

Russia's Syrian Refugee Conference Highlights Just How Far Away a Solution Is

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After years of military cooperation in a conflict that has displaced millions of Syrians, the Assad regime and Russia arranged for a two-day conference that began on November 11 in Damascus, which they presented as a means to move forward on the issue of Syrian refugees and displaced persons. In reality, the conference was clearly meant to advertise Assad as a supporter of these displaced Syrians, polish the image of Assad and his policies in the public eye, and make progress towards breaking the international isolation and economic [sanctions](#) [\(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assad-regime-undaunted-sanctions-biden-consider-broader-pressure\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assad-regime-undaunted-sanctions-biden-consider-broader-pressure) imposed on members of the Syrian regime. Yet the United States and the European Union publicly rejected the conference and any resolutions that might result from it. In that sense, the conference was already dead on arrival.

Though the plight of Syrian refugees and displaced persons remains severe, the U.S. and European rejection of the conference was the right choice. Ultimately, it is incumbent upon countries hosting Syrian refugees and international organizations to safeguard refugees' well-being and maintain responsible policies in the region.

The Conference

Russian officials played a large role in organizing the event, and a sizeable Russian delegation was in attendance. The conference came in the wake of a previous [Russian initiative to repatriate Syrian refugees in May 2018](#) [\(\)](#), which failed after Russian efforts to secure necessary funding from Western countries proved unsuccessful.

[At the end of October, the Russian news agency "Van" quoted a participant stating that there would be a consensus between the guarantor countries of the Astana peace process—namely Russia, Turkey and Iran](#) [\(\)](#). However, Russian Presidential Envoy Alexander Lavrentiev's international tour in the lead-up to the conference—meant to secure the participation of relevant actors in the event—did not include Turkey, the largest host of Syrian refugees in the world. The subsequent absence of Turkey, perhaps the most critical regional power for any discussion on Syrian refugees, at the talks became a particularly notable omission.

The Dire Circumstances of Syrian Refugees and Displaced Persons

In fact, the conference was notable for its failure to include representatives from many of the countries with the largest refugee populations, with only Lebanon and Iraq sending delegates. According to [UNHCR statistics](#) [\(https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#_ga=2.68427605.535146331.1605567996-1983286623.1605567996\)](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria#_ga=2.68427605.535146331.1605567996-1983286623.1605567996), 5.6 million Syrian refugees currently live in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Egypt,

with 3.6 million in Turkey alone. Syria is home to 11 million internally displaced persons. Millions of refugees have reached Europe and other, farther destinations through smuggling.

Many Syrian refugees living in host countries have struggled for years under a series of challenging circumstances. A series of recent incidents in Lebanon have highlighted the desperation of some refugees: on November 5, a Syrian refugee set himself on fire in front of the UNHCR headquarters in Beirut () UN and Lebanese personnel were able to save his life). In a similar incident, sources said a 58-year-old man tried to kill himself for not being able to provide medical treatment for his terminally ill daughter. ()

In Turkey, refugees confined to camps are suffering tragic living conditions. Even those who can leave the camps and hold KİMLİK ID cards, which allow them to move within the Turkish province in which they live, must undergo long security checks and routine procedures when they travel. Many of these card holders are deported to Syria because they cannot renew their ID cards.

Conditions are similarly grave for those trying to enter Turkey from Syria. In efforts to prevent any refugees from entering the country, Turkish border guards killed 470 people before October 2020, including 89 children under the age of 18 and 59 women (). All that being said, Turkey has had no issue threatening European countries with the opening of migration routes into Europe, demanding large assistance packages from the European Union and the United Nations. Turkey (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/syrians-are-increasingly-recognizing-turkeys-disrupting-role-in-syria>) also recruits refugees as fighters in foreign conflicts in Libya and, more recently, Azerbaijan. ()

The conditions of refugees in Jordan are not much better. The entry of an estimated 1.3 million () Syrians into Jordan has overwhelmed the Jordanian government, and the government seems to be trying to rid itself of the issue. In his meeting with Russian officials preparing for the conference in Damascus, Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman al-Safadi said, "The problem of al-Rukban camp can be solved by repatriating refugees to the areas from which they came." ()

As for internally displaced persons, many suffer the double pain of having lost both family members and homes in the Syrian conflict. Events like the war against the Islamic State in Deir Ezzor and the detention of thousands of refugees in the al-Hol camp have left internally displaced people with dire circumstances and uncertain futures.

From Bad to Worse

Having played a major military role in Syria's destructive conflict, Vladimir Putin now hopes to play a role in the country's reconstruction, beginning with the of repatriation and settlement of refugees and internally displaced persons. In an effort to scare European host countries into repatriating their Syrian refugee populations, Putin has encouraged the narrative that hosting Syrian refugees will lead to an increase of terrorist attacks: "young refugees often fall under the influence of extremist elements, and join the ranks of militants and thus can pose a threat to host countries." The remark came after the recent slew of terrorist attacks in European countries by radicalized Muslims.

But the reality is that it is doubtful whether Syria could handle the return of refugees. Syrian economic activity, currency values, and infrastructure are all weak and reeling from years of war. Syrians who remained in the country are already living through the worst stage of their recent history in terms of living conditions. Aside from the effects of the conflict, U.S. sanctions under the Caesar Act are playing a major role in paralyzing the Syrian economy.

Perhaps the most pertinent case for Syria's inability to accept returning refugees comes from the current situation in Deir Ezzor. The Syrian regime, Iranian militias, and Russian forces all control parts of the western Euphrates areas around the city of Deir Ezzor, and the area has remained unstable and dangerous for local residents. People in these areas, fearful of the Assad regime, have continued leaving for the eastern Euphrates areas despite poor conditions there. Militias have capitalized on displaced people's fears of returning to Assad-controlled and Iranian proxy-

controlled regions, seizing their homes and describing them as "terrorists".

The irony is that the regime is suggesting the repatriation of 6.5 million refugees even as the regime's presence displaces people in Deir Ezzor—and this is in addition to settling 6 million internally displaced persons. And while it is unlikely that the regime can break sanctions and achieve its goals of repatriation anytime soon, U.S. and European administrations continue the rejection of these proposals, which are likely to continue.

In addition, host countries and international organizations should recognize and criticize Syrian and Russian efforts to use refugees as political implements, considering the circumstances and prospects for Syrian refugees and displaced persons.

Moving forward, these entities should work to safeguard the well-being of displaced Syrians and refugees. The international community should commit to supporting repatriation only in the context of a broader political solution in Syria. That solution should ensure against forced demographic re-arrangements while providing safety for displaced persons and refugees against the Assad regime. In so many ways, the displacement of millions of Syrians is the product of the Assad regime. It would be beyond foolish to place responsibility for Syrians' settlement back in the hands of their oppressor. ❖

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