn't cooperate," Hassan said.

He said he was released at the end of January after relatives paid another bribe, this time \$7,000.



A portrait of Assad in March in the old city of Damascus. (Louai Beshara/AFP/Getty Images)

Syrians returning from abroad, like Hassan, often have to gain security approval just to reenter the country, in some cases signing loyalty pledges and providing extensive accounts of any political activities, according to documents listing questions to be asked and statements to be signed.

“I am fully prepared to cooperate with the relevant authorities to preserve the safety of the homeland and to report anything that is suspicious or affecting security,” one reads.

For other Syrians, including civilians and rebel fighters in opposition areas retaken by Assad’s forces, surrender deals imposed by the government have provided for formal “reconciliation” administered by security agencies. Hundreds have been arrested as part of this process. Local groups operating in formerly contested areas including Daraa, Eastern Ghouta and southern Damascus, have documented at least 500 cases since August.

Last month, the United Nations said that it had documented 380 detentions in Daraa alone and that at least two people had died in custody. Detentions often involve extensive questioning, with men frequently taken to intelligence offices where torture and other abuse was common, according to human rights groups and former detainees. Several of the men said that their wrist bones had snapped during long periods being hung from the ceiling.

Another document used by security forces directs “reconciled” civilians from a formerly rebel-held area to “state your role in the current events and your involvement in the protests, riots, and armed terrorist activities. State the details of your relatives’ involvement in the current events.”

'We don't know what to do'

Returnees and refugee advocates describe the reconciliation process as a way for the government to expand the already vast repository of information it has long collected about its citizens and to dissent-proof the future.

Documents released this month by the Washington-based Syria Justice and Accountability Center illustrate the type of information that was being collected before the 2011 uprising.

Memos from security agencies, including the Political Security and Military Intelligence directorates, even include reports on youth-club field trips. By the time popular protests started, the documents contained growing lists of named informants. Conscripts informed on conscripts. Doctors told on their patients.

Researchers and Western diplomats say Syria's security agencies are now using returnees to expand their intelligence trove and fill in gaps that opened during war.

"They not only securitize the returns process but also institutionalize the system of intel-gathering using informants," said Emma Beals, an independent analyst researching conditions for Syrian returnees. "In order to return home, the half of the prewar population that has been displaced must engage with a set of security and intelligence agencies responsible for the detention and torture of tens of thousands of their countrymen through the conflict."

Even as many Syrians fear what awaits them at home, they may have little choice about whether to remain in exile.

Syrians living in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey now have limited rights to work. It has also become increasingly difficult to secure the correct paperwork to stay there legally, increasing the Syrians' risk of exploitation and abuse, as well as restricting their access to health care and education.

In tandem, security agencies in each country are deporting a growing number of Syrians, aid groups say, despite the fears of harassment, arrest or torture in their home country. In Lebanon, some have been forced to sign documents saying their removal is voluntary, according to Human Rights Watch.

"We don't know what to do, really," said a carpenter from Aleppo province now living as a refugee in the Lebanese capital, Beirut. "While I'm here, all my son

sees is a father who can't provide for him, and I'm risking deportation to even go to work. But going home [to Syria]? I can't do that. It'd be like walking into a black hole."

Zakaria Zakaria in Istanbul contributed to this report.

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