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Syria's Internally Displaced and the Risk of Militarization

After five years of fighting, an estimated 40% of the population still residing in Syria are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Recognizing the paucity of knowledge about their situation, this policy brief explores the risk that Syria's IDPs are systematically exploited by the various armed actors in the conflict, be that through recruitment, control over humanitarian support, offering protection, or socialization. What is known gives serious reason for concern. IDPs have a right, codified in the 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, to 'be protected against discriminatory practices of recruitment into any armed forces or groups as a result of the displacement'. When groups successfully recruit, gain the support of, and control resources aimed at, IDPs, the negative effects are considerable. In the short-term, increased capacity manifests itself in an intensification of the conflict; in the long-term, the experiencing of violence and the hardening of attitudes makes conflicts much more difficult to resolve.

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The potential for militarization of internally displaced persons within Syria is a serious concern, yet one that is largely left untouched in the debate on the conflict. Are those displaced within Syria facing risks of militarization that are distinctly different from the risks facing those who have not moved? There is good reason to assume that for many of those who are displaced, the wish to get away from an armed actor (whether government or non-state) that is prone to recruit them may have been one motive for their flight. For some, the wish to shift to a territory controlled by a group they somehow identify with, and engage militarily with it, may have been a reason to move. Those displaced within Syria, where the government and multiple armed groups are engaged in an existential fight, are extraordinarily vulnerable, and the risk of them being somehow engaged in the battle is therefore high.

Unlike refugee militarization, which has been seen as a serious concern since the late 1980s, a similar risk for Internally Displaced People (IDPs) is rarely openly discussed, even though it is well known by experienced practitioners. IDPs differ from refugees in that they have not crossed an international border but remain within the state whose territory is contested. Yet, in many domestic conflicts, the armed contenders end up with sustained control over distinct areas, effectively creating new boundaries, and the displaced will be fully aware of both what they are fleeing from and fleeing to. By implication, the armed actors in control of a particular area may end up with both a responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, and the authority to demand their contributions to the larger whole.

Exactly because of the encompassing war, which has made access for researchers – as for journalists or humanitarian workers – so difficult, it is impossible to obtain precise data on the nature of, as well as the extent of, IDP militarization. Faced with that difficulty, one is tempted to shelve the whole topic. Yet, the issue at hand remains critically important, and we have therefore decided that despite the weakness of data, we want to explore the issue on the basis of what is known from news sources and various reports, and thereby not only highlight the issue, but also build a foundation for more solid empirical inquiries.

In framing our inquiry, we have taken a lead from work on refugee mobilization.[1] We will focus on four main factors: Recruitment (as a critical aspect of organization); Humanitarian resources; Security (as protection) and, finally, Socialization (incl. education). We will get to each of these in turn, but will first provide a brief background on internal displacement in the course of Syria's civil war. At the end, we will also be offering some overarching – and highly tentative – conclusions, including recommendations for work to follow-up.

Internal Displacement and the Conflict in Syria

By beginning of 2016, the best available estimate for the number of internally displaced in Syria stands at an astounding 6.6 million.[2] This corresponds to 40% of the entire population still within the country. Another 3.9 million are registered as refugees in the wider region (most importantly in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey). Altogether, about half of the pre-war population is displaced. While potential militancy among the Syrian refugee populations in itself is deserving of analysis, we will here focus on the internally displaced.

It was the regime clampdown on peaceful protesters in Dara'a in March 2011 that ignited Syria's violent conflict, soon followed by mass defection from the army, with officers forming the Free Syrian Army (FSA), an umbrella for a variety of groups, hampered by internal power struggles. The People's Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian-Kurdish group, soon also engaged in the fighting.

By mid-2012, the armed opposition had gained control over large areas around Aleppo and Idlib in the northwest, Deir-Ez-Zour in the east, and Dara'a in the south, as violence also spread to Damascus. Fighting between Islamist groups and more moderate ones escalated. Displacement was at first largely temporary and short-distance (within cities or to adjacent rural areas), but gradually took on a more permanent character. By mid-summer 2012, the estimated number of IDPs exceeded 1.5 million.

The conflict took on more of a sectarian (Shia-Sunni) character in the spring of 2013, as the government army, with support from Lebanon's Hezbollah, regained control over most areas bordering on Lebanon. The war has a clear multi-front character, where shifting tactical alliances and massive violence leads to rapid changes in who controls what, generating new displacement, often across longer distances, creating massive security challenges for those who have already moved.

By early 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) started a major offensive, first in Iraq, then increasingly also in Syria. By late June, the group declared itself the Islamic State (IS), denouncing the Iraqi-Syrian border. The group's brutal violence – including executions explicitly on sectarian grounds – was extensively publicized, and deepened the sense of an existential conflict. By September 2014, an international bombing campaign, targeting IS positions, was initiated by the United States. A year later, Russia engaged in aerial bombardment on the side of the Assad government. As distant powers and regional actors engage in the conflict, either supporting or directly working with one or another of the parties, the Syrian conflict has become a truly internationalized civil war. As many as 1.3 million may have been displaced in 2015 alone, most of whom had already undergone one or several rounds of displacement. The gravity of the threat to the displaced is mounting, and it seems likely that many of the displaced respond by moving on. By early March 2016, a cessation of hostilities is implemented, but fighting and bombardment continues in many areas, and it is by no means clear that a political settlement is within sight.

Recruitment

Data on recruitment to Syria's government forces, as well as to its armed opposition groups, are virtually non-existent. Pinpointing whether – or to what extent – there is recruitment amongst the displaced is therefore impossible. Yet, some anecdotal evidence exists, and one can draw some inferences from the way in which the conflict has evolved and displacement patterns have shifted as a result. While highly uncertain, what is known gives reason for concern.

The government has a working conscription system in all areas under its control, and, depending on new personnel to fill its ranks, is taking a number of measures to identify those that it sees as evaders.[3] Displaced people are no exception. In the early period of the war, the regime would even pursue enrolment in areas with strong opposition presence. In areas under its control, the regime's administrative apparatus – while weakened – retains its capacity to register the displaced. Also regime intelligence is at work. Assad's regime, seeing itself as the country's legitimate government, clearly sees those displaced to areas under its control as part of the pool of people from which it can recruit.

The armed opposition can here be roughly categorized as moderates versus Islamists. The more moderate groups, whose early fighting capacity came largely in the form of deserting units from the regular army, would probably have found it in-

creasingly opportune to recruit amongst internally displaced in areas under its control, although evidence is scant (some reports point to child recruitment in areas with high displacement).

Definition: "persons or groups of persons […] have been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their homes or places of habitual residence, in particular as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights or natural or human-made disasters, and who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border"

Protection: "Threats and incitement to commit any of the foregoing acts [genocide; murder; summary or arbitrary executions; enforced disappearances] shall be prohibited" and "Attacks or other actor of violence against internally displaced persons who do not or no longer participate in hostilities are prohibited in all circumstances"

Recruitment: "In no circumstances shall displaced children be recruited nor be required or permitted to take part in hostilities" and "Internally displaced persons shall be protected against discriminatory practices of recruitment into any armed forces or groups as a result of their displacement"

Assistance: "All internally displaced persons have the right to an adequate standard of living" [safe access to essential food and potable water; basic shelter and housing; appropriate clothing; essential medical services and sanitation] and "All humanitarian assistance shall be carried out in accordance with the principles of humanity and impartiality and without discrimination" and "… shall not be diverted, in particular for political or military reasons"

Education: "… authorities concerned shall ensure that such persons, in particular displaced children, receive education which shall be free and compulsory at the primary level. Education should respect their cultural identity, language and religion"

Excerpts from the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (authors' vignettes)[8]

Among the Islamists, most is known about the IS' recruitment, which in the early phase was clearly characterized by forces built up in neighbouring Iraq, bolstered through large-scale transnational recruitment. When Manbij fell in early 2014, and IS (then ISIS) took over, many displaced from Aleppo and elsewhere reportedly joined its ranks, more or less voluntarily. By early 2015, international actors have become increasingly concerned about IS recruitment among the displaced, both within Syria and in the region. "You can imagine some of the living conditions, which create the environment for recruiting. That's a great concern", stated James Clapper, director of US national intelligence, in March 2015.[4] Interestingly, while most observers see the vulnerabilities of the displaced as a worry, few would compare that to the state-like organizational control that armed groups have in many areas.

Humanitarian Resources

Humanitarian aid has been highly politicized during the Syrian conflict. The paucity of reliable information, even on basic humanitarian needs, is an effect of this politicization.[5] The Syrian regime, for one, has gone to length to limit the access of international humanitarian actors, insisted on distribution of aid through its own channels, and systematically prevented aid from reaching areas controlled by the opposition. Humanitarian aid, states the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, "has been instrumentalised for military gain".6

IS is no less aware of the utility of controlling humanitarian resources. There are indications that the organization has distributed humanitarian aid that it has captured, after relabelling the packages with the group's insignia.[7] Claiming transport fees from humanitarian actors is one source of income, but its impact of recruiting amongst the displaced is indirect at best. More important is its tactic for building local support in areas where it pursues control by securing people access to various necessities, coining it as *zakat* (Islamic alms).

The more moderate groups – often referred to as FSA – would have access to international humanitarian aid, not the least from the US. Both the groups and their suppliers of humanitarian goods are clearly cognizant of its military significance. Yet, although FSA groups have frequently been accused of mismanaging aid, little is known about how it is distributed.

Undoubtedly, all actors see humanitarian assistance as important to maintain – or build – political support among the population. The displaced, of course, are more dependent on humanitarian aid than anybody, and clearly, receiving aid is followed by an expectation to support the cause. The pattern is one where the areas controlled by one or another group are also the areas where humanitarian aid is available – often the more densely populated areas – and are logically also the areas that most IDPs move to.

Protection (i.e. Security)

In the early period of the war, when temporary short-distance displacement was the dominant mode, the question was one of getting away from situations of acute insecurity, but not necessarily seeking the protection of others. As the dividing lines have become more clearly identity based, with many killed exclusively on the basis of their sectarian belonging, the prospects for being protected have become more important when those being displaced single out where to go. With no third party present to offer security, individuals become entirely dependent on one or the other of the armed actors to offer them security, and with the strong sectarian divide, there is often only one group that may be willing to grant it. Displacement patterns are fairly clear. When the opposition increased its territorial control in areas along the Turkish border, many fled there from areas controlled by the government.

The dynamic is equally clear to all the armed actors. The government, on its side, has long sought to portray itself as the protector of all Syria's minorities, which unintentionally – given the rise of Islamism – can be understood as reluctance to protect the Sunni. IS, who is chiefly responsible for the latest sectarian turn in the Syrian conflict is clearly identified with a particular brand of Sunni political thinking, and has no resonance among anybody non-Sunni. However, when the Sunni are targeted, such as when a number of Arab villages in the vicinity of Kobane were burned down during the fighting there, IS stands out as the only available source of security. Also, within this, various groups within the more moderate parts of the opposition become more clearly identified with one specific identity, and, by implication, their credibility as a possible source of security for others diminishes.

We know from other instances that when individuals – not the least displaced people – rely exclusively on one armed actor or another for security, they are vulnerable to pressure for actively engaging with the group. The situation for internally displaced, who rarely have any independent third party to stand up for them – certainly not in Syria – is particularly grave. Again, our data on how Syria's actors use protection to insist on engagement amongst the displaced are limited, but from what we know about the modus operandi of the various actors, it would be counterintuitive was this not to happen.

Socialization

The politicization of education in Syria is nothing new, but it has taken on a new character in the course of the war, with the active reshaping of educational institutions by armed opposition groups in general, and by IS in particular. Some of the

reports are from IDP camps, but with the bulk of the IDP population not residing in camps, there is good reason to assume that the heavily politicized schooling system caters also to the displaced.

IS, propagating a radical world view, has often made their first inroads into new areas through religious emissaries, setting up small Dawa centres which convene meetings and Sharia courses. Inconspicuous in earlier phases of the conflict, such centres – which cater mainly to men willing to support the cause – are now widely seen as a sign that the IS has a particular area in sight. The missionary centres are often followed by recruitment offices, from where those enrolled are moving on to training courses that combine Islam and military skills training.

The IS evidently has a focus on controlling the educational system, and in areas where they have gained control, schools have been temporarily closed as the organization gets a new curricula in place and has the teachers undergo religious-ideological training. Teachers in general face a choice between compliance and displacement. Those already displaced to areas under IS control have no alternative to the ideological schooling, and indications are that opting out is often impossible.

But the IS is not alone in using the education system for their cause, although – in large part because they market it so extensively themselves, seeing it as a carrier of their claim to be a state – it is the best known. Groups associated with the FSA are also known to have imposed their own curricula in areas under their control, and to provide military training to school pupils.

What Next?

The belligerents in the Syrian conflict are actively tapping into the IDPs in order to build a support base as well as swell their ranks for fighters. While we know far too little about the scope of the problem, its exact manifestations, and variation between various actors, we certainly know enough to say that this is a serious concern, and that it merits much more international attention. Given the limits on our knowledge of the problem, we stand back from formulating specific implications for policy and practice; at current, that simply seems premature.

Yet, the paucity of knowledge in itself calls for not only more attention, but for concerted work on documenting the scope and the various mechanisms at play for IDP mobilization in the Syrian conflict. Any attempt to address the problem must start from analysis. We recognize the significant methodological problems that stem from access, yet think much can be gained from the combination of interviewing people who have fled, tapping into the tacit knowledge of observers on the ground, and a more fine-grained analysis of existent statistical data.

The lack of attention to potential for IDP mobilization is in itself conspicuous, and calls for a thorough rethink of how the global humanitarian community (widely defined) is able to fulfil a mandate of protecting the most vulnerable in a situation where most actors pay no respect for basic humanitarian principles. One reason the issue receives so little attention is a concern that talking about a possible connection between displacement and militant mobilization may undermine existent norms and commitments. Yet, the challenge at hand is real, even though it is insufficiently addressed by existent codifications, such as the 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Given the importance of the IDP mobilization to the success of armed actors (both state and non-state), and its evident impact on the protractedness of conflicts, there is a need to place the issue much more centrally on the agenda. ■

Notes

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PRIO

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute (established in 1959) whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.