The Human Rights Crisis in Syria

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Articles & Testimony

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Assad regime's brutal year-long crackdown on Syria's pro-democracy protestors. Throughout years as a journalist and analyst based in Damascus, I followed Tom Lantos's often-critical words on the Assad regime's policies with great interest. I'm pleased to see the commission continues his good work at a key time in the Syrian uprising.

My testimony today is based on a recent trip to Antakya, southern Turkey, and northern Lebanon last month, where I met with Syrian refugees and oppositionists based in both countries. With the help of the Turkish authorities, who have done a solid job of taking care of Syrians fleeing to their country, I was able to enter the refugee camp at Yayladagi, one of seven Syrian refugee camps near the Turkish-Syrian frontier in Turkey's Hatay province. The Yayladagi camp, which once was a tobacco factory, hosted around 4,500 residents in makeshift tents, each warmed with an electric heater provided by the Turkish Red Crescent. The residents seemed well taken care of, and Turkish control over entry and exit to the camp was complete.

The residents I interviewed hailed from either communities along the Syrian coast -- the ancestral homeland of the Alawites, the minority that dominates the Syrian regime -- or the conservative Idlib province. Like most if not all Syrian refugees in Turkey, they were Sunni; all those I interviewed were a mix of ethnic Arabs and Turkmens. All shared with me harrowing stories of their plight against regime forces in Syria, including in many cases having to flee in the wake of attacks by shabbiha -- armed gangs primarily of Alawites who terrorize Sunni villagers throughout the Syrian coast. Others from Idlib -- all of whom had already spent up to a decade of their lives imprisoned under the Assad regime -- spoke of the regime's brutal raid into their community of Jisr al-Shughour and their hurried exit across the border to Turkey for safety. None imagined returning to Syria unless the Assad regime collapses. And no one I met believed that would happen -- sooner or later -- without force.

The real story of what is going on with Syrian refugees in Hatay province happens outside the camps. Hatay is officially disputed territory between Turkey and Syria, and people there are a mix of Sunnis, Alawites, and Turkmens. While the area was ceded to Turkey in 1939, large families still straddle the border. Thousands of refugees who have elected to leave the camps did not return to Syria; they stayed in Hatay with family. More

fortunate Syrians who fled the fighting simply rent apartments in and around Antakya. To its credit, Turkey has turned a benevolent blind eye to Syrians whose visas probably expired months ago.

Like those refugees in the camps, Syrians in Hatay just try to get through the day as best they can. But there are others who are acting on the notion that Assad will not go without force. Members of the Free Syrian Army -- an organization formed last June by Col. Riad al-Asaad, a military deserter who resides in what is referred to as the "soldiers" camp at Ayadin -- have watched the horror going on across the border in Syria for months. Like civilian refugees residing in Hatay, they are outraged at the Assad regime's brutal suppression of the Syrian uprising. They communicate with fellow deserters via iPhones and similar smart phones using the Turkish cell phone network (Turkish network coverage extends well over the border into Syria) and via voice-over-IP program Skype. For those in Turkey, there is little more that they can do other than monitor movements and activities of regime forces in Syria and give advice on when residents of villages or cities should flee.

Like civilian refugees I met in Hatay, FSA members wondered why the international community had not done more to protect Syrians from a brutal regime with one of the worst human rights records in the world. I tried to respond with what we hear in the news about the strength of Syria's air defenses, or the fear of setting off civil war or aiding al-Qaeda. They scoffed at my answers. "Doesn't the United States have the strongest military in the world?" one asked. "Does it matter if people die in an uprising or a civil war?" asked another. And last but not least: "Just because some of us are pious Muslims and have beards doesn't make us al-Qaeda -- you lived in Syria, you know that."

That doesn't mean there are not some things to worry about, especially in poor and conservative Idlib province. There is some evidence of Islamist groups operating there that share America's short-term interest of bringing down the Assad regime but not our long-term interest in helping to foster a secular post-Assad Syria. But they do not make up anything close to the majority of the opposition. Given the diversity of sects in Syria -- and divisions in the Sunni community as well -- it is far from clear how much traction Islamist extremist groups would have in the country.

The Assad regime is keen to keep Syrians from fleeing the fighting, as refugee flows could trigger an external intervention by Turkey. The day we left Antakya, we began to receive news that the regime was laying mines on the foot trails leading into Hatay -- an admonition that it was preparing to move its onslaught north into Hama and Idlib governorate from the central Syrian city of Homs. To find out what's going on in Homs, one need only visit northern Lebanon, where thousands of Syrian refugees have moved out of the pocket at Wadi Khaled into the Sunni hinterland north and east of the Lebanese coastal town of Tripoli and in the Beqa Valley. In Lebanon there are no formal refugee camps -- those fleeing the fighting have to make it on their own.

As in Hatay, most Syrian refugees in Syria are Sunni. They continue to flee the country due to shabbiha operations aimed at terrorizing Sunni villages around Homs, where the sectarian map is as diverse as that in Lebanon. Over the last year, shabbiha forces have moved into hundreds of Sunni villages, where they threaten, shoot, and kidnap residents who protest against the regime or support the uprising as a whole. Like Syrian refugees in Turkey, many had smart phones and digital cameras with photos or video clips of the destruction of their homes by shabbiha and regime forces.

During my visit to northern Lebanon, the Assad regime was in the midst of trying to clear and hold Bab Amr, a neighborhood of Homs where deserters from the military who had refused orders to shoot protestors had fled. The Syrian military knew better than to send more military units into the city -- soldiers in regular army units, a majority of whom are Sunni like the residents of Bab Amr, often run away when faced with the dilemma of killing a fellow Syrian. And the military only has so many elite units, which are dominated by Alawites and other minorities, and which it needs to put down the uprising elsewhere. Instead, the regime resorted to shelling and rocketing Bab Amr for nearly a month, driving more refugees into Lebanon and driving up death tolls to an all-time high in February of around 1,800 persons. The onslaught also took the life of American journalist Marie Colvin.

Eventually, the regime's forces moved into Bab Amr and Homs to "clear" the area of armed oppositionists, once again driving up death tolls. And as expected in the days following my return to Washington, the regime's "killing machine" marched north into Hama and Idlib, sowing a path of death and destruction. But much to Assad's chagrin, the regime's forces are unable to completely "hold" and secure those areas -- as clearly demonstrated by the videos coming out of Syria on a daily basis.

Conclusion

When folks in Washington ask my overall impression of my visit to southern Turkey and northern Lebanon, I often say it felt like tracking a tornado in the storyline of the 1990s film Twister. The yearlong uprising in Syria is a tempest with two forces swirling around each other -- a tyrannical minority-dominated regime with a forty-two-year history of not being able to reform, and an opposition chiseled out of a country that boasts perhaps the youngest population in the Middle East outside the Palestinian territories. You can feel the tension on Syria's borders as the political tempest continues to churn, killing thousands and displacing many more. I see no sign this will settle down anytime soon.

Where the situation in Syria differs from the Twister story is that it's possible to curtail and eventually stop the crisis if action is taken sooner rather than later. As the last year has shown, that will take much more than sanctions and diplomacy. The Obama administration is currently exploring all its options, including everything from military force to support for the opposition within Syria. I commend this effort. But I think it's completely fair to say this exploration of options has come far too late if the United States wants Bashar al-Assad to step aside anytime soon. Short of more robust action, including support for the opposition within Syria, the crisis will likely last for years to come.

Andrew J. Tabler is a Next Generation fellow in The Washington Institute's ***Program on Arab Politics (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/research-programs/program-on-arab-politics/)***. ❖

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