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Russia urges Syrian refugees to return - with no guarantees for their safety



Taxi drivers push their cars to a gas station in Damascus, 16/04/2020 (AFP)

By Lyse Mauvais, Ammar Hamou



November 17, 2020

AMMAN — “I cannot return to Syria. My home is destroyed, my friends have disappeared, my family is scattered,” said Neo (a pseudonym), a 21-year old refugee from the countryside of Aleppo who spoke to *Syria Direct*.

Neo’s feelings echo those of 5.6 million Syrian refugees [registered](#) by the United Nations’ High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) globally. Yet, according to Russia and Damascus, time is ripe for return. On November 11 and 12, Russia organized a controversial conference on facilitating refugee returns, which was widely decried by civil society and [boycotted by most states](#).

Voluntary returns are increasing, but remain anecdotal

“On social media, the vast majority of Syrians addressed the event with mockery and sarcasm,” observed Rami Issa, *Syria Direct*’s correspondent in Damascus. The European Union refused to participate, insisting that talks of large-scale returns are premature. “Conditions inside Syria at present do not lend themselves to the promotion of large-scale voluntary return,” [stated](#) the EU’s High Representative, Joseph Borrell.

As of July 31, 2020, the [UNHCR recorded 250,555 voluntary returns to Syria](#). The number of returns has been increasing steadily each year, from around 28,000 in 2016 to over 94,000 in 2019. However, it remains weak compared to the scale of [displacement inside Syria](#) (6.6 million displaced persons) and abroad.

“Many people talk about the paradox of the regime and Russia discussing the return of refugees, while people here struggle to survive in what they call a living hell,” added Issa. “Electricity comes four hours a day, water is not safe to drink, and there are no services,” Abeer Al-Hussein, a 27-year old Damascene, told *Syria Direct*. She told her husband not to return, saying, “Before thinking about returning the refugees, the government should think about providing services to those who remain in the country.”

Within the country, [13.1 million Syrians already rely on humanitarian assistance](#). Large-scale returns would add to these needs, which may very well be what the conference was about. “If Russia succeeds to push European countries to send Syrian refugees back [by sending the message that Syria is safe for returns], the next step would be ‘they need infrastructure’, so please fund us. Russia and the Syrian government will be the direct profitters of any reconstruction money,” warned Muhammad Al Abdallah, Executive Director of the Syria Justice and Accountability Center, speaking to *Syria Direct*.

Refugees face many obstacles to return

“The Assad regime did not take any steps to welcome refugees. On the contrary, it issued a set of laws that prevent returns, the last of which is Law no. 10 of 2018, which confiscates the property of refugees and displaced persons,” said Dr. Radwan Ziadeh, Executive Office Director of the Syrian Center for Political and Strategic Studies (based in Washington, DC), in an interview with *Syria Direct*.

At the conference, Bashar al-Assad [blamed international sanctions](#) for aggravating the economic crisis, thereby hindering return. But for Saeed Abdallah, Abeer’s husband, “The issue is not just services, food, drink and electricity. No sane person would return with mercenaries and militias in the country. No one knows, if you return, will you be arrested? Will you be killed?”

According to [research](#) conducted by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, between July and November 2018, “[the regime] arrested 700 Syrians returning to government-controlled areas and 50 children. A June 2019 survey covering 350 returnees reported that 75% of them had experienced arrest; harassment; as well as conscription despite promises of exemption.”

In addition, young Syrians such as Neo face the prospect of military conscription. They fear being sent to the battlefield, especially as the regime has tended to prioritize conscripts [from “reconciled” communities for the frontlines](#). The educational system has been destroyed through the bombing of schools and drained of its best professors. This, in addition to the economic crisis, leaves few opportunities for youth.

Despite obstacles, some returns take place, although candidates for return “can lack important information about their own safety and security. Their family members and friends may be afraid to communicate the risks and dangers over phones or online,” pointed out Emily Scott, Postgraduate Researcher and member of the McGill Refugee Research group, to *Syria Direct*.

Russia’s agenda

“The return of Syrian refugees is a Russian idea,” said Dr. Ziadeh, who believes Russia pushed the Assad regime to hold this conference.

The initiative may be nothing more than “a demonstration that some efforts are being made,” according to Kirill Semenov, an independent analyst and non-resident expert at the Moscow-based Russian International Affairs Council, who spoke to *Syria Direct*. “It will be possible to say that Russia is dealing with this issue while the rest are inactive.”

This is reflected by the attendance of “countries that have zero relevancy to the conference, based on political alliances,” according to Al Abdallah. States that host the most Syrian refugees all boycotted the conference - with the exception of Lebanon.



Participants convene for the "refugee return" conference in Damascus, sponsored by Moscow, 11/11/2020 ([SANA](#))

Russia's motives are also economic, as suggested by the participation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE). According to Semenov, “the UAE is actively involved in supporting the Assad regime, and Abu Dhabi's participation in this conference can be considered significant. It is possible that Russia will try to attract investment from the UAE to finance the Assad regime, as the topic of refugees may allow them to bypass the Caesar Act.”

Safety and a political settlement are essential conditions for return

“Russia and the regime are the ones who damaged a large part of Syria,” said Nahla (a pseudonym), a Syrian from the Homs countryside now living in Jordan. “So many foreign powers have put their hands inside Syria that the regime is no longer able to guarantee anything to its people.” She does not support the regime nor its opposition, but, as a member of a minority Christian sect, fears persecution from either side.

In a [survey](#) of 1,100 displaced Syrians on minimum conditions for return, the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) found that 73% of Syrians would like to return to Syria, given the right conditions. The first of these, cited by 80% of respondents, is an improved security situation. Security concerns were cited by 90% as one of the main reasons for displacement, far ahead of economic reasons (only cited by 28%).

The second, according to 75% of respondents, is “a comprehensive political solution guaranteeing their rights”. This includes the “departure of the regime and all its key figures,” cited as an essential condition by 81% of those wishing to return.

“The refugees return issue,” [emphasized](#) the SACD, “cannot be unilaterally managed by Russia and the regime. Any return thresholds must take into account the minimum conditions for return defined by displaced Syrians themselves.” Nahla, for her part, is determined never to go back, “until the regime disappears and we return to livable conditions.”

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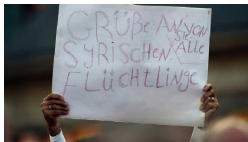


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