

# **U.S. Policy on Syria from the Perspective of Refugee Security and Regional Stability**

## **The Syrian Refugee Security Issue Within the Current Context**

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Considering the tragic loss of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. consulate personnel in the midst of what appears to be a coordinated attack on U.S. and other western countries' diplomatic missions around the world, it was natural that public opinion would divert its focus away from the crisis in Syria and into what seem to be immediate threat to our global interests.

Yet, the situation in Syria is not one of declining importance and relevance to be considered as secondary even with the last rapidly developing event. In fact if we do not want to find ourselves with an even more explosive regional environment than even what we have today, then we must remain focused on Syria. The severity of the consequences of the continuation of what seems like internal affair will be felt in the immediate future in countries that so far have been considered stable including Turkey and Jordan, two of the US's best and most loyal regional allies.

Syria is located at the heart of one of the most complex and volatile regions in the Middle East. It borders with Turkey (North), Iraq (East), Jordan (South), and Israel and Lebanon (West). The region has a host of multiple conflicts, old and ongoing, including the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israel-Lebanon War, between Syria and Israel over the Golan Heights, between Syria and Turkey over the PKK, the war of Turkey with the PKK along the borders with Turkey and Iraq, the war in Iraq, and also Cyprus.

One of the primary observations regarding Syria's neighbors is that each one of them, Syria included, is already home of refugees from the conflicts mentioned earlier, or functions as routes of refugees from one country to another. In Jordan, the combined number of Palestinian (two million) and Iraqi refugees threatens to surpass the number of Jordanian citizens. Turkey is a constant route of refugees from Iraq and the broader area of Kurdistan towards other European countries. Lebanon is home to almost half a million Palestinian refugees, just as many Palestinian refugees as those living in refugee camps inside Syria. Besides Palestinians, Syria is a host to almost a million Iraqi refugees.

This was the situation *before* the war... and the populations of these refugees mentioned have already played an enormous role in the politics and the history of

each host nation. Today due to the war in Syria between the regime of President Assad's and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) there have been more than 350,000 refugees to those mentioned most of whom reside in refugee camps in Turkey and Jordan, and less so in Lebanon and Iraq with numbers soaring each week beyond the capacity of the host countries to correspond accordingly. Experiences from previous conflicts have shown that uncontrollable waves of refugees entering en masse may create a serious destabilizing element in the region. The impact from the Black September events in Jordan 1970 remains vivid almost half a century later.

Adding to the equation the anti-western sentiments of the latest few days, provision of materiel and the presence of personnel of western humanitarian organizations in the region becomes increasingly hazardous. The attack against the Red Cross in Misrata, Libya on June 12 shows that there are groups affiliated with Al Qaeda which see any target as fair game. Al-Qaeda's presence in Syria is common knowledge claiming the most "spectacular" of the attacks against the regime without any reservation as they did in Libya while trying to overthrow General Qaddafi a year ago.

### **The Current Military Situation in Syria**

Syria is a kaleidoscope of ethnic, tribal, and religious groups, some supporting and others fighting the regime of President Assad's. Of the 22,530,00 population, Alawites consist approximately 2,100,000, Christians 2,300,000, Druze 700,000, and Kurds 2,000,000, most of whom support the regime as they consider it to provide them with security against the majority Sunnis.

Alawites who occupy the leadership in the Baath party and high level positions in the government and the military, are concentrated in pockets of majority in the Latakia district, along the coast north of Lebanon and south of Turkey, and in large urban centers including Damascus and Aleppo.

Christians are mostly concentrated north east of Lebanon, close to Homs, Druze in the south at As Suwayda, and the Kurds at the north. The latter having managed to capture and control territories immediately south of Turkey, so far, have not clearly taken sides but they do they avoid clashing with the Syrian Army forces.

The Syrian Army (SA) controls the rural region around the Latakia district and the almost all the major urban centers of Damascus, Daraa, Homs, Idlib, and Aleppo, all of which are grounds for fighting and sources of refugees.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA), a constellation of organizations fighting mostly under the loose political leadership of the Syrian National Council (mostly residing in

Turkey), controls mostly the rural areas outside the Latakia district, and especially zones bordering Jordan, the Golan Heights, Lebanon, and Turkey, north of Aleppo. The FSA controls momentarily also pockets within cities, including Daraa, Damascus, Homs, Idlib, and Aleppo, which they may abandon when attacked severely, withdraw to the country, and then return again when recovered. The FSA has managed to control the majority of An border checkpoints including those with Iraq and many important transportation arteries within Syria.

This distribution of the various fighting forces and hostile to each other groups create a structure of threats and potential hazards against refugees as they usually have to encounter both of the competing sides while fleeing towards the borders, some times more than once. In many cases, refugee camps in neighboring countries are almost adjusted to the fighting areas.

Considering the nature of deployment of the SA against the FSA the distribution of various combatants is very complex and the situation on the ground is extremely fluid which provides an unstable and dangerous environment from which most residents are trying to flee. Old tribal disputes have reemerged which is the reason of most of the massacres against civilians adding another element of fear.

### **Where do the Refugees come from?**

The most densely resided areas in Syria correspond to those where the worse fighting takes place; Damascus, Daraa, Homs, Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo which are the most common sources of refugees. As of now according to the UNHCR (Sep, 2012) there are 1,500,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and 202,500 refugees registered in neighboring countries estimated to be 350,000 altogether. There are no detailed demographics of the origin of refugees in terms of their ethnic or religious background but they come from both Syrian cities and country, and refugee camps.

### **Where do they go and security considerations for host countries**

#### **TURKEY**

Those who arrive in Turkey usually are mostly those escaping from the fighting in Idlib, Aleppo, and Al Bab. They reach refugee camps in Antakya, Apaydin, Kilis, Gaziantep and other, new ones along the border. According to the UNHCR, as of September 15th there have been **80,104** registered refugees in the country with another 10,000 waiting to cross in. The number of refugees has increased from 500/day to 3,000/day within the last few weeks.

So far Turkey has done an exemplary job in accommodating the refugees with camps offering playgrounds for children, mosques, medical assistance and other

amenities. However as the numbers of refugees' increases there is already some competition with local populations over water and electricity and a few riots have been reported. Also in very few cases some of the fighting has spilled from the Syria into camps with stray bullets and bombs. Turkey just opened six new refugee camps which increased its capacity to absorb up to 150,000 refugees. Considering the rate of flow of refugees this capacity may be bridged fairly soon. Turkey is considering imposing a cap to the number of incoming refugees and has already requested that camps should be build inside safe zones in Syria itself a request rejected by the UN due to complications regarding Syrian sovereignty and the provision of adequate peacekeeping force.

The war between Turkey and the Kurdish separatist insurgency, the PKK, which has escalated its campaign recently, makes the flow of refugees from Syria another issue of concern for it is not easy to determine who these individuals might be.

More important, so far the warm welcome of Syrian refugees in Turkey has created a friendly environment, against the tradition of hostility between the two countries. A future failure of Turkey to accommodate the needs of an overwhelming number of refugees beyond her capacity might reverse this process and might ignite a very hostile and adversarial climate between refugees and local residents as well as Turkey's police and security forces. For Turkey the refugee situation is already escalating as a local destabilizing factor.

## **LEBANON and JORDAN**

As of September the 15<sup>th</sup>, **49,653** refugees have registered in **Lebanon** and another 18,307 have filed applications. The number of refugees in the country is estimated up to 90,000. Most come from Damascus, Homs, Hama and rural areas bombed by the regime to flush out rebels. They go to the Bekaa Valley, Wadi Khaked, and other destinations as Lebanon is relatively easy for Syrians to cross in and move freely. There are already a few camps set, others used empty schools and some have relatives to move in with. As some of these areas are too close or under the control of Hezbollah there was some concern as the party had declared earlier in the year that they would not allow any refugees to cross into Lebanon. On Aug the 17<sup>th</sup>, they revised their stance to accept refugees as long as they are not a security risk to the region by bringing with them weapons or setting up anti-Assad rebel camps. Yes Hezbollah's concern is shared by others in Lebanon and already the fighting has spilled over into Lebanon in the troubled city of Tripoli.

In **Jordan** **49,236** refugees have been registered with another 27,169 waiting to apply, a total of 86,940. It is estimated that a total of 140,000 will soon cross into Jordan. The rate of flow has doubled to 10,200/week within the last few weeks. Most come from the city of Deraa, and south of Damascus.

Jordan, a country hosting millions of refugees already from Palestine and Iraq, was taken under surprise is are catching up by expanding the Al Zaatri camp, the destination point of most refugees to Jordan to accommodate up to 113,000 refugees. Water, and other provisions have been sparse and that has caused some serious riots and arrests by the Jordanian Army and security forces. Many of those arrested are to be deported from Jordan. An alarming phenomenon is the great amount of unaccompanied minors walking in groups into Jordan without any information about the fate of their parents and families.

According to IRIN, of those Palestinians that live already in refugee camps in Syria, 5,000 have already crossed into Lebanon and Jordan and more are to follow as they feel increasingly trapped in a warzone and neglected.

### **IRAQ and other destinations**

As of September the 15<sup>th</sup>, **25,508** refugees from North and East Syria (mostly Syrian Kurds) have registered at Domiz, Iraq under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) with another 10,914 waiting to register. About 5,000 have crossed into Western Iraq via the Anbar via Al Qaim crossing, most of whom Arabs. Iraq is a constant source of refugees itself experiencing one of the most violent years after the beginning of the war. Control of the flow of these refugees is limited which means that groups playing destabilizing role both in Syria and in Iraq may be using both as regrouping and logistics grounds. Iraq and the KRG region in particular is a major concern for Turkey as they frequently fight the PKK in the extended borders between Turkey and Syria-KRG. There are no signs that the PKK has been strengthened by the flow of refugees into Iraq but it is a probable scenario for the near future.

A number of other countries have accepted already refugees including Armenia, Algeria, and a few in Cyprus. Switzerland is considering accepting a number of Syrian refugees and there were some news reports in June that Israel might admit Alawites in the disputed Golan Height region, depending on the course of the conflict. If the war continues, inevitably refugees will flood European and Arab countries similar to the Iraqi refugees during the war there.

The European Union, another potential refugee destination, is already drifting to the Far Right politically, mainly on the issue of immigration. It will most likely be a very hostile ground to Syrian refugees and the climate in the EU might grow more intolerant due to increasing insecurities, prejudices and economic grievances.

### **Special security and humanitarian considerations for the refugees**

The sparse distribution of arable land in Syria corresponds more or less to the available routes for the refugees fleeing the war. This is a difficult terrain with

limited routes. The weather has been particularly dry and hot this year and that has made movement hazardous. That adds to the pressure on humanitarian relief organizations as refugees arrive, suffering from dehydration, hunger, sun burned and exhausted, aside from the direct toll of war.

The fact that the FSA controls the majority of border checkpoints implies that the refugees have to inevitably cross through war-zones, and that the fighting might accompany them all the way to the refugee camps. In some cases refugees are targeted up to the border lines and even close to refugee camps. That increases the chances of refugees arriving wounded or carried to the camps dead. It also implies that some of them are likely to be members of the FSA seeking shelter and medical attention across the borders which creates another security concern inside and around the camps in the case of riots for example.

Human Rights Watch has published maps which have identified more than twenty five torture camps set by the regime, including ten in Damascus, four for each in Homs, Idlib, and Latakia, and two at Aleppo in areas where the government maintains control. That means that a number of refugees require special post-torture, physical and mental treatment and that among the refugee camps there should be experts to provide comfort to these victims.

The alarming number of unaccompanied minors especially of those refugees crossing into Jordan requires a setup that will accommodate their special needs, playgrounds, schools, vaccinations, and psychological and physical security to this vulnerable group. Confusion and the effects of psychological trauma will make it hard to identify the families of these kids or their origin, and it may take special interviewers for minors to fill in records. The descriptions that these children provide already regarding what they have witnessed back home are appalling.

### **Where do we go from here?**

There are three basic directions that this conflict can go towards, a victorious Assad regime, its catastrophic defeat, and a negotiated settlement. The last one might be closer or further from the other two extremes but it is the most sensible for the following reasons:

#### **Scenario 1: Assad Regime “Wins” the War**

This scenario is based on the “Great Middle East Divide” theory that sees the Middle East as a new Cold War playground dividing the world into the West supporting Turkey, Libya, Egypt, Jordan, Cyprus, Azerbaijan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, and the East including Russia, China, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. The government’s tactics at Hama (1982) including massive bombing by use of artillery and air force followed by mechanized units, then entering towns with columns of

infantry for the final slaughter (a tactic of siege invented in WWII by the Nazis, and later used by the Russians in Grozny 1999-2000) have not materialized in this war; even so in Idlib where the FSA was removed completely before returning again after the Syrian Army moved its focus in Aleppo. It appears that the basis of this insurgency is not urban as much as rural areas. Insurgents enter the cities, control a sector for a few hours or days and then withdraw back to the country.

Moreover the Grozny approach on behalf of the government would entail massive firepower concentrated before each operation with weapons of caliber such as the TOS-1 Buratino (Thermobaric bombs) and helicopters and fighter jets in waves. Such sizable concentrations by the army have not yet been materialized. Initial plans from Russia to send in soldiers “with experience from Grozny” and materials have been watered down and the suspension of the Russian Naval base in Tartus makes any such plan now impossible.

Whatever movement the Syrian Army has done so far, has been reluctant and extremely dangerous to itself in modern military terms; departing in groups from one city to the next (Homs, Idlib then Aleppo) in a territory where the roads and major highways are exposed to the FSA; leaving its flanks and supply lines open to the enemy. The other favorite tactic so far of the Syrian Army has been to park at the center or outskirts, or in safe points in the city and then respond to incursions of the FSA one by one taking no strategic initiative whatsoever. In some areas middle class old neighborhoods are not even targeted even when armed “insurgents” are reported there. So far the bulk of casualties come, not as much from artillery and tanks, as from fighter jet strikes and choppers in response to which the rebels are now targeting air fields. This behavior is not a winning strategy and sooner or later the Syrian Army will stay out of fuel, parts, and ammunition and then the war might turn to another scenario altogether.

Indicator for a Grozny scenario would also include massive concentration of troops, sweeping operations in the rural areas, clearing of villages that support or stand within FSA zones (like in Chechnya), and massacres of civilians close to the borders to ignite an even larger refugee wave emptying the country of “undesirables” and keeping the FSA busy with protecting the refugees (like in Kosovo).

Iran and Hezbollah have also shown reluctance to continue their support to Assad’s regime. They seem to be more interested in exploring what the winning side will look like to place themselves in a position of influence in the post-Assad era.

China seems to be focused more on avoiding any UN intervention not to so in supporting Assad as to keep intervention as far from the UN agenda as possible in general. Such predicament could open future possibilities towards North Korea and even China itself. Yet it is unlikely this will be enough to motivate China to invest itself in Syria militarily.

Finally, this scenario seems impossible considering the zones of support for the FSA which suggest that this war theoretically could continue indefinitely. A superficial look at the map of religious and ethnic distribution in Syria indicates an isolated pocket (or pockets) of Alawites surrounded by Sunni Arabs who enjoy unlimited access to their own supporters outside the country including all the way from Libya, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.

The enormity in scale and permanency of refugee settlements which will continuously grow over time will place an unbearable burden on all neighboring countries. Turkey may face a Syrian-driven rebellion within its South East belly far worse than the long PKK insurgency which has been occasionally lethal but has rarely turned explosive. A population of over a million refugees would bring Turkey to her knees in that already volatile region as water alone will put a limit to the numbers it can accommodate. Turkey will be forced to enter the Syrian war as a party by moving its refugee camps within Syria itself and by enforcing a buffer zone along its borders to both repel further refugees and to protect the new camps from the surviving regime.

Lebanon's role might also transform into a new war zone as Israel might use the opportunity to attempt a decisive blow against a Hezbollah deprived of a strong and busy ally in Damascus. Iran may decide to play that role directly adding to an already strained relationship between the two over Iran's nuclear ambitions. Jordan may simply collapse under the weight of another million refugees which might ignite a chain of events that may lead to a Palestinian-led confrontation with Israel.

Considering the situation of the last few days with attacks against western diplomatic missions and previous attacks of Al Qaeda's against the Red Cross, everything in this scenario may happen either in the absence of with very limited involvement of western or IGO based humanitarian organizations.

## **Scenario 2: Assad's Regime Collapses Defeated**

Such catastrophic scenario in the extreme would unleash waves of retribution by Sunnis and anti-regime forces mainly against the Alawites, Christians, and Druze which would generate a flow of refugees and IDps of gigantic proportions. If the FSA loses control of its forces after winning the war it might mean more than a million refugees at a rate impossible for the neighboring countries to keep up with. In this case most high level government officials will abandon their post and a post-Saddam Iraq scenario of chaos and confusion might unfold. The rural / zealot-like consistency of some groups of the insurgency echoes a resemblance to the dreaded Khmer Rouge in Cambodia before the capture of Phnom Penh in 1975.



In this scenario a post-war Syria will most likely accommodate unfairly, Christians, Druze, and Alawites by offering them small district territories as a new state or even more than one. Reconfiguration of the borders and state beyond Syria might be likely if Christians in North Lebanon decide to join a new Christian based republic. The same might apply to the Kurds in connection to the KRG. At this point all will depend on how well each minority prepared itself by accumulating leverage and “breathing space” during this war and how well they are ready to defend themselves in the absence of the Syrian Army. There are reports of shifting balance between Alawites and Sunni in Latakia district with groups of youth especially harassing Sunnis to leave and increasing their own territory noticeably.

Israel might act according to press reports from June and admit Alawites in the Golan Heights creating a buffer zone between Israel and a future Syrian Islamic Republic.

The Kurds, as they organize themselves lately, controlling border areas, may choose to play a stabilizing role by following the KRG strategy towards Turkey or exploit the situation in the complete opposite direction, and turning to the PKK as an ally.

Israel and Hezbollah/Iran will compete in establishing zones of control in the new territory by systematically exploiting local ethnic and religious divides.

The amount of refugees will put the neighboring countries under similar pressure with the previous scenario. Here we may have a more active and aggressive role of the Christians in Lebanon, the opening of a two front war for Hezbollah, the increase of violence in Iraq and a demographic change of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. That demographic change (Alawites now instead of Sunnis) might bring the Syrian civil war inside Turkey itself.

### **Scenario 3: Assad flees Syria or is removed, and the government and FSA negotiate a deal**

This seems the most likely scenario considering the disposition of the Syrian Army, the tactics of most of the SFA groups, the low degree of commitment and investment of Russia and China towards the regime, and the limitations that the regime increasingly faces diplomatically, militarily, and resource-wise.

As mentioned earlier, the Syrian Army does not seem committed to a plan of destruction of the Sunnis in Syria, even in areas under SFA control. Battles are sporadic and as long as they hold their perimeter we see no further massive campaigning (after Hama and Idlib) except maybe from Aleppo currently. Even there the army seems to come short from destroying neighborhoods of a certain value probably dictated by wasta, protection payments or even ongoing micro-scale negotiations. France24 has recorded such isolated incidents in Damascus.

There are massacres but not yet of the size and nature that would prompt a planned and systematic fleeing of Sunnis from the country. So far those have been incidents of tribal and ethnic nature not parts of a planned government strategy. Generating massive refugee lines has been used in other similar wars such as in Kosovo. It provides two advantages to the minority based regime fighting insurgents. First it clears areas from inhabitants (ethnic cleansing) adding leverage and a stronger position to the minority in case of future negotiations. Second, tactically it pulls insurgents off the ranks and towards supporting their families on the road to camps. It partially worked with the Kosovo Liberation Army which almost disintegrated as its fighters left the insurgency to go help and protect their families. This strategy has not been used by the *Syrian Army* so far. With the noticeable exception of the air force (mostly high level Alawite officers) which has caused most of the destruction and civilian casualties, and sectarian groups, the rest seem to be buying time trying not to burn bridges as they are doing so.

On the other hand as mentioned earlier Alawites are engaged in ethnic cleansing at the tribal level by harassing Sunnis in the Latakia area which indicates that they aspire more towards consolidating their position in areas that are already Alawite than trying to restore their control of Syria altogether. There are also scenarios indicating that Christians are considering joining the Lebanese brethren for a post-Syria future state republic. But very little on the ground seem to support such a development.

Unattended minors appearing as refugee groups in Jordan indicates that their parents were either killed or have decided to take a stand. Demographics in this case would be very useful in understanding further what that might mean. If the children are from Sunni families it is most likely they are preparing for a FSA offensive. If they are from minority groups they might be barricading themselves. In either case it is unlikely they are sending their children away for a long time. Unless the worst is true and massacres of enormous scale have been committed but remain hidden.

In the case of negotiations both sides will have to control their forces for a cease fire and considering the tribal, ethnic and religious layers of the conflict it will not be an easy task. Insurgent groups such as Al Qaeda or even formal members of the FSA such as the Salafis will most likely try to destabilize the process in order to gain more ground militarily. The Syrian state might still collapse Iraq-style and this might bring another wave of refugees running from anarchy, unsanitary conditions, and criminality. Alawites may have to share power to keep the government running.

Syrian Kurds will have to initiate talks with Turkey probably via KRG to keep that conflict from spreading in the north. Any other option might bring Turkey within Syrian sovereign territory complicating things even further.

Russia still fights a war in Chechnya with small scale operations running constantly. The last they would want is a prolonged stalemate in Syria that might provide a new Sunni wave of volunteers from Syria to Chechnya just as Bosnia & Herzegovina did back in the war in Yugoslavia. Considering their latest actions it may also be the case that Russians are talking directly with Syrian military leadership by-passing the regime and seem to understand that Assad's time is closing to its end. Russia might play a substantial role in work relating to Alawite safety in the end of the war and they may hold their naval basis in Tartus after all in case there is a new Alawite state in the Latakia district.

Safe havens for IDPs will have to be established within Syria requiring an intervention which might meet furious resistance by groups opposing any talks or feeling threatened by a new status quo. It will lift the burden from the neighboring states but the security situation will be intolerable or in some cases unmanageable, Sudan style.

Considering the complexity of the situation any negotiations will have to take place in multiple layers including those "middlemen" or wasta components that may already be playing a role in cities negotiating lines of control between FSA and the Syrian Army. It seems they enjoy the trust and respect of both sides and they might be useful in future inter-communal negotiations including on the return of the refugees from the camps.

The more this conflict continues the more difficult it will be for a speedy ending and the worse the security situation for IDPs and refugees both to them and to the countries hosting them.

Unfortunately all of the dire consequences of the two previous scenarios on the neighboring countries may still materialize depending on how early or late the implementation of a peace agreement will take place.

Turkey unable to accommodate a rising number of refugees may still face a Syrian rebellion or find herself hosting a war between different Syrian fractions or may still invade Syria in order to move the refugee camps there and establish a buffer zone. The presence of Turkey within Syria might drive the Syrian Kurds to join the PKK instead of working a deal via the KRG.

Israel might still decide to try the strength of Hezbollah in Lebanon as the regime in Damascus declines and Iran might try balance the odds by supporting Hezbollah militarily.

Jordan may still face another version of the Black September with consequences in Israel and Palestine.

And all these might happen while due to attacks against western presence most humanitarian organizations will have left or will remain at a marginal level.

The likelihood between the best and the worst case scenarios in Syria will be determined simply by time. The longer the war lasts the more likely that any of the terrifying consequences mentioned above will happen. It is a conflict tied up by layers and layers of ethnic, tribal, religious, economic, environmental, cultural, and historical variables that leave very little space to the parties for creative solutions; as time goes by that space become even smaller. The world public opinion and leadership cannot afford to be diverted in ways that place the Syrian war as secondary; what happens during these last few days in the streets in the Arab world, and as much as threatening they may seem to our interest, the US has to maintain focus on Syria undistracted.

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