Refugiados en movimiento: retos políticos, legales y sociales en tiempos de inestabilidad

«Refugees on the move: political, legal and social challenges in times of turmoil»

Alisa Petroff, Georgios Milios, Marta Pérez (eds.)

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Elaborated by:
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Focus on international migration és una col·lecció d'accés obert promoguda i coordinada pel **CER-Migracions** de la UAB-UB, centre de recerca interdisciplinària per a l'estudi de les migracions internacionals. L'objectiu de la col·lecció és consolidar un espai online de divulgació acadèmica que permeti fer arribar a la comunitat científica i al públic general interessat, treballs inèdits individuals i col·lectius que suposin rellevants aportacions teòriques, empíriques i/o metodològiques per a l'estudi de les migracions internacionals.

Focus on international migration es una colección de acceso abierto promovida y coordinada por el **CER-Migracions** de la UAB-UB, centro de investigación interdisciplinar para el estudio de las migraciones internacionales. El objetivo de la colección es consolidar un espacio online de divulgación académica que permita hacer llegar a la comunidad científica y al público general interesado, trabajos inéditos individuales y colectivos que supongan relevantes aportaciones teóricas, empíricas y/o metodológicas para el estudio de las migraciones internacionales.

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2. Syria's Refugee Crisis: History of a Mass Exodus

Naomí Ramírez Díaz | nao.ramirez@gmail.com
Universidad Autonoma de Madrid (UAM), Madrid, Spain

2.1 Introduction

In 2011, Syrians amounted to a total population of roughly 22 million people. In early 2017, more than 5 million people had left the country and over 9 million were internally displaced. Moreover, 13.5 million people, that is, more than half the original population, needed humanitarian assistance inside the country. To make matters worse, almost half a million people have been killed in the ongoing conflict. All this has turned Syria into the scenario of the World's worst humanitarian crisis in the last 70 years, according to the UN.

The spill-over to neighbouring countries is also worth mentioning. Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Irak and Egypt host around 5 million Syrian refugees, whose life conditions are miserable, in many cases because those countries themselves already had internally displaced people (as it is the case in Irak), had previously welcomed large numbers of Palestinian refugees (Lebanon and Jordan) or sim-

ply cannot provide a secure environment for them and even use them for political interests (Turkey).

Despite the above, from the beginning of the Syrian crisis and until December 2016, only 224,694 places for resettlement had been offered worldwide, which is roughly a 5% of the total refugee population currently living in the five countries mentioned above, according to Amnesty International.

The lack of future perspectives, especially regarding children and their education, has pushed many families, individuals, parents and even lone children to risk their lives yet again, and find a way to improve their lives in wealthier countries by crossing to Europe by land or, more dangerously, by sea.

This chapter will examine the roots of the ongoing conflict in Syria and the reasons behind the mass exodus in a country which has also witnessed countless cases of forced

internal displacement. By stating certain often forgotten facts, this chapter argues that most Syrians left to escape from terrorism, but contrary to the public opinion, it was the terrorism perpetrated by the Syrian State to suppress all forms of protest that made them flee from neighbourhoods reduced to rubble in Homs, Aleppo, etc. At the time of writing, peripheral neighbourhoods in Damascus are being bombed as well (Moath, 2017).

2.2 The origins of a repression foretold

In order to understand the current situation of both mass displacement and mass destruction, it is important to return not to 2011, but – if not earlier – 1971. It was that year that the former president, Hafez al-Assad, Bashar al-Assad's father, became the president of the country, and its most powerful man. His power was not merely derived from the fact that he held the highest political position, but also because he was able to build a complex network of security and intelligence services that secured his survival in a country which had previously witnessed three decades of political turmoil and military interferences in politics (Seale, 1965; Khalifa, 2017). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Assad was a member of the Army as well, a fact which helped him establish the necessary ties to reach the highest spheres of power: before becoming the president, he was named Minister of Defence. After his death in 2000, Bashar al-Assad, who had never shown any interest in the military career due to the fact that his late elder brother, Basil, was the heir apparent until his death in a car crash in 1994, escalated at lightning speed in order to became the Commander in Chief of the Syrian Armed Forces. From that position, he would be able to control not only the Army but also the security services, dominated by people with close ties to the President and balanced in order to make sure that all its branches reported to him personally and spied on each other to earn the regime's favour and gratitude. Despite this elaborate pattern of domination established by Hafez al-Assad himself (Hinnebusch, 1990), the late president's three-decade tenure was challenged at different moments both by dissatisfied social sectors who felt humiliated by the policies of what came to be known as "l'état de la barbarie" (Seurat, 1986) and paradoxically, by his own brother Rifaat al-Assad.

In the late 1970's, Leftist and Islamist sectors began a series of protests and demonstrations against the regime's policies of sectarian discrimination – it was a public secret that those who shared kinship, confession or loyalty with the Head of the State had better opportunities at all levels –, its economic policies and the lack of political participation and plurality (Hinnebusch, 1990; Batatu, 1999; Perthes, 1995). In the mid-1970's a violent off-shot of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (SMB), began a series of selective assassinations in retaliation for what they perceived as unfair privileges enjoyed by Alawites. Rejected by the SMB themselves – who eventually joined the struggle since the regime targeted all forms of religious expression, as explained in many of Syria's prison novels (Khalifa, 2017) –, the escalation of violence and the implication of other actors, prompted the regime's final solution: in 1981, Rifaat al-Assad and his brigades of the Defence Companies carried out a massacre in the dessert prison of Tadmor, where most Islamist or suspected Islamist prisoners were killed. To cut the roots of discordance, in 1982, the city of Hama was reduced to ashes under the attack of those same forces. The number of casualties remains unknown, but the lesson learnt was difficult to forget: any form of dissent would

receive a violent answer. From then on, Syria would be known as *mamlakat al-samt* (Al-Turk, 2000), the kingdom of silence.

Perhaps paradoxically, but framed within the same desire for domination, in 1983, Rifaat al-Assad himself took advantage of his brother's illness, which had him for a few days on the verge of death, and tried to build a different power nucleus for himself (Seale, 1989). When Hafez al-Assad miraculously recovered, his brother's powers were decimated and, eventually, he was invited to leave the country. This was the second lesson: any internal dissent would be silenced.

2.3 2011: The turning point

Although in the early months of Bashar al-Assad's tenure a slight opening in the regime's grip on freedoms of speech and assembly paved the way for what came to be known as the Damascus Spring (George, 2003) – an attempt by intellectuals and traditional political opponents to the regime to inaugurate the debate on the need to open the political sphere and grant basic rights and freedoms that remained on hold –, the difficulties inherent to any form of dissent in the country made it virtually impossible to expect any real change in Syria.

However, at some point, things began to change. Following on the steps of other countries, large sectors of the Syrian society expressed their rejection of a life under constant humiliation in what came to be known as *Thawrat al-karama* (The Revolution of Dignity). Being aware that they had no control over their lives, and that they were constantly surveilled by the secret services, in addition to the fact that they could not express any opinion for fear that they might end up in prison, or simply "disappear", groups of inexperienced activists began to organise. However, it was a spontaneous episode in the Hariqa souk in Damascus on February 17, 2011, that encouraged people to act.

When a person was mistreated by a law enforcement agent in the street, a group of people gathered around them and repeated the following slogans: "Syrian people will not be humiliated" and "Death before humiliation". Minutes later, under the surveillance of dozens of mobile phones and cameras, the then Minister of Interior, Said Sammur, told the protesters off: "Come on guys, this is not right: this is a demonstration".

This statement of the obvious is particularly important because, since the very early stages of the uprising – which officially started on March 15, 2011 –, the regime's discursive strategy has been the following: there is no real opposition in Syria, but a bunch of violent infiltrates and terrorists seeking to plant the seeds of *fitna* (powerful word meaning 'social strife') in the country. Demonstrations were not acknowledged as genuine social movements and protesters were shot at by security agents who had been sent to the streets to "fight terrorists".

2.4 A more complex scenario

The vicious cycle of demonstration-repression-death-funeral-repression-demonstration prompted the need to protect people's lives. Those soldiers who refused to shoot at protesters started defecting from the Army and formed the nucleus of what came to be known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). Later on, as the repression intensified and heavy weaponry came into the scene – the episode of the fall of Baba Amro provides a good example of this (Espinosa and Garcia, 2016) –; more men joined the armed insurrection in order to fight a guerrilla war of attrition against the regime.

As time went by, however, different Salafi groups started popping up in different regions within the country. In the beginning, their presence was more of an anecdote than the general rule, and in most cases, it was the leaders who held that ideology and not the rank-and-file fighters (Lund, 2012). In fact, in many cases, some groups adopted 'religiously-inspired' names as a mere trick to get funding and weapons from the only countries or people that, at the time, were eager to provide means of defence to the FSA and other brigades. However, this went in detriment of the initial revolutionary values.

Several countries and political groups decided to focus on the provision of weapons to those groups openly displaying loyalty to their ideology. This however, is not something exclusive to the opposition to Bashar al-Assad, whether it is military, or political (Syrian National Council or the subsequent National Coalition for the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, which were created to allegedly represent the revolution in international forums and try to bring support to the people's struggle). For his part, the regime has received substantial support from different countries and groups from the very beginning. In fact, Iran was the first country to intervene in Syria by providing Assad with help: the internet monitoring system used in 2009 in that country to counter the so called Green Movement[1] was given to Assad to survey user's activity in the internet, knowing that the Local Coordination Committees[2] organising demonstrations and activities agreed on their moves in the internet and social networks.

Soon enough, it was obvious that the regime counted on the support of Iran, Russia, China, Iraq and the Lebanese Hezbollah, all of whom provided their diplomatic, political, economic and military support. On the other side, European countries at different levels, the US, Gulf countries and any self-declared "Friend of Syria"[3] did not support the revolution even if they openly criticised Assad's repression. Instead, they hindered the advance of revolutionary forces and activists by claiming that the lack of a cohesive and fully representative political body in the opposition's side was the only obstacle to their provision of real help (O'Bagy, 2012). This in itself was a declaration of intent: Assad was the only alternative to himself until further notice.

With regards to European countries, their divergent policies with regards to foreign affairs have hindered the possibility of a joint response with regards to repression in Syria (Pierini, 2016). In fact, the only real agreement European countries have reached, especially those which form part of the EU, is the infamous 2016 agreement with Turkey by means of which the EU would return to the Anatolian country, considered a safe place for Syrians (although various situations have proved otherwise (Kingsley, 2016), all illegal immigrants coming from its coasts. Prior to that, besides freezing some assets of prominent regime figures, little else had been done in retaliation for the repression in Syria (Castle, 2011).

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1 Political movement that arose after the 2009 Iranian presidential election, in which protesters demanded the removal of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from office, since they believed the process had been fraudulent.

2 The Local Coordination Committees started working in March 2011 from local groups that organised the protests in the country and published information and new son the demonstrations.

3 International diplomatic collective of countries and bodies created in response to a Russian and Chinese veto on a Security Council resolution condemning the Syrian regime's violence against civilians.

Gulf countries and individual Gulf donors, for their part, disguised their hatred for Iran and its expansionist plan, as a form of support to the revolution against the Assad regime. In other words, they were mainly interested in fighting a proxy war within Syria's borders. Consequently, they focused their efforts on breeding the ground for sectarian division and promoting a bigoted version of Sunni Islam by supporting groups with a marked Salafi creed. Interestingly enough, the leaders of the strongest Salafi brigades, such as Jaysh al-Islam or Ahrar al-Sham to list a few, had been released from Assad's prisons in the early months of the demonstrations (Junaidy, 2013). By releasing less tolerant elements and imprisoning peaceful activists, Assad clearly wished to turn his words into a self-fulfilled prophecy.

In the case of the US, the disasters in both Libya and Irak, the fear that weapons might "reach the wrong hands"[4], Obama's trau-

ma with Bush' legacy, and the nuclear deal negotiations with Iran, were enough to apply an arms embargo on Syria (Friedman, 2014), and even blur the red lines (Engel, 2016). Only in 2014 did the training of some specific units begin in southern Syria and later on in northern areas. However, in the case of the latter, much closer to Daesh-controlled areas, the orders were crystal clear: their target was Daesh, not the Assad regime. This was the straw that broke the camel's back: for most brigades, the main enemy, responsible for most of the destruction and the deaths happening in Syria, was Bashar al-Assad. Only some Kurdish brigades believed otherwise, and the 2015 liberation of Kobani from Daesh was therefore US-backed.

following: "This idea that we could provide some light arms or even more sophisticated arms to what was essentially an opposition made up of former doctors, farmers, pharmacists and so forth, and that they were going to be able to battle not only a well-armed state but also a well-armed state backed by Russia, backed by Iran, a battle-hardened Hezbollah, that was never in the cards" (Friedman 2014).

4   However, he also underpinned Syrian's capacities by stating the

2.5 Daesh and Al-Nusra: Syria as the Hotspot of International Jihadism

Daesh is the Arabic acronym for *Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi-l-Iraqi wa-l-Sham* (The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant/Syria), the original name with which this originally Al-Qaeda's branch in Iraq, came into being in Syria. There are no better sources to understand its appearance and fast evolution into a para-State in North Eastern Syria than the deep and complete study by Hassan Hassan and Michael Weiss (2015), and Javier Espinosa and Mónica Garcia's witness account in their two recent books (2016, 2017).

Daesh, or the idea of Daesh – also known as "Daesh brand" –, has *de facto* attracted many Muslims who hold a radical vision of religion and who despise Assad's rule (who they label as an unbeliever) and feel that the injustice that has fallen upon Syrians needs to be repaired

somehow. In this specific sense, they could be understood as an opposition movement. Moreover, following the sequence of events, the organisation's advances, and the spectacular capture and recapture of Palmyra in 2016, it would not be incongruent to think that it is the strongest rebel faction in Syria and the most dangerous.

However, a quick revision of the suffering of Syrians within the territory it controls, and the fact that in early 2014 a large armed faction known as Jaysh al-Mujahidin (Army of the Mujahidin) led a counteroffensive and was able to expel Daesh from rebel-held Idleb and important areas of Aleppo, suggests otherwise (Ramírez, 2016). Daesh and its sisters, such as Jund al-Aqsa, have attacked numerous rebel positions – including those of Salafi brigades

like Ahrar al-Sham –, have imposed a government of terror in the areas it controls and, as explained below, have taken advantage of the rebel gains for their own benefit.

Raqqa was the first capital city seized from government control by the rebels, and yet, it was – in retrospective – one of the biggest mistakes, because administering it and keeping it under the revolutionaries' control was a difficult task. The political and administrative vacuum left in the city – whose management was not as simple as that of smaller cities or neighbourhoods already outside the regime's control – was soon filled by members of this group whose expertise in controlling large areas of Iraq was unparalleled. Their strategy was simple: presenting themselves as pious people who would not fall into the lure of looting people's houses or services (as it had been the case with many FSA brigades or self-declared members of the FSA), they managed to win the hearts of large segments of society. The repressive strategy arrived later.

Against the background of Daesh' advances following Jabhat al-Nusra's own techniques, the official Al-Qaeda branch in Syria, which had become quite powerful back in 2013-2014, felt threatened: the split was inevitable (Baker, 2014), yet nothing suggested that Jabhat al-Nusra would be any better for the revolution, despite initial gains and even joint operations with other brigades. In fact, when large numbers of activists took advantage of the fragile "cessation of hostilities" after six months of a violent joint Russian and Syrian air campaign on the regions out of regime control in March 2016, to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the revolution, it was Nusra fighters, who attacked the demonstrators. It was also Al-Nusra fighters who in January 2015 had stormed the offices of civil organisations and the radio station in Kafranbel. One year later, Raed Fares, a prominent activist from Kafranbel, and reporter Hadi al-Abdallah were abducted for a few hours by Nusra fighters. Six months later, a blast almost claimed the life of Abdallah and killed his reporting partner Khaled al-Issa. Activists blamed Al-Nusra for it while an imam in the city close to the group refused to office his memorial (Enab Baladi, 2016).

Although in mid-2016, it claimed to have severed ties with Al-Qaeda and renamed itself as Jabhat Fath al-Sham, not even Islamist groups, like the SMB for instance (Syrian Muslim Brotherhood 2016), trusted their intentions if they did not translate into palpable realities. Months later, in yet another move towards acceptance and distancing from Daesh, it gradually merged with other factions into what came to be known as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. Trusting this move remains difficult to say the least.

2.6 Siege, mass destruction, forced exile and displacement

Daesh' territorial gains in Syria and Iraq in 2014, after the establishment of the self-declared Caliphate of the Islamic State, prompted an international response, due to Assad's large neglection of the group outside the rhetorical sphere. The International Coalition against Daesh began its strikes in Syria in 2014. Soon, concerns were voiced that Assad might try to justify his attacks on the opposition under the pretext that he was targeting terrorist positions. These predictions were not unfounded: every agreement on a ceasefire between the regime and the opposition has systematically excluded Al-Nusra's positions, which means that any area in northern Syria outside the regime's grip is considered a legitimate target, even though there is no single area completely dominated by them.

Aleppo would become the epitome of this situation in late 2016: sieged by the Syrian army, the neighbourhoods in rebel hands were targeted with heavy shelling and barrel bombs. Many factors contributed to the deterioration of the situation in Aleppo, including a very interesting report by some fighters who belt betrayed by specific factions and could no longer trust anyone (Abu Shams, 2017). In the end, just like before in some areas of Homs, leaflets falling from the Syrian planes surveilling the area, reminded the people inside rebel-held areas that they had two choices: fleeing their houses in a controlled "evacuation", or facing death (Saad and Cumming-Bruce, 2016). And that is the most obscene paradox regarding Syria: the situation is often reduced to a mere humanitarian catastrophe.

No doubt that the situation in Syria corresponds to a humanitarian emergency (the large amounts of people fleeing the country bears witness of that), but, as opposed to situations of famine, draught or tornados, it is not the result of a natural catastrophe. On the contrary, it is the outcome of the implementation of the regime thugs' declared policy: "Assad or we burn the county". That was the slogan written on the walls of those neighbourhoods forcibly evacuated and raided in different parts of the country. Discordant elements had two (or may-

be three) options: face death, leave the country in a forced exodus, or accept an unknown destiny if they returned to the "homeland". Knowing the fate of all the men who had left Homs earlier, most of whom had disappeared after laying down their arms, no one (except for a few civilians) dared leave the green buses taking them to Idleb, even if they knew that the city's fate might eventually be similar to that of Aleppo. To make matters worse, the armies responsible for the mass destruction and most of the deaths (Syrian Network For Human Rights, 2017) – Russian army[5], Syrian army and Iranian militias –were the ones supervising the transit from Aleppo to Idleb (in fact, Iran's feeling that Russia was receiving too much attention had delayed the process (Pasha-Robinson, 2016)).

Under this flagrant usurpation of national sovereignty, what solution awaited Syria? How could the thesis of the international conspiracy and the foreign backing of the different opposition groups still be an excuse for the ongoing repression? How could the massive influx of refugees, who have lost their homes under the heavy shelling, into other countries be stopped and the country rebuilt?

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5 According to the Syrian Network For Human Rights, the death toll resulting from Russian strikes amounted to a total of 2.704 civilians between September 30 2015, and August 17, 2016 (Syrian Network For Human Rights, 2016).

2.7 A Political Solution?

On June 30, 2012, the final communiqué of the international Action Group for Syria[6], which held a meeting in Geneva (later known as Geneva I), clearly condemned the continued "killing, destruction and human rights abuses" and voiced the member States' concerns regarding "the failure to protect civilians". In addition, it expressed the group's wish to launch a Syrian-led

political process that would eventually lead to a transition by means of which Syrians would be able to determine their own future. In addition to that, the Syrian authorities were required to release arbitrarily detained activists, especially those who had been detained because of their involvement in peaceful political activities.

With regards to the future, the document made it clear that any political settlement had to offer the perspective of a common future for

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6 An UN-backed initiative to support political change in Syria.

all the citizens in the country, implemented in a climate of safety and at a credible pace. Such perspective included a "genuinely democratic and pluralistic" State which would open the door to new political actors, and an independent judiciary to hold those in the government accountable for their actions. In order to turn this into a reality, the statement demanded the establishment of a transitional governing body that should include members of the Government and the opposition. At no point was the Syrian regime's responsibility for the violation of Human Rights mentioned. Instead, the declaration asked all parties to bring the confrontation to a halt at a time when the above-mentioned episode in Baba Amro had already born witness of which party was responsible for the incipient policy of mass destruction.

Two days later, in early July 2012, representatives of the Syrian political opposition held a conference in Cairo under the auspices of the Arab League. The final document, in a clear declaration of principle with regards to Geneva I, explained that the very first phase for any solution to the conflict would be "a stage of struggle and determination until Bashar al-Assad and the symbols of power are toppled", since "justice for the sacrifices and the sufferings of the Syrian people for freedom and dignity can only be achieved after the removal of the main symbols of power". This very specific aspect would become the main obstacle for the achievement of any progress.

For instance, Walid al-Muallim, the everlasting Syrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated in the conference in Montreaux in January-February 2014, also known as Geneva II, that "no-one in the world has the right to confer or withdraw the legitimacy of a president, a constitution or a law, except for the Syrians themselves". Once again, the regime was denying the fact that large sectors of the population had taken to the streets against the regime and underpinned their relevance as foreign-backed terrorists. Under such circumstances, it seemed difficult to reach any form of agreement, and actually, despite the different initiatives both at the regional and international levels (including

Geneva III and IV), no issue remains more controversial than the future of Bashar al-Asad.

Unsurprisingly, the Geneva III talks, in early 2016, proved once again that there was no interest from the regime's side to make any significant progress, unless Bashar al-Assad's continuity was guaranteed. For their part, the opposition condemned the fact that bombs were falling at a time when negotiations should have been taking place (and a cessation of hostilities implemented according to the Security Council resolution 2254, adopted in December 8, 2015, which would not apply to Daesh or any group designated as a terrorist organisation).

Regardless of the political position's stance, it is important to retrieve here what Syrian civil society organisations had to say. On January 26 2016, more than 300 civil society organisations within Syria and over 1,000 prominent civil workers signed a declaration which started with a powerful statement[7]: had it not been for the March 2011 revolution, "Syrian civil society would not have any presence". According to them, the revolution had "broken the chains of a despotic regime that has systematically suppressed all demands for freedom and the resurgence of civil society since 2011". Therefore "the principal conflict in Syria today remains the conflict with the regime in Damascus and its repressive policies".

Insisting on the fact that this was not merely a humanitarian catastrophe, they asked for humanitarian aid to be introduced in every sieged area with or without Damascus consent – for starvation was being used as a war weapon[8]. Last but not least, any progress required the rejection of all forms of terrorism, "acknowledging that the main cause of terrorism in the country is the regime of Bashar al-Assad", which should transfer all its powers to a government of consensus in order to prevent those responsible for the repression of the Syrian people to play any future role in the country.

7   The Spanish translation can be found here: [Date consulted: March 17, 2017].

8   It is true that the opposition factions sieged a couple of cities in Northern Syria, such as Al-Fu'a and Kafraya, but in those areas, as opposed to the areas sieged by governmental forces, the regime threw food bags from the air to mitigate the effects of the siege.

No one, according to them, had the right to impose their views or ideas by force.

Nevertheless, the main issue of concern remains that there is no mechanism to control the different parties' commitment to ceasefires, especially in the case of the regime, who defies any violation of its (alleged) sovereignty. Actually, after the chemical attack in Al-Ghouta, for which no side has been officially held accountable, but whose responsibility can only fall upon the party which most analysts seem to agree on (Brown, 2013; Higgins, 2014; Gladstone and Chivers, 2013), Assad learnt the lesson: since crossing the red line had brought no ill to his rule, using conventional weapons should be a piece of cake.

The farce of celebrating presidential elections – for the first time since the Assad clan arrived to power, it was not a referendum, although the picture of one of the other two candidates, Mahed Hajjar, with Bashar al-Assad's portrait on the back was very eloquent –where people voted even via WhatsApp, proved yet again that Bashar al-Asad, as he has stated in various interviews (Barnard, 2016), had no intention of leaving because he still had popular support: the support of actual and real supporters, whose presence cannot be denied, and the compulsory support of people in regime controlled areas. However, it was difficult to quantify that support since already in the previous parliamentary elections (2014), those who, in the regime's words, had left Syria illegally would not be allowed to vote (Ensor, 2014). This meant that all those who had left the country to flee from the war were no longer considered citizens. Add to that the fact that no one in rebel-held areas and, of course, Daesh-held areas, could vote. For the Syrian regime, only those under his control were worthy of the category of citizens.

Going back to the political process, the recent meeting held in Astana is worth mentioning. In it, Russia (after a tacit rapprochement with Turkey, allegedly supportive of the opposition, and despite the fact that its army was clearly part of the repression of civilian areas outside the regime control) provided a draft constitution for Syria by means of which Bashar al-Assad's crimes were whitewashed: the current president could run for presidential elections once the Constitution had been adopted, and since it was a foundational document, he could even repeat for an additional seven-year tenure. Just like the chemical massacre had given Assad free rein to keep killing civilians provided he refrained from using anything but conventional weapons (which has not prevented him from using chemical substances afterwards, as concluded by the investigation led by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons and the UN), the Russian constitution aimed at providing him with a *carte blanche* to remain in power.

This never-ending proceedings and failed initiatives has gone in favour of the most radical and violent elements in the opposition against Bashar al-Asad, a fact which does not turn them into real opponents, but in opportunistic counter-revolutionary forces, among which we can list some Salafi brigades who are also playing their role as warlords and betraying the very essence of the revolution. According to activist Loubna Mrie: "My problem with the opposition delegation to Geneva can be summarized by the following: Currently I am being represented, against my will, by Muhammad Alloush, whose Jaysh al-Islam proudly put civilians in cages as human shields and have a long history of kidnapping and harassing activists. While All-out is in Geneva pretending to speak for Syria's revolutionaries, his thugs are attacking the very revolutionaries he should be speaking for. [...] This is just one more mistake committed by our political opposition. We need to reclaim our revolution and not allow the All-out group to intimidate the political delegation the way it has oppressed the people of Damascus" (Facebook, March 8, 2017).

2.8 Conclusion

Bearing in mind the long and complex explanation above, what are people fleeing from? Why where there refugees in neighbouring countries before Daesh even existed and why did they decide to flee to new destinies after the situation had become unbearable?

From the comfortable perspective of a spectator after six years of daily repression in Syria, it is my contention that no political solution is viable in the country under the current conditions. Years ago, a no-fly-zone should have been imposed in order not to allow the Syrian air force commit the atrocities that paved the way for radicalisation and the appearance of terrorist groups in the country, prompting a new international intervention in order to fight them, and sending the following message: despite the fact that Assad has killed a large number of Syrian citizens, many of which were civilians, and has destroyed most of the country's infrastructures, he is not a problem.

This is the context that explains the massive transit of refugees within and outside Syria. Those who left before Daesh' appearance simply needed to find new alternatives; those who are leaving now do not necessarily come from areas dominated by Daesh, but can graphically describe how their houses were destroyed, either because they lived in the "wrong areas" or because they had clearly showed their despise for Bashar al-Asad and his regime, who is responsible for the vast majority of deaths in the country and, as we have seen, has worked towards the radicalisation of the opposition. To this aim, he has had the support not only of its allies, but also of its alleged international detractors, who, from the beginning saw him as the only alternative to himself.

As activist Razan Ghazzawi brilliantly stated: "The term 'permanent address' should cease to exist in applications. Refugees don't have 'permanent' but 'temporary' addresses and spaces. I shouldn't want to struggle emotionally and mentally every time I want to fill in an application. 'Permanent address' is gone forever until Assad gets the hell out" (March 7, 2017).

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