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# Sada

## Pushing Syrian Refugees to Return

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Under increasing financial pressure, states hosting Syrian refugees are pressuring them to return whether conditions in Syria are safe or not.

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Comments (1)

As the Syrian war inches closer toward its eighth year, continuing to displace Syrians, the West is collectively resettling fewer Syrian refugees—beginning with the EU-Turkey refugee deal in March 2016 and continuing with President Donald Trump’s push to resettle Syrians in Jordan and Lebanon instead of the United States. This shift is intensifying pressure on Syria’s neighbors, who already shelter millions of Syrian refugees amid high unemployment, regional instability, and reduced international funding. Host governments are increasingly resorting to detentions, deportations, evictions, residency restrictions, and other coercive tactics to push refugees back.

Despite the staggeringly high 5.5 million registered Syrian refugees and an estimated 6.5 million IDPs in 2016—and an additional 200,000 displaced from northwest Syria alone since December 2017—the total number of Syrians who were resettled in Western countries dropped from roughly 48,000 in 2016 to 30,000 in 2017. With the exception of Germany, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia who have committed to resettling more refugees in 2018, others are reluctant to keep resettling Syrians and have instead favored programs that resettle refugees in neighboring countries.

Yet the advocated long-term settlement of Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey requires extensive long-term international financial commitments, leaving these countries vulnerable if donor priorities shift and funding dries up. The financial burden on Jordan and Lebanon to provide for refugee populations already surpasses their national capacities, forcing them to rely heavily on unreliable international assistance. Although UN member states pledged \$12 billion for host countries at the 2016 “Supporting Syria and the Region” donor conference in London and an additional \$6 billion at the 2017 “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region” donor conference in Brussels, they consistently fall short of fulfilling these pledges. Lebanon’s

national response plan—a joint initiative with the UN to address Lebanon’s challenges related to the Syrian conflict—only received 54 percent of pledged funding in 2015, down to 46 percent in 2016 and 43 percent in 2017. Meanwhile, funding was raised for only 62 percent of Jordan’s national response plan in 2016 and 65 percent in 2017.

Host governments are relying on funding that had been earmarked for domestic expenses to fill the gap to fund services for refugees—an estimated \$2.5 billion annual cost per year for Jordan and total estimated \$10 billion cost for Lebanon. Ahead of the unveiling of Jordan’s 2018-2020 response plan on February 1, Prime Minister Hani al-Mulki commented that Jordan has reached its capacity to provide services, spend national resources, and expend social and physical infrastructure to absorb refugees. Meanwhile, the Trump administration’s 2018 budget, reduces U.S. contributions to the UN by nearly \$285 million—a 24 percent cut in U.S. contributions. This included a 16 percent cut to the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and the elimination of the International Organizations and Programs fund which, through its financial assistance for the UN Development Program and UN Women, provides critical support for Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

The push by the United States and European Union to keep refugees “as close to their home countries as possible” is driving host states to increasingly consider returning refugees prematurely, fearing that otherwise they will have to shoulder the burden of a long-term Syrian refugee presence as they have with Palestinians. Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan have all ramped up efforts to coerce the return of refugees in the past year.

In addition to lessening its own budgetary burdens, Turkey has used the return of refugees as political coverage for military operations in Syria. Following the conclusion of Operation Euphrates Shield in March 2017, Turkey reported the return of nearly 140,000 Syrians to areas it captured over the last year. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is hailing these returns as justification for its ongoing Operation Olive Branch in Afrin. Yasin Aktay, a senior advisor to the Turkish president, commented that Turkey aims to rebuild Afrin once the region is secure in order to stimulate return flows of as many as 500,000 Syrians, according to an estimate provided by First Lady Emine Erdogan.

In a speech to the UN General Assembly on September 21, 2017, President Michel Aoun reiterated his call for Syrians to return to Assad-held areas even if a political solution is not yet in place. While Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri reassured the international community on February 2 that Lebanon will not deport Syrians, Lebanon has increased its actions, policies, and restrictions that make living conditions for the refugees difficult. Lebanese authorities are cracking down on illegal settlements, evicting over 10,000 Syrian refugees from tented settlements in 2017. Since the Lebanese Armed Forces recaptured Aarsal from the Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in July 2017, an additional 10,000 Syrian refugees returned to Syria—without the facilitation and oversight of the UNHCR—many citing pressure from the Lebanese armed forces, including detention, raids on settlements, and restrictions on movement. The Lebanese military noted these specific raids following the Aarsal operation were in response to a string of suicide attacks near the Lebanese border. However, in Sidon, which does not have the same security concerns, 50 refugees were detained in January for not having the proper paperwork and entering the country illegally.

Lebanon’s foreign ministry drafted a plan in October 2017, reportedly headed by Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, to induce the return of Syrians—proposing to accomplish this through stricter border security, mass registration, detention, limitation of humanitarian assistance to specific cases, and legal action against Syrians residing and working illegally. While the proposed plan has been abandoned, it is representative of growing anti-refugee sentiment in Lebanon.

Likewise, after the Islamic State carried out deadly attacks in Karak and Rukban in 2016, Jordan continues to tighten restrictions on Syrians out of security concerns, creating an unwelcome environment for them. Many of the nearly 80 percent of Syrian refugees living outside of refugee camps fear that if they are caught, Jordanian authorities will detain and

transfer them to the camps. Approximately 8500 refugees that the Jordanian authorities transferred to the Azraq refugee camp from Rukban—an informal IDP camp on Jordan’s northern border where many Syrians fled from areas held by the Islamic State—are reportedly also being detained in a separate section within the camp with little to no freedom of mobility until security checks confirm they do not pose a security threat—an effort to mitigate the infiltration of potential Syrians with terrorist links. But aid organizations in Jordan also estimate that half of Azraq camp’s 50,000 Syrian refugees were forcibly transferred to the desert camp from around Jordan, including many refugees caught by Jordanian authorities without proper paperwork and those targeted for communication with family in Syria. Jordan’s efforts to curb terrorist activity are producing a precarious environment for Syrians, which combined with increasing economic difficulties and high costs of living could push many to return home.

These coercive tactics are supplemented by additional cases of deportation, which are regularly documented in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. According to Human Rights Watch, the number of Syrians deported from Jordan spiked in early 2017 with nearly 400 refugees sent back per month in the first half of 2017, the second major spike since the beginning of 2016. Many of their relatives “voluntarily” returned to Syria alongside their deported family members. Because many Syrian refugees are not registered with the government, there is also fear that Jordan’s push to detain more refugees within camps will lead to further deportations. In Turkey, human rights groups have documented cases of deportation since 2016, as many as 100 per day. Although there is limited available information, this trend appears to be continuing, and Prime Minister Binali Yildirim further claimed in July 2017 that refugees who commit crimes will be deported.

These policies force the UNHCR into a difficult position: accede to unsafe repatriations or stand by as returnees go back in a chaotic and potentially harmful manner. In August 2017, the UNHCR began to scale up its operations in Syria to facilitate the resettlement of Syrians who return, expanding its staff and seeking \$150 million for these operations. The refugee agency announced in June that they are making the necessary preparations for managing the increasing returns, even though they do not promote or facilitate refugee returns to Syria due to ongoing instability. Sustainable return—which requires extensive collaboration between the UNHCR, donor countries, international organizations, refugees, and officials of the host country—is not feasible. The majority of Syria’s refugees fled the Syrian government and cannot return to “safe areas” due to the widespread destruction, continuing violence, and the risk of retaliatory violence. Since 2011, the Syrian army has led widespread military operations against residential neighborhoods, villages, and, in some cases, entire cities with egregious bombing campaigns, chemical weapons attacks, sieges, and forced displacement campaigns producing the majority of Syria’s refugees. Furthermore, the widespread destruction of property and infrastructure, lack of available services, and unexploded mines left by retreating fighters creates extensive security risks for returnees.

Sending refugees home prematurely—before the conditions are conducive for a safe and sustainable return—will exacerbate already-deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Syria, placing stress on what limited services and fragile governance is left in areas to which refugees return and forcing returnees to compete with the those who remained for jobs, resources, and shelter. Returnees could become internally displaced again if violent conflict breaks out the displacement would start all over again.

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