

POSITION PAPER ON RUSSIA'S INITIATIVE FOR THE RETURN OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEES TO THEIR COUNTRY

Introduction

This position paper was prepared based on a closed discussion session organized by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut on Tuesday July 31st 2018. The closed meeting gathered a number of academics, researchers, and journalists as well as government advisors, and experts to discuss the return of the Syrian refugees, in light of the latest proposition made by Russia.

MAIN DISCUSSIONS

- ▶ Although debating the voluntary, safe and imminent return of Syrian refugees to their country seems unrealistic before reaching a comprehensive political settlement in Syria, the Russian proposition is the first initiative issued by an international power aiming at reaching a comprehensive solution for the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Europe and paving the way for their return to their hometowns.
- ▶ Till present, Moscow did not get the expected endorsement by the European countries or the United States for this initiative. In fact, the international parties require the supervision of the United Nations (UN) represented by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the return process, and guarantee that international standards are respected.
- ▶ Implementing the Russian initiative seems to rely on obtaining international support. Therefore, Lebanese diplomacy should play an active role while engaging with it, and raise this issue in the UN Security Council.
- ▶ The initiative is an opportunity for the Lebanese state to give the issue of return the importance it deserves through defining a clear national policy based on International Humanitarian Law standards, as well as human rights, Lebanon's international obligations and safeguarding its sovereignty. In this regard a quick action from the Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, immediately after the formation of the new government, is required to reshuffle the ministerial committee tasked with handling the displaced Syrians in Lebanon issues and include experts in the field, which will enable this committee to achieve its objectives. In addition it is also important to bolster the Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs role and prerogatives, in order to thwart the interference of different actors in the Lebanese political scene in this process.

About the Initiative

Russia launched an initiative for the return of Syrian Refugees to their country few days after the summit meeting between the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the American President Donald Trump in the Finnish capital Helsinki on July 16th, 2018. Although the meeting focused on the security of Northern Israel, it gave a momentum to launch a diplomatic movement on the international level about the return of Syrian refugees to their country.

The Russian initiative, which was not totally disclosed, is the first initiative issued by an international power that aims to reach a comprehensive solution for the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Europe and would thereby pave the way for their return to their hometowns. In fact, this proposition is extremely important in light of the ongoing demographic change happening inside Syria.

The Russian proposition raises multiple uncertainties, such as the potentiality of its implementation, receiving the needed international support, and securing the approval of Russia's allies inside Syria – the Syrian regime and Iran - who's interim and long term objectives are different and overlapped. The initiative remains unclear, as it does not specify the extent of the return process, the repatriates' safety and security guarantees provided by Russia, in addition to the coordination with the United Nations. Some sources described the initiative as "very ambitious" in terms of the proposed time frame. Others see that the suggested numbers of refugees who are intended to return may give the impression that this return is not inclusive but selective and targeting only a part of refugees selected by the regime in Damascus.

The initiative may be part of Russia's effort to rehabilitate the Syrian Regime on the international level, and pushing the European, American, and regional parties towards normalizing relations with the Syrian regime in return of solving the refugees issue, which is pressuring host communities on many levels. In addition, Russia is seeking to secure the necessary funding for reconstructing afflicted areas in Syria which will be initially receiving refugees.

This initiative was launched days after the Syrian government handed lists of detainees' names to the civil status departments in several regions of Rif Dimashq and Rif Hama claiming they died in prison. And following the death of more than 200 persons mostly civilians in an attack by the "Islamic State" organization on areas in As-Suwayda Governorate and some villages mostly controlled by the Syrian government since 2011. The initiative also comes in the context of a potential battle in Idlib and demographic changes similar to Kefraya and AlFu'ah.

The Russian initiative, which did not give a solution to the issue of the compulsory Syrian military service, should not be isolated from the Syrian objective of rebuilding the Syrian army that was deteriorated during the past eight years of the crisis.

In Lebanon, the initiative comes at a time where politicians are struggling to form a new government, and while unofficial initiatives are rising willing to repatriate Syrian refugees in small groups checked and approved by Damascus and by political parties' offices on Lebanese territory.

Russian officials identified 76 areas inside Syria that can receive refugees, along with a listing of various requirements prior to return including transportation and rebuilding of destroyed areas. These suggestions were discussed with by a large Russian delegation presided by Russian President Vladimir Putin's Special Envoy to Syria Alexander Lavrentiev with several officials of different countries among them the Prime Minister and senior officials in Lebanon.

The Initiative from an International Perspective

It seems that Russian initiative implementation is conditioned by getting the endorsement of the UN Security council, but the initiative did not get till date the support Moscow has expected from the European countries, as well as from the United States This lack of international endorsement reinforces the belief that the parties involved in the Syrian conflict do not see any opportunity to resolve this issue and overcome the political and military obstacles delaying the return.

This western hesitance shows that these states, or most of them, are cautious about normalizing relations with the Syrian regime and are still insisting on knowing the fate of the Syrian President Bashar al Assad and the nature of the political path to resolve the crisis in Syria.

This also indicates that these states are unwilling to bargain on a partial or symbolic repatriation in exchange of kicking off reconstruction.

The security guarantees that Russia may provide for the return of refugees represent another challenge. Most of the involved states require the supervision of the United Nations represented by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the process and abiding by international standards for a safe and voluntary return. In fact these requirements do not seem guaranteed since the safe arrangements proposed by the Russians are similar to the measures that were implemented in local reconciliations in Syria and during controlling the situation in de-escalation zones.

This initiative raises further questions about the existence of a vision and a compatible plan to provide the necessary infrastructure for the returning refugees and ways to reintegrate them into the Syrian society.

The Initiative from a Syrian Perspective

The Russian initiative for returning refugees to their "place of origin" can only be achieved on a very small scale for many reasons mentioned above. In addition, this initiative contradicts the demographic change policy pursued by the Syrian regime.

The Syrian regime, supported by Russia, may be ready to negotiate the return of a small group of refugees in exchange of information on the families of the "Islamic State" fighters, and other additional gains.

Accordingly, the talk about the voluntary, safe and imminent return seems unrealistic before reaching a comprehensive political settlement in Syria.

Lebanon's Position vis-à-vis the Initiative

Prime Minister – designate Saad Hariri welcomed the Russian initiative few days after it was announced. In a statement on July 21st, 2018 he announced that he asked his team to contact the Russian officials and get more details regarding Moscow's proposition for the return of Syrian refugees from Lebanon and Jordan. Afterwards, Russia's Chargé d'Affaires in Beirut visited Prime Minister Hariri to discuss the Russian initiative. This meeting was followed by an official visit of the Russian President Vladimir Putin's Special Envoy Alexander Laverntiev, to Syria and the Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin to Lebanon on July 26th where he met with Lebanese President, the Speaker of Parliament, and the Prime Minister who held a long meeting with the delegation.

Although the Russian initiative remains ambiguous, it still presents an opportunity for the Lebanese state to deal with the issue of return by setting up a comprehensive national policy instead of factional initiatives. This initiative shall enhance decision-making on the national level.

The fact that Prime Minister Hariri embraced the initiative helped relieve the internal debate between Lebanese political parties about the return of refugees to their country. However, this didn't impact the internal conflict/division regarding the official Lebanese stand of the Syrian regime.

For many, it seems that adopting a wait-and-see approach is justified until the real intentions of the Syrian regime and its policies regarding the issue are well known; in addition to ensuring the seriousness of the guarantees provided by the Russian security and obtaining the approval of Western countries.

The Lebanese Prime Minister asked Russia to provide three conditions:

1. To refrain from seizing refugees' properties (which was legalized by the recent law no. 10) and exempt them from military service as well as issuing a general amnesty.
2. To ensure that all return processes are coordinated and supervised by UNHCR.
3. To provide a clear distinction between the Russian security guarantees and the call for political normalization with the Syrian regime.

These conditions are crucial, especially regarding the security measures to guarantee the safety of the returnees: Russia considers that the Syrian regime control over the territories is the guarantee for a safe return, ignoring security agencies offensive behavior in the reconciliation areas, while the UNHCR insists on respecting refugees protection protocol according to international standards, and this is what the Russian initiative must abide by.

While dealing with the Russian initiative the Lebanese diplomacy should play an active role and raise the issue in the UN Security Council.

Additionally, once the new government is formed, the Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri is required to reconstitute the ministerial committee tasked with handling the issues of displaced Syrians in Lebanon and make sure to include policy experts which will enable this committee to play its role fully. In addition it is also important to bolster the Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs role and prerogatives, in order to thwart the interference of different actors in the Lebanese political scene in this process.

In this context, it is essential to form a new Lebanese government that is capable of defining a clear national policy that complies with the International Humanitarian Law standards, as well as Human Rights Law, and Lebanon's international obligations, while insuring the protection of the Lebanese state's sovereignty. It is also necessary to identify rationalized ways to manage the Syrian refugees' return issue.

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The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut

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