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Analysys

March 2019

UNHCR's dangerous mirage of safe return to Syria: Debunking a false narrative and irrelevant numbers

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The UNHCR has claimed that at least 1.4M of displaced Syrians have returned last year, using it to push forward the narrative that Syria is safe, and that the conditions inside the country are now fit for the voluntary return of refugees and IDPs to their areas of origin. It is not clear what the UNHCR's motive for promoting this narrative, best debunked by the [refusal of people](#) displaced in Rukban camp to return to Assad-held areas despite the terrible conditions. The recent social media posts showing senior UNHCR officials [walking through the rubble of Homs](#) and other Syrian cities, supposedly to illustrate how conditions are harsh but improving, are deeply misleading and dangerous for the Syrian displaced who are likely to face forcible recruitment into Assad's army, detention, and in some cases enforced disappearance if they try to return home. Even after the outcry of other [humanitarian groups](#) and UNHCR's head Filippo Grandi [openly admitting](#) that UNHCR has no access to all areas of the country to ensure that returnees are safe, the agency narrative has not changed.

One of the cornerstones of UNHCR's push to promote return to Syria as safe is their figure of 1.4 million people who have supposedly returned home within the country in 2018. However, this number does not provide a clear picture of the actual situation, which is much more complex than this figure suggests. UNHCR's number fails to take into consideration the ongoing levels of displacement in Syria, issues arising from the regime's continuing campaign of targeting of Syria's civilian population, and the troubling security conditions inside the country.

During 2018—the same period during which the UNHCR claims at least 1.4 million people have returned—new, or secondary, displacement inside the country remained constant. People across the country are still forced to leave their homes because of lack of safety, ongoing persecution by the Assad's regime, as well as the collapse of economy and the resulting lack of employment. As of August 2018, there were still 6.1M IDPs in Syria with an average of 6,550 people being [displaced every day](#). For example, while 119,698 IDPs returned to their areas of origin in December 2018, there were also 58,549 new [IDP displacements](#) during that same month. It seems that UNHCR is ignoring the data of its sister UN agency UN OCHA.

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Displacement inside Syria in 2018 has remained constant throughout the year but, additionally, for the majority of areas, it has not been reversed. For example, between April and June 2018, at least 61,800 people left rural Damascus and moved to Hama, Idlib and Aleppo governorates. According to UNOCHA data, this only 6,700K came back to their areas of origin in the areas that drove this displacement during the same period.¹ This suggests that conditions in rural Damascus, despite the end of military operations, are not safe enough for Syrian to return to. Numerous reports of arrests and detentions against those that have spontaneously returned to rural Damascus after the evacuation and "reconciliation" deals under Russian "guarantees" have been [reported](#).

While UNHCR can track the number of people returning to the country, it cannot monitor what happens to them once they arrive. Numerous reports have been published about the arrests, detention, torture and, in some case, death of people returning to Syria.² While UNHCR can report on numbers of people returning, it cannot confirm their safety, nor the safety of people who remained in their homes under so-called "reconciliation" agreements. This raises a question of what these "returns" numbers are actually telling us. If the number of 1.4 million is waved around, shouldn't know how many of them were forcibly recruited and sent to the frontline, how many were detained and tortured, and how many were killed upon returning?

Finally, it is important to note that, while it is easy to get data about the people returning to the country, it is near impossible to track the number of people still being smuggled out of the country across Lebanese and Turkish borders, since borders are officially closed and no information can be tracked about movement of people across them. If Syrian social media which focuses on migration is take as illustrative, the vast majority of reports are still focusing on information regarding how to get out of the country rather than on how to get back in, confirming that, for the majority of Syrians, Syria is not yet a place in which they can safely live but are searching for ways to escape it.

¹ UN OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements June 2018', available online at: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/idpmovements_201806_jun_final_en.pdf ; UN OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements May 2018', available online: https://www.humanitarianresponse.info/sites/www.humanitarianresponse.info/files/documents/files/idpmovements_201805_may_final.pdf ; UN OCHA, 'Syrian Arab Republic: IDP Movements April 2018', available online at: https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/idpmovements_201804_apr_final.pdf

² "Arrest and Torture of Syrian Refugees Returning Home Reported", The Irish Times, (17 May 2018) available online: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/middle-east/arrests-and-torture-of-syrian-refugees-returning-home-reported-1.3429762> ; "We Can't Go Back: Syria's Refugees Fear for Their Future After War", The Guardian (30 August 2018), available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/aug/30/we-cant-go-back-syrias-refugees-fear-for-their-future-after-war> ; "Some Syrians Are Returning Home Arrest As Others Brave the Sea", The National (26 September 2018), available online: <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/some-syrians-are-returning-home-to-arrests-as-others-brave-the-sea-1.774385> ; "A Deadly Welcome Awaits Syria's Returning Refugees", Foreign Policy, (6 February 2019), available online: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/06/a-deadly-welcome-awaits-syrias-returning-refugees/>