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Migration Motivation and Psychosocial Issues of Internally Displaced People: A Close-up from Homs, Syria

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Abstract: The Syrian conflict led to a countrywide realignment in both territorial and demographic traits with catastrophic consequences for the population. More than 6,6 million people were forced to leave their homeland, and a further 6,9 million became Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Lately, a subsequent consolidation of the population ensued, which witnessed a partial self-repatriation of IDPs. Here, we report the preliminary results of a study to explore migration motives in the framework of the repatriation aid programme provided for these IDPs. The programme was coordinated by the Melkite Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Homs in and around the city of Homs. Moreover, we provide an overview of the geographic territory covered by the initiative and of the relevant events of the conflict which affected IDPs from the region. Key results from our analysis include the observation that individual experiences of traumatization and deterioration of social status are major contributing factors that fuel resettlement. Our work provides timely guidance for other ongoing struggles and emerging crises by highlighting the causes and circumstances of internal migration.

Keywords: the war in Syria, Homs, IDPs, refugees, repatriation, psychosocial impacts

Introduction

The war in Syria began in March 2011 as an outgrowth of the broader Arab Spring protests that gripped an expanse reaching from North Africa to the Levant and beyond. Within the Syrian milieu of the Arab Spring, what began as demonstrations of discontent with the Syrian government quickly escalated into widespread armed revolt. After more than ten

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years of conflict, a huge range of elements of the crisis in Syria has been studied and subsequently reported in the academic literature. The overwhelming majority of these studies, however, variously deal with the complex interconnected geopolitical, diplomatic, or security policy-related issues of the war (Önis 2012; Phillips 2016; Hinnebusch and Saouli 2019; Daoudy 2020; Csicsmann and N. Rózsa 2022). In this complex and fluid framework of social upheaval, the events in Syria are now well-understood to encompass a multifaceted local and international context with a particularly significant human component of suffering and resultant internal displacement. This latter element, i.e., internal migration, however important it is to understand in the context of humanitarian aid, has generally escaped analysis because the most emphasis has previously been placed on those who seek refuge well beyond the borders of their homeland. In our analysis, we found that academic literature and international organizations' reports addressed many aspects of the complex issue of internal migration, repatriation, and humanitarian assistance alongside with socioeconomic situation of IDPs regarding previous years' conflict zones (Chowdhury 2000; Utterwulghe 2004; Adelman 2010; Brun 2010; Sert 2010; Daley 2013) and the Syrian crisis as well (Thibos 2014; Sert 2017; Marzouk et al. 2020; Abbara et al. 2022). On the other hand, migration motivations of IDPs, in general, remain underrepresented and unrecognized in the international dialogue. We attribute this to a lack of first-hand, local reports as well as a certain level of disbelief that people would remain in the face of such terrifying hardship.

The primary objective of this paper is to discuss and analyse the social and humanitarian challenges faced by Internally Displaced Persons (hereinafter IDPs) in the city of Homs, their main motivations for migration and the circumstances of their displacement. It does so first and foremost by analysing interviews with IDPs involved in the repatriation programme mentioned above. In order to provide a descriptive context, the study also looks at the situation of Homs and the evolving overall circumstances of internal displacement in Syria during the war. We have to highlight that the study focuses consistently on the plight and needs of IDPs within the Syrian border, for which years of research and active engagement in lending assistance are at hand. Our overall goal is to gain a more accurate understanding of the daily struggle of internally displaced people during the different phases of the war and thus form a more holistic view of the impact of such displacement on Syrian society. The significance of the analysis of the IDPs further lies in the fact that while many (due to lack of financial and other resources) persons did not leave their country, a significant number of them remained in their homeland as a result of their own, personal decision to remain and invest in the recovery of their land. Our research has shown that the reason for this decision was not only to avoid dangerous international migration routes but also the intent to continue residence in Syria. In our analysis, we share what we have found about the motivations that compel millions of people to migrate to destinations within the zone(s) of conflict. The purpose of our writing is not to accurately reconstruct the antecedents and events of the Syrian conflict or to give a detailed narration of the political history aspects of the conflict. Instead, it is directed at describing the local and international actors' system of relations and to use this information to both understand the sentiments of IDPs and in doing so, guide aid efforts.

The Goal of the Research and Methodological Elements

Accessing the target group and forming the sample presented a challenge in conducting these interviews: IDPs are considered a rare or hidden population (difficult to approach). “By rare populations, we understand communities and social groups, about which we do not possess a direct sampling framework (that is, a nearly full-scale list of the members of the given population (such a list does not exist, or it is not accessible)” (Kapitány 2010, 739–754). Our job was made even more difficult by the circumstance that those who became IDPs because of the war are often still afraid of persecution, they live in a threatened state. We, therefore, applied the Snowball Method, moving past the circle of those first questioned, the initial sample, in the direction of the acquaintances of acquaintances. Even though this sample taking is not representative and does not allow for drawing any general conclusions, it still yielded important knowledge helping to create a comprehensive picture, to understand certain details more effectively (Mason 2002). At the beginning of the year, we conducted five trial interviews, the experiences of which confirmed the assumption that the refugees would talk about their experiences with great difficulty. As a result, we conducted a total of 50 semi-structured interviews. Between 20 and 25 questions were formulated in advance, which were then supplemented by impromptu questions, leaving the interviewee free to say something more or less (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). We established our final themes based on the experiences we gained from the trial interviews. The interviews finalized in this manner were conducted in the city of Homs between February and April of 2021. The talks lasted for three to four hours on average, with the subjects typically speaking in their mother tongue, assisted by an interpreter, or in some cases, without an interpreter, in English or French. The interviews were conducted anonymously.

It should be noted that although these encounters were characterized by anxiety of the interviewees, nevertheless the families undertook the conversations thanks to the confidence and close human and working relationship that developed during the relief project of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta (referred to as the Charity).¹ We, therefore, prepared for these encounters, we conducted the interviews with selected, pre-disposed families with the common goal of being able to better help them and their peers through their personal life stories and the more accurate and in-depth knowledge of the context and to be able to deliver such information (among these present lines) that do not or appear underrepresented in the professional discourse. The results of our work thus helped us to implement the method of development aid more effectively and adequately, to improve the services provided in the repatriation program, to plan better community assistance, and conclusively to provide better aid.

¹ The Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta is the biggest Hungarian humanitarian and development organization. It has thirty years of experience in international disasters and man-made crises.

In the second half of the study, we summarize the findings of these interviews, including the empirical data we found most useful to support our Charity's efforts. The results are introduced in thematic chapters, starting with summary parts, followed by more important parts of the interview excerpts while highlighting particular elements of the interviewees' narrative. In order to ensure and respect the anonymity of the interviewees, the interviews are marked with the dates (year, month) in the relevant chapters of this paper.

The Process of the Interviewing

Participation of the interviewees was on a voluntary basis. Data collection and analysis of the gathered surveys were strictly anonymized. We have collected written informed consent statements in all cases. The ethical approval of the study was designed as per (1) the Humanitarian Charter of the Sphere Project and Handbook in line with the Core Humanitarian Minimum Standard (CHS), (2) the Code of Conduct of the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta and (3) the Scientific Research Ethics Committee of the Medical Research Council of Hungary (Solymári and Gibárti 2022). The latter one is based on the Codex of Ethics of Scientific Knowledge of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. To ensure the ethical aspects and the principle of homogeneity, the family questionnaires were led and supervised by the same social worker and research interviewer in each given interview. All interviewers received the same instructions before administering the questionnaires. Influencing respondents and their responses were strictly forbidden.

In our pilot research, we visited fifty internally displaced refugee families and interviewed them in accordance with the guidelines of an in-depth interview. Our goal was to make it easier to comprehend the deep, personal side of the phenomenon, the motivation of migration and thus the complexity of migrations and (highlighted with a special emphasis) to ensure that the families participating in the repatriation program are given better assistance that is based on community involvement.

Voluntary Resettlement – A Pragmatic Way to Help

The eruption of a new socioeconomic order in Syria, which parallels the swift evolution of political Islam witnessed in the last several decades, has long-term effects that, even years after the start of the conflict, are yet unclear (Hinnebusch 2016; Kepel 2020). However vague the consequences may be, they are still the result of the struggle of millions of people. After ten years of war and the displacement of more than half of the Syrian population, the country's basic services are, to quote Janez Lenarčič, European Commissioner for Crisis Management, not only "...being annihilated, but its entire society (is) sustaining injuries" (Lenarčič 2021). The appeal for redoubling efforts to aid the imperilled population of Syria was answered by a cooperative initiative spearheaded by the local Melkite Greek Catholic Archeparchy of Homs (in southern Syria) and its associated charity organization, the Hungarian Charity Service of the Order of Malta (hereafter termed, the

Charity) and the Hungary Helps Program. In 2015, the Hungary Helps Program (HHP) regrouped its aid sources and shifted attention to the alleviation of traumas afflicting those Syrians who remained. Supporting these IDPs and other Syrians who remained became the primary goal of HHP's international work. By 2019, the safety situation on the ground in Syria fundamentally improved to the point that members of the IDP population began to inquire about returning to their original homes. In response, the Charity set as its goal to launch an intra-country repatriation programme in cooperation with the president of Caritas Syria. Within the framework of this programme, centred in the southern city of Homs, the organizers planned for two hundred families to be given a chance to restart their lives, repair and rehabilitate their former homes.²

During the two-year development programme of the Charity, a survey was carried out on an extended circle of beneficiary clients to gain a more accurate, data-driven picture of the specific causes that led them to flee, and to what extent has the conflict affected their physical, mental, and social wellbeing. The survey used assessments based on qualitative and quantitative sampling, as well as structured personal interviews. Although the first qualitative phase of the study began in 2021 (when we completed a small-sample pilot assessment of the personal interviews), the first-hand experiences that we gathered proved to be highly valuable and contributed to a better understanding of the triggering causes of migration. A key detail that emerged from our analysis is the correlation of an individual's traumatization and social status to the likelihood that they will internally migrate within the zone of conflict. Our report is structured as follows: We begin with an outline of the Syrian metropolitan district of Homs and its satellite settlements in the war (the city is the primary venue for our development programme), followed by an overview that explores the unique traits of Syrian IDPs quantitatively. The city of Homs is the primary venue for our development programme because it has some existing and usable infrastructure that we can employ, and the IDPs, who are the targets of our development programme and migration research, are primarily located there. Beyond this preliminary investigation, due to the complexity of the issue, we will not dwell on the results, methodological elements, or community development principles of the contribution made by the Hungarian repatriation and development aid work; this will constitute the subject of work currently under preparation for publication.

Internally Displaced Persons in Syria

The IDP community in Syria constitutes the primary client base of Charity's development aid and research programme. According to the estimated data of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), currently 6,9 million IDPs are living in Syrian ter-

² It is crucial to underline that at the time of writing and submitting this study, the implementation period of the repatriation programme was still in process. However, some elements of professional fieldwork (e.g., identifying the recipient population) have been completed, alongside the community development and psychosocial support, so their partial results have provided a sound basis for this present research.

ritory (UNHCR 2022). This data comprises one of the world's largest populations of its kind,³ yet their safety and particular challenges appear under-represented in the professional and academic discourse alike. Indeed, the relative paucity of reports on the plight of this category of displaced persons is in contrast to the widespread attention directed towards refugees crossing external borders, and the entirety of processes and problems pertaining to them (Harpviken and Yogev 2016). However, similarly to the number of people fleeing to destinations outside of Syria, the number of IDPs has also undergone rapid growth as an aftermath of the wave of violence that unfolded in March 2011 (International Displacement Monitoring Centre 2012). In May 2012, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) issued a warning that the crisis that had developed in the territories of Idlib (in the northwestern part of the country) and Homs meets the criteria of “armed conflict not of an international character”, i.e., civil war. This defined the protracted involvement of the central government's armed forces in applying military violence against rebel factions and indicated the organized military character of the rebels fighting for the government's overthrow (Nebhay 2012). By the middle of 2012, the total IDP population count reached half a million (International Displacement Monitoring Centre 2012). In July of the same year, the international organization classified the Syrian crisis – besides the previously named conflict zones – as a war affecting the country's entire territory (BBC News 2012a). By the third quarter and in the course of merely two months, the number of IDPs within the territory of Syria had tripled in size (International Displacement Monitoring Centre 2012). Data show (Chart 1) that with the escalation of the armed conflict, both global and regional powers joined in the active conflict, then with the so-called Islamic State gaining ground, the number of IDPs rose at such a rate that by the end of 2014, already 7.6 million of them lived in Syria as refugees without crossing the country's borders (International Displacement Monitoring Centre 2019). The spectacular decrease in 2015, which is also visible on the chart, does not primarily reflect greater rates of returning home or resettling but rather the mass-scale domestic displacement wave that evolved into the flow of refugees from Syria, directed towards the territory of Turkey and beyond, to the European Union. Regarding the numbers in the chart below, it must be noted that they indicate mainly estimated and approximate data, which is a common challenge in other aspects of the humanitarian crisis caused by the Syrian conflict as well. This lack of accuracy is due not only to the country's barely accessible conflict areas, the encircled settlements, or the absence of international humanitarian organisations, but also to the fact that the Syrian government made data collection extremely difficult by not officially acknowledging the presence of IDPs in the country (Ferris and Kirişci 2016).

3 It should be noted here that Russia's war against Ukraine has significantly reshaped global data and trends on refugees and IDPs. Regarding the ongoing and constantly changing nature of the war in Ukraine, for the year 2022, there are no official figures on refugees, IDPs and returnees summarized by relevant international organizations. However, what is clear from the periodic reports is that Ukraine has also become one of the countries with the largest IDP population, alongside Syria. See, e.g., IOM 2022.

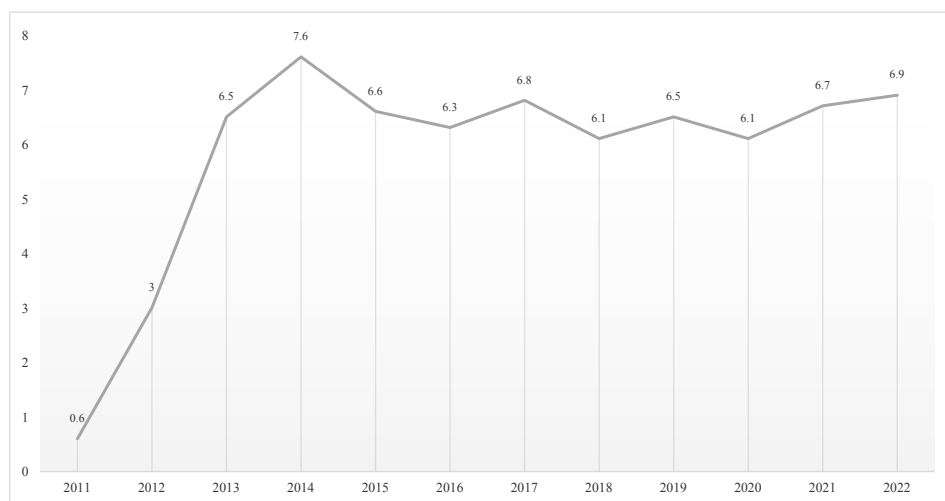


Chart 1: Evolution of the number of IDPs (in millions of persons) in Syria between 2011 and 2022 (IDMC 2019, OCHA 2020, UNHCR 2022)

The peculiar situation of this large IDP population, as well as their role in the humanitarian crisis, merits special attention. After all, while the refugee population living outside the country's borders can (in an ideal case) count on protection or support from the receiving country, this is far less clear-cut in the case of the IDPs who are harboured in their native country nevertheless without security guarantees. Hence, to this category of a displaced person, an extended armed conflict poses considerable and barely surmountable obstacles to charity organisations that seek to guarantee their safety, especially where both the frontlines and the borders of territories are dynamically evolving (Harpviken and Yogev 2016). Furthermore, atrocities, human rights violations, and assorted war crimes are perpetrated against the civilian population by the standing governmental forces and attached military formations fighting along with the Syrian government, as well as the opposition's armed forces, mitigate adherence to the norms⁴ regarding IDPs (Doocy et al. 2015). Additionally, the participation of foreign combatants in the conflicts further deepens the humanitarian crisis by escalating the exposed situation of IDPs and the civilian population in general (Vietti and Bisi 2016, 491).

The Situation in Homs During the Syrian War

Besides the direct connections to our targeted work to administer aid and to research the origin of clients seeking repatriation, the city of Homs also has great geopolitical significance. The Homs-related aspects of the Syrian conflict aptly reflect the complex system of relations of the civil population's vulnerability and the Syrian refugees' challenges (Gelvin

⁴ For more on international standards for IDPs, see: United Nations 2004.

2018). Homs is the country's third largest city and one of the most populous; it is Syria's commercial epicentre, which had turned into one of the country's most significant crisis nodes already in the first years of the conflict. The city had been under siege by the government forces for six years from 2011 to 2017, a situation that ended with the insurgent forces marching out (Harris 2018).

The start of hostilities began with anti-government demonstrations that started in March 2011, and during April of that year, the clashes between the security forces and the demonstrators grew more and more intense (Holliday 2011). The initial riot controls and group arrests escalated into a series of armed clashes, and Homs turned into what was dubbed the "capital of the revolution" (BBC News 2015). The Syrian army, with no apparent regard for the plight of the civilian population, sought to crush and subdue the opposition's armed resistance that had started to become increasingly more significant and defiant. In April 2012, the United Nations Peace Corps arrived in the country (United Nations Supervision Mission in Syria 2012), but because of the gradually increasing violence, they suspended their mission in June 2012 (BBC News 2012b). The battles temporarily abated; the military operations ceased but scattered street fights continued (BBC News 2012c). By May 2012, only about one-fifth of the city was under the control of the militia fighting in the opposition, also including the central quarter of Homs (BBC News 2015). Battles to regain control of these quarters and the continuous attacks launched by the government forces led to the widespread destruction of residential buildings, educational compounds and healthcare institutions (International Crisis Group 2012). This offensive resulted in extensive loss of life to the civilian population. Due to the intense fighting in November 2012, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and the local associates of UNHCR already reported 250,000 IDPs in and around the city of Homs. Along with this, the two organisations called the international community's attention to the extremely worrying and hopeless situation of the quarter of a million IDP (UN News 2012). By that time, half of the city's hospitals were out of operation, with a considerable number of doctors and healthcare personnel perishing or fleeing the city; in addition, beyond the generally traumatized condition of the impacted population, numerous children showed obvious signs of post-traumatic stress, and this contributed greatly to the gradually deteriorating life circumstances of the IDPs living in and around Homs (Wilkes 2012).

Moreover, the alleged chemical weapons attack that central government forces launched in December 2012 led to horrific casualties and gruesome harm to those that survived (Sen 2018). The city's ongoing siege (continuing until 2017) further aggravated the vulnerability and ordeal of the civilian population remaining in the city and the IDPs who had fled the earlier fighting. Although the government troops gradually regained control of most of the city quarters previously "dominated" by the opposition's forces, the city centre of Homs and the Al-Waer quarter, situated in the north-east of the city, remained under opposition fighters' control (BBC News 2015). From June 2012, the Syrian government's army besieged first the former, then, from October 2013, the latter district (BBC News 2015); this was the quarter where the largest number of IDPs from other parts of the city resided (Salahi 2014). The most intense bombings of the quarters under insurgent

control were launched in October 2012, when the Syrian government's army deployed attack aircraft, tanks, artillery rockets and mortars (Al Jazeera 2012). While the siege and lockdown of the Al-Waer district limited the movement of nearly 100,000 people, the parties fighting for the control of the other districts (such as Khaldiya, Qusor and Jouret el-Shayah) prevented the transport of humanitarian aid, intentionally starving several thousand people, leaving them without basic supplies, clean water, power, and fuel (Amnesty International 2017). The Syrian government justified the confiscation of the aid transports and cutting off the routes of the aid convoys by claiming that they could not let the aid and the tools necessary for basic provision fall into the hands of what they broadly labelled as terrorists and the insurgent militia.

In February 2014 – after several thwarted peace negotiations – the Syrian government permitted the 3,500 unarmed civilians stranded in the city centre of Homs to leave the besieged sectors. Those who decided to remain were guaranteed access to humanitarian aid (Salahi 2014). By this time, the UN's aid convoys with their food and medicine supplies had been on standby at the city's borders for weeks, waiting for the government's permission to give them access to needy civilians (UN News 2014). For the duration of the temporary ceasefire, during the evacuation, the UN and the Red Cross together managed to help 1,400 civilians flee the Homs city centre (Middle East Monitor 2014). In 2014, as a result of the fighting, entire residential quarters were levelled, 21 of the 36 districts of the city of Homs were rendered uninhabitable. Not only the destruction of residential buildings but also the total erosion of basic services and infrastructure played a significant role in what was to become one of the primary factors contributing to internal displacement (UN-HABITAT 2014).

In May 2014, then in December 2015, there were short ceasefires, giving not only the civilians wishing to leave the city, but the members of oppositional combatants a chance⁵ to leave Al-Waer, the only city quarter still under the opposition's control (Shah and Melvin 2015). Despite this, it was not until March 2017 that the government forces could "regain" this district (with Russian help), thus forcing the oppositional forces to surrender and leave the city (Al Jazeera 2017). In this context, however, we have to add that up until the evacuation of the city in March 2017, besides the airborne strikes against civilian facilities, one of the main warfare methods applied against the population remaining in the besieged quarter was the government's refusal to allow the transport of corn, bread, and other basic food into the district. The blockade brought about not only a drastic rise in food prices but also included (or resulted in) the population almost entirely becoming dependent on the arrival of humanitarian food aid and its quantity (Amnesty International 2017, 9).

⁵ However, Amnesty International (2017) warned that evacuating the city was perceived more as a forced relocation than voluntary displacement not only for those who fought in the opposition but also for the civilian population.

By the end of 2013, the distribution of refugees in Homs became as follows: the number of IDPs who left the city exceeded 262,000, while the number of people remaining in the city can be estimated at 206,000 individuals (UN-HABITAT 2014, 17). The more than 200,000 IDPs remaining in the city sought refuge primarily in the few remaining districts which proved to be relatively habitable due to a decline in the intensity of the fighting (UN-HABITAT 2014, 18).⁶

Even though in the middle of 2017 the siege of the last opposition-controlled city quarter ceased, and the IDPs also began to return to the depopulated and abandoned city quarters, repatriation is by far from self-evident (REACH 2019). Resettling is not only impeded by the absence of liveable city quarters and preponderance of razed buildings; it is also made considerably more difficult by the inflated rental fees of those buildings that remained in a liveable condition, the lack of documents certifying earlier ownership rights, as well as the dearth of private sector wage-earning opportunities, and the entirely or partially missing social infrastructure (World Bank 2019).

As is apparent from the above narrative, Homs is among those cities in Syria that have suffered the most devastation during the years of conflict and from where most people have been forced to flee their homes. Since the uprisings, armed clashes and the siege of the city, some 400,000 people have left their homes, seeking refuge in towns, settlements near Homs, in neighbouring governorates or Lebanon: thus, in many instances, internally displaced persons have not left the governorate that was previously considered their home⁷ (World Bank 2019).

About the Traumatizing Effects of the War

A better understanding of the IDPs' migration motivations and the impact that their war-time milieu had on the individual is one of the main aims of our pilot research. In the context of the Syrian war, we primarily researched the circumstances behind the flight of the client base in question and their traumatization, with a special focus on the way and manner in which their lives turned out during the decades of this conflict. Our assumption was that as a result of this preliminary research, the mental traumas and personal dramas will become more understandable, and through these, the deep layers of the entire society, the war's impact on the community (Van Dam 2017, 89–93); finally, due to these, the entirety of the geopolitical context will make more sense.

Applying modern mass communication tools and the messages transferred by politicians and other actors, aimed at the entirety of the civil population, are elements of psychological warfare. The theories that are passed on in this manner attempt to influence and possibly mobilise the climate of opinion, serving the current political interests, with cultural,

6 Al-Waer – as one of the quarters “housing” the most IDPs – does not fit into this category.

7 This will be discussed in further detail during the analysis of the personal interviews.

national, ethnic and religious content (Rostoványi 2020, 301). Kepel states that for example, the Salafists' successful mobilisation and conversion was the result of utilising the opportunities offered by television, virtual space, and community media in a manner superior to others for passing on their ideology and manipulative theories (Kepel 2020, 321).

The forced or voluntary participation of individuals in wartime operations is one of the most interesting, painful social phenomena of the Syrian war (Sommerfelt and Taylor 2015; International Alert 2016; Albrecht 2022). Even today, but especially during the early years of the war, mainly on the buildings in Alawite settlements, but also in large cities, Syrian travellers frequently encountered posters, placards, and banners filling up long sections of the walls along the roads, depicting the portraits of deceased soldiers. These were made and placed by the families of the fallen soldiers expressing their pride, to honour the memory of their beloved children and husbands who are viewed as martyrs for serving their homeland. It is a peculiar, less 'politically correct' observation that this was less frequent in the settlements inhabited by the insurgents, which can perhaps be put down, on the one hand, to their different political motivations, and on the other hand, to the significant number of alien and foreign mercenaries fulfilling their 'duty' among them. The phenomenon of impressment (forced recruiting) was a frequent and grave problem, but this was mainly typical among the rebels and radical brigades. Numerous women recounted in the interviews that we made in the course of our research how ISIS or the Al-Nusra Front threatened their children or husbands, saying that they would kill their families if they refused to join them in their fight. These extremist groups also operated 'children's camps' according to the accounts: they impressed child soldiers whom they frequently subjected to grave physical abuse during the time of 'training'; these children were called the 'Little Lions of Islam.' This circumstance was a significant factor in the migration motivation of many even though, out of shyness and fear, they still do not like to talk about it. The phenomenon of forced recruiting on the government's side (although on a local level, it might have occurred) was not observed on a system level: the only sons of families and, for example, those who had a student status received an exemption from the otherwise obligatory wartime recruitment; and what is more, there used to be a time when the obligatory military service could be redeemed in exchange for a fee of 8,000 USD. The above statements originated primarily from personal in-field experiences and interviews made in the course of the research.

About the Preliminary Results of the Psychosocial Situational Assessment

Despite academic papers highlighting and assessing the psychological challenges of refugees and war populations (both in Syria and other armed conflicts) (Kaplan 2009; Nickerson 2011; Davidson, Murray, and Schweiter 2012; Ugurlu, Akca, and Acarturk 2016; Weinsten, Khabbaz, and Legate 2016; Mahmood et al. 2019), certain aspects of this issue are still unknown. According to Aarethun, Sandal and Markova (2021) "we know little about the mental triggers of forced migration, in order to be able to offer these people

appropriate help. We need the greatest possible knowledge about how their mental problems could be defined, in what manner these could be best treated” (Aarethun, Sandal, and Markova 2021). The survey in the study mentioned here, which was carried out with the vignette method,⁸ investigated the extent to which PTSD can be observed among Syrian refugees. In its findings, the survey stresses that “...besides depression, PTSD is markedly frequent among the refugees” (Aarethun, Sandal, and Markova 2021). The survey concluded that severe pre- and post-migration trauma can be observed among both women and men – even though, as they put it – it is important that these symptoms do not necessarily constitute mental disorders. The Syrian part of Gallup World Poll’s worldwide assessment made identical statements. Their research, which they carried out between 2008 and 2015, and then published in 2020, is one of the latest large-sample surveys in a Syrian context (Cheung, Kube, and Tay 2020). This assessment analysed the impact of the armed conflict on social welfare, and thus, naturally, it did not deal with social-type questions such as migration motivation, the root of persecution and better disclosure of its causes.

Interview Results

Background and Family Structure, the Antecedents of the Flight

The respondents were mainly middle-aged or older heads of Syrian families (husbands, fathers) of internally displaced refugee families. The interviews were normally conducted in the presence of the entire family. Although some questions were answered by other members of the family, they were mainly answered by the head of the family (due to the sensitivity of the interviews we unconventionally treated the option of responding spontaneously). Without exception, all families raised multiple children, typically more than three. There were families where three generations were living together, in this formation the grandparents also lived with their immediate family.

In all cases explored herein, the respondents’ original place of residence was the city of Homs, which they left between 2011 and 2012. The earliest ‘exodus’ took place in February 2011, and the interviewees who were the last to flee departed in March 2012. The majority reached refugee status in February 2012. Based on the interviewees’ unanimous answers, they left their homes primarily due to the war, since continued residence became life-threatening. Armed men swarmed their surroundings; atrocities, armed violence, shootings, and explosions became frequent. Already before their fleeing government forces were bombing their former places of residence, with armed forces of the insurgents and radical organisations appearing in their midst. In almost all families, the husband, and the wife (father and mother) received death threats. Thirty-four families recounted how

⁸ The brief essence of the vignette technique is that the respondents are presented with a context, image, text that hypothetically describes and depicts the studied phenomenon, without directly naming the specific event.

the insurgent, rebel fighters attempted to kidnap their children, and force them to join as combatants. On 17 occasions, insurgents attempted to abuse the female members of the family, which was thwarted in the end by the family's firmer resistance, or because they immediately fled from their homes. Some of the interviewees' homes had been broken into while they were still there, pillaged, and ransacked up to the point of becoming uninhabitable. Valuables, including jewellery and paintings, were carted off in groups, in an organized manner.

"Unknown armed men broke into our apartment, [and] threatened to kill us if we didn't leave the house. They summoned my husband to join them. Previously, we had several days-long continuous shootings immediately in front of our window." (Interview, April 2021)

Besides the direct atrocities, all the families interviewed mentioned the permanently deteriorated circumstances, the total lack of social and healthcare services and the extensive, severe food and medicine shortage as the direct cause of their flight. Regarding the life conditions before their exodus, they related that before they fled, they all lived in the city of Homs, in their homes, typically in three-room apartments, which had been (without exception) in their possession.

Education, Schooling

The educational background of the interviewees is rather heterogeneous. Twenty-seven family heads claimed to have a diploma, 12 responded that they do not have schooling, while 11 family heads marked a high school degree as an answer. Engineers, teachers, nurses, doctors, university professors, researchers, and blue-collar workers were represented. A common element in the answers concerning education is that the children of all families received an age-appropriate education before their flight. Among the older children, a few had already obtained their university degrees (with some of them working in professional fields, such as veterinarians, and others as engineers, in Homs).

The long-drawn-out exodus also impacted the children's education, although considering the circumstances, the situation in this field turned out to be relatively better: Among the respondents, the children were typically able to continue their education, even though in the majority of cases, their schooling progressed in more difficult conditions, frequently changing classes or even schools. In the families that had a child participating in primary or secondary level education, they had to change their educational institution four or five times on average over the time interval in which they were in flight from the conflict.

Workplaces, Employment Before the Exodus

Corresponding to their level of education, the interviewees had held a variety of jobs before their departure. Most of them were employed by the state, while others worked as

teachers, nurses, engineers, in dentists' offices or taxi drivers, had the job of constructing banners or earned their living as plumbers. Regarding questions referring to savings, moveable property or real estate, the interviewees explained that even though they did not consider their assets significant, they did possess personal effects, cash or jewellery before their flight. These assets were confiscated in all cases. Some of the respondents possessed other assets as well, such as office buildings, houses, automobiles, furniture and antiques, which were, however, in every case destroyed, confiscated, or severely damaged during the war. Their personal, and family savings were merely enough for less than a year after their 'escape'; depending on the size of the family and the amount of savings, this period, on average, lasted for six months.

All in all, these families all recounted good circumstances, they were satisfied with their lives before their flight. Regarding their financial status, the families can be categorized as having belonged to what is termed the middle class, with considerable private property.

The Circumstances of Fleeing

Typically, there were two scenarios for the escape: at the urging of the government or as an individual or family decision resulting from violence by insurgents or a radical group. In the case of the former, the government designated temporary residences for the families, where they stayed for a few days, some for weeks. These were generally suburban storage facilities where they were given a warm meal once a day. About the circumstances of the flight, the families explained that it was not only difficult because they had to leave their previous lives behind, but that while they were leaving, many of them were attacked, shot at, or they had bombs detonating next to them. Almost all the families were threatened in some way or subjected to personal atrocities. Many of the respondents were shot by the insurgents, and some of them were severely beaten up or suffered shrapnel injuries. Following their exodus, they recovered from their injuries through hospital treatments paid for by themselves from their financial resources. Besides their physical injuries, the mental traumas also left deep traces: some of the parents explained that the immense fear caused psychological symptoms in their children.

"They shot at us while we were fleeing. Due to the terror, my son got into a very bad mental state, as a result of which, four or five years after the flight he still sometimes wets his bed." (Interview, February 2021)

"While we were fleeing, a bomb detonated in our neighbourhood. My hands and feet were hit by shrapnel, but other members of my family came away unhurt. I was driven to the hospital by government soldiers, where I was taken care of until my recovery." (Interview, February 2021)

In the great majority of cases, the families' flight was unaided by external, state, or civil actors. They left their homes on foot or with public transport, endeavouring to get to a safe place. However, among the respondents, some were assisted by the central government's

soldiers in carrying them to shelters. When they fled, besides a little clothing, personal documents, money, and occasionally a few easy-to-carry personal effects, they took nothing else with them. Some families had to leave so suddenly that they couldn't bring away anything of their previous lives with them.

“Since we had to flee fast, we couldn't take any personal effects, not even the pictures of my parents and grandparents. We had to pack up in three minutes. We practically just got dressed and stepped out of the apartment. At this time, the surroundings were already being bombed by the government forces.” (Interview, April 2021)

It was a general characteristic that the interviewees fled together with their immediate residential community, together with their extended families. Twenty-seven families fled with their grandparents, together with other generations, 14 families with their immediate neighbours with whom they were not related, and 9 families left their homes on their own. Apart from this, others left their homes on their own because, due to the communication channels being cut off, they were unable to plan or coordinate with others.

Flights typically occurred in two different ways: either upon a governmental summons or as a consequence of the atrocities committed by the insurgents or one of the radical factions. In the first case, the government assigned temporary residences for the families where they stayed for a few days, some of them for a few weeks. These places were typically suburban storage spaces where the refugees received warm food once a day.

Housing

After days or weeks of literally being on the move, the temporary disposition of the families' housing turned out in different ways. Typically, they were lying low at a residence owned or under the control of, one of their family members or friends, then moved on to rented apartments. They had a large variety of destinations. Many IDPs migrated to smaller settlements around Homs (Al-Khansa, Marmarita, Hawas), while others moved on to the capital Damascus or the extreme western or eastern boundaries of the country. Of the 50 families interviewed, 46 claimed to be Christian, and they found refuge in the region called Wadi al-Nassara (a majority-Christian valley at an hour's distance from Homs). Some had the chance to settle in a relatively more secure part of Homs. In every case, after leaving their original residence, they had to subsequently move several times. Everyone interviewed had difficulties with paying rent, so they either moved frequently or applied to the local churches for assistance. Their living conditions were, in every case, unimaginably worse than what they enjoyed in their existence before the conflict.

“After we fled our home, we were taken in by a family in Alarman for two days. After this, we went to the quarter called Jaramana in Damascus, where we had some relatives. We spent about a month with them, then we rented an apartment in the same area. Here, we lived approximately for half a year

but because of the high rent, we had to move out. This situation went on for a further nine years: we continuously had to move into a new rental apartment because the rental fees were so high that we couldn't pay them." (Interview, March 2021)

Out of the respondents, there were twenty-two such families who spent nine to ten years in rented places after their forced displacement. Most typically, this process turned out as follows: the refugee families were temporarily lodged with another family member, which lasted for a few weeks or months, and after this, they moved into their own rental spaces. The number of moves per family exceeded fifteen on average.

"We lived in the home of my husband's relatives in Al-Khansa, in one room. After that, we rented a house for seven years in Alarman." (Interview, February 2021)

During the interviews, we also inquired about why they remained in the country and why they did not move to Europe, for example. Every respondent clung to Syria; they did not want to leave their homeland. In the case of 17 families, besides the emotional attachment, the financial situation contributed as well: it would have been too expensive to travel to another country, and the family's finances made this impossible. Forty-six families recounted that they did not want to take the risk of the long and uncertain journey.

"In spite of the severe suffering and inhuman conditions which we were subjected to in the course of leaving our home, we didn't want to leave our homeland." (Interview, April 2021)

"We have several reasons for having remained in the country. On the one hand, I did not want to subject my elderly mother to the ordeals of a journey, and on the other hand, going abroad would cost a lot, and we have no money." (Interview, April 2021)

"We wouldn't have any money to go abroad but also, we wouldn't like to leave our homeland." (Interview, March 2021)

Financial Situation Following the Escapes

Besides the housing difficulties, another cardinal issue is that of adapting to the new labour market. It was previously mentioned that the families we interviewed could live off of their savings for only a few months, for half a year at the most. Concerning employment, the respondents explained that those who worked in state institutions were able to continue working after moving out because they had the chance to ask for a job transfer to their new place of residence. Twenty-seven families either could not find any employment within the new labour market or had to resort to casual labour, which resulted in very meagre incomes for them. In the case of casual work, they were generally employed

at several locations, depending on what kind of work was available. Sixteen of our respondents were formerly non-state-employed interview subject families who were able to find new employment in their original trade (such as drivers, plumbers, and dentists). However, in the case of 27 families reported that due to the injuries they sustained while fleeing, they dropped out of the labour market either entirely or for an extended period.

The changes in the employment situation plunged the families into a difficult financial situation, their incomes proving insufficient to cover their needs. Each respondent received some type of aid or support. Seven families were able to rely on the support of their former friends, and besides these, they mentioned the aid (such as food parcels, clothes) from church or charity organisations (e.g., Syrian Arab Red Crescent) as supplementary sources. Regarding the aid, they noted that because of the constant, continuous on-the-road existence and moving around, they had no access to these opportunities, or the help was periodic and occasional, so it could only provide temporary relief to their misery. With all the supplementary help, many of the refugees were still starving; half of the respondents recollected that one or more of their family members sustained lasting health consequences as a result of undernourishment; in the case of 14 families, the children had to be transported to the hospital due to their critical condition.

“No, our income wasn’t enough for our livelihood, and one of the consequences of this was that we almost lost one of our children because of starvation. The child had to be taken to hospital, where treatment was provided as a courtesy of a charity organisation, since we had no more money left to cover the costs of treatment.” (Interview, April 2021)

Because of their deteriorated financial situation, they could not afford school supplies. Frequently, this resulted in discrimination and feelings of shame and frustration by the children, which led to occasional truancy.

As a result of the war, in some places, healthcare services were almost entirely destroyed. Without exception, the interviewees mentioned being prevented from getting medical treatment for their health complaints and receiving adequate medical care only at the cost of great difficulties and financial sacrifices. All the respondents explained that either they themselves or one of their family members had a health condition requiring medical care that was non-existent before their flight.

The next nine or ten years following their exodus, without exception, imposed a severe burden on these internally displaced families. Their everyday life became a constant ordeal: job search, starving, illness, fear of the future – these were the words they used to describe their situation.

“Our ‘everydays’ were spent waiting for the time when we could return to our homes, to our old workplaces, and we could finally continue with our lives.” (Interview, April 2021).

“Our lives were spent in a continuous instability, in an utterly exposed state, with a continuous job search.” (Interview, April 2021)

“The years spent away from our home were a period of suffering on a daily level, especially when we had to move into a new apartment and my son couldn’t find a job to at least be able to provide for ourselves with the most basic things.” (Interview, February 2021)

Conclusion

In this work, we have laid the groundwork to explain how the Syrian city of Homs and its region were impacted by an armed conflagration of combatants, with special emphasis on the humanitarian side of the crisis. In our pilot research, paired with our ongoing development work, we analysed the results derived from in-depth interviews with 50 families. The findings of the interviews suggested that the IDP population had to face serious socio-economic challenges during their displacement, such as lack of secure housing, lack of access to education and livelihood opportunities and basic needs, as well as deteriorating food insecurity and health challenges. The interviews also showed that the reasons why IDPs had not crossed the Syrian borders and not sought refuge in a safer host state were mainly due to financial and security considerations. In addition, a significant proportion of the interviewees expressed their intention to move back home as soon as the situation in the country is suitable for their repatriation.

The decade of the Syrian war brought about a significant territorial and demographic realignment, along with a profound structural and economic crisis that was a calamity for the people affected. Anyone heading to the city from Damascus Airport – which is operating international traffic again – or on their way to Homs or perhaps East Aleppo will catch sight of razed city neighbourhoods and quarters. These areas were bombed to the ground. Considering the extent of the destruction, it seems to be impossible to rebuild, rehabilitate these districts and buildings, and realistically expect the former residents to return to live here. The extended war is perhaps over (maybe just for the time being), but due to the lack of basic services and the internal instability, it is a real challenge to launch effective repatriation processes. Even though some forms of dialogue have begun, no Syrian governmental support is in sight yet to promote these processes. The commitment of international donors is, at present, insufficient for solving the problem efficiently. It is our view that what we have learned in our work with internally displaced persons in Syria is not unique to that particular location but helps us to guide our aid efforts to provide aid to emerging flashpoints, such as Ukraine.

As opposed to the mainstream discourse, it is evident from our analysis that the concept that all refugees wish to settle down in Western Europe is erroneous. The majority, especially the IDPs, eagerly await the opportunity to return home. This conclusion is overlooked by most aid organisations, and we wish to add this fact to the discourse

on how best to implement relief for those who need it. Fulfilling their wishes means we understand that it is necessary for them that we help them return home, thus creating a realistic chance of a new start. Aggravating circumstance in this work is that the status and judgment of the local actors in dialogue with the implementers are in constant flux, and the assessment of the results is not clear. Only one thing is certain: the duty to help the vulnerable civilian population in need by helping them rebuild their lives with dignity and security.

In conclusion, we highlight that the possible value and benefit of this work is that we have been able to draw further conclusions about how the war in Syria has affected the population and displaced people. This possibly will guide policy-making decisions to best serve this highly vulnerable population. Our work could provide a template for similar studies of IDPs in emerging and escalating conflicts such as Ukraine in 2022.

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