



Out of Syria: shifting routes and returns

by Roderick Parkes

At the height of the 2015 migration crisis, the EU feared that state actors like Turkey would be able to ‘weaponise’ migration flows – to push refugees onwards or hold them back for geopolitical gain. It worried, too, that non-state actors like Daesh were capable of infiltrating and controlling the flows. But then the numbers of migrants on the Balkan route reduced drastically and calmed EU fears: none of these actors was, after all, in a position to manipulate the movements of refugees.

Yet the EU’s key vulnerability remains: no actor is really in control of the migration flows. The EU is too far removed from the crux of the fighting to influence the flows at source, and state and non-state actors exercise only partial influence on the routes out of Syria. As the conflict grows in complexity, so too do the flows of people inside the country and into the neighbouring region. Three key shifts are about to occur in the conflict, each of which will muddy the migration trends further.

Shift 1. Victims become perpetrators

In Syria, some victims may become perpetrators, undermining the key distinction in the international refugee regime. In certain regions, Sunni, Kurdish and Turkmen groups who once suffered at the hands of Daesh and the Assad regime, are gaining the upper hand. This is not a complete novelty of course: back in the 1990s, small groups of Palestinians, Afghans and Colombians were labelled ‘refugee warriors’ to describe the way they organised themselves

politically, and attempted to undertake military actions. Even then, the label was an aberration. But in Syria the classification describes an even more complex and fluid group. Without peacekeepers on the ground to stabilise territory or prevent revenge attacks, perpetrators can readily become victims, and vice versa.

The situation is not helped by the fact that former victims are now asserting their control over territories and their populations. Ethnic groups like the Kurds, who were once victimised by Syria’s central government, have reneged on their promise to vacate places which they liberated, and may attempt a degree of state-building. Some international observers view this territorial shakeup in a positive light as a prelude to the creation of refugee safezones, the possible federalisation of the country and the eventual return of displaced persons. And true, under EU law, it is possible to send refugees back to spots deemed stable. But returnees are often viewed as enemy agents, suspected of helping to establish chains of evidence against perpetrators or reappearing to reclaim property.

It is not just returnees who fall under suspicion. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) and even economic migrants too are treated not as victims of conflict but as proxies of the belligerent parties. Various groups of IDPs have, for instance, been called pawns in Iran’s effort to repopulate sections of Syria and build a strategic land bridge to the Mediterranean – a worrying echo of the situation in Libya, where

the rumour went out that all African migrants were in fact sub-Saharan militiamen on Qaddafi's payroll. Worse, there may be a grain of truth to such claims: IDPs in Syria with nowhere to go might indeed reach out for help to external patrons. The 50-70,000 Syrian refugees trapped in the berm between northeastern Jordan and Syria are thought to be ripe for exploitation by Daesh.

Shift 2. Flows become more mixed

Another key distinction is set to erode: between the flow of refugees and foreign fighters. In as little as four weeks, US-backed forces could begin their effort to remove Daesh from its last stronghold in northern Syria. The battle over Raqqa's permeable northern ramparts and its southern bastion will ebb and flow for at least nine months. So too will civilians and fighters. Local fighters will probably stay in the vicinity, moving out to the countryside and then back into the city, or heading for ungoverned spaces like the berm. But die-hard foreign fighters might just hide in migration flows in order to move internationally, seeking out destinations beyond their original homelands, and heading for new berths in Yemen, parts of Africa, Central Asia or even Europe.

Already in 2015, foreign fighters seem to have exploited refugee flows to cross borders. This tactic was largely ignored by the authorities because the terrorists were actually heading in the opposite direction to the refugees, using the smuggling networks to move away from their homelands and into the conflict zone. But that means the international community has done little planning for the eventuality that terrorists now renew these old smuggling contacts. Few countries wish to take responsibility for their own fighters let alone for foreign terrorists transiting their territory in large people flows. Moscow is said to have put in place mechanisms to help repatriate Chechen fighters. But in reality Russia, like other states, seems to be hoping its nationals will simply die in combat.

Back in 2015, border authorities were able to rely on refugees themselves for tips about infiltrations. In Greece, translators working in the asylum-processing hotspots picked up hints from refugees about terror cells setting out from the Turkish port town of Izmir. But, today, authorities may be reluctant to trust any refugees who do manage to flee northern Syria. The 200,000-odd citizens of Raqqa have developed a *modus vivendi* with Daesh over the past four years. They have had no other choice – Daesh's is a coercive regime. But it is also one that has offered a transactional relationship to the people living under its rule, possibly even smuggling children into Europe to strengthen its hold over family members

who stayed behind. The authorities will ask whether Daesh maintains this hold.

Shift 3. International alliances re-form

The final distinction to collapse is between safe third countries and transit states. The EU relies on Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan to act as safe countries and contain refugee flows from Syria. But if these states have prevented the onward flow of people, it is not because of the EU's generous humanitarian packages. They do so for their own interests – to maintain a complex set of international relationships, comprising everything from local kinship lines to geopolitical power play. This is hardly a watertight system. EU border authorities have, for instance, recently been puzzled by a small stream of Syrians arriving via the far east of Turkey. It seems that Ankara has been unable to close its border to Iraq along Kurdish-controlled sectors and Syrians have drawn on kinship networks to travel into Iraq, moving up along the Iran-Turkey frontier, and then into Europe.

Lebanon's borders regime is even more complex. It is characterised not just by numerous law-enforcement agencies, but the fact that these are controlled by different religious groups, which in turn bring their own international alliances. Lebanon is said to have been particularly efficient at preventing the onward flow of Syrian refugees to Europe – but only because Hizbullah itself has a hand in airport controls, and it does not want to jeopardise its international networks. If true, this effectively leaves the EU dependent on a terrorist group to prevent the flow of foreign fighters out of Syria. If the EU now helps Lebanon clean up its border controls (perhaps introducing an airline passenger names record system, which would link up to the Masnaa crossing point on the Beirut-Damascus highway) it might undermine Hizbullah.

As for Jordan, the EU has recently stationed a Migration Liaison Officer (MLO) in Amman, tasked to work out how the EU can best cooperate with the local authorities on border control. This may not sound like a key position in the Syria conflict, but in fact the MLO can provide technical expertise of just the kind required to defuse tensions. Last month, Israel destroyed a convoy *en route* from Syria to Lebanon, which was said to contain arms for Hizbullah. Regional tensions escalated as debris from Israel's missiles was reported to have landed near the Jordanian city of Irbid. This is clearly a hugely volatile situation. Simply expanding the remit of the MLO to cover Israel, too – and to hook up to their counterpart at the EU delegation in Beirut – could be a useful step for the EU to take.

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