reports are from IDP camps, but with the bulk of the IDP population not residing in camps, there is good reason to assume that the heavily politicized schooling system caters also to the displaced. IS, propagating a radical world view, has often made their first inroads into new areas through religious emissaries, setting up small Da’wa centers which convene meetings and Sharia courses. Inconspicuous in earlier phases of the conflict, such centers—which carry mainly to men willing to support the cause—are now widely seen as a sign that the IS has a particular area in sight. The missionary centers are often followed by recruitment offices, from where those enrolled are moving on to training courses that combine Islamic and military skills training. The IS evidently has a focus on controlling the educational system, and in areas where they have gained control, schools have been temporarily closed as the organization gets a new curricula in place and has the teachers undergo religious-ideological training. Teachers in general face a choice of place and have the teachers undergo religious-ideological training. Teachers in general face a choice between compliance and displacement. Those already displaced to areas under IS control have no alternative to the ideological schooling, and indications are that opting out is often impossible.

Yet, the paucity of knowledge in itself calls for not only more attention, but for concerted work on documenting the scope and the various mechanisms at play for IDP mobilization in the Syrian conflict. Any attempt to address the problem must start from analysis. We recognize the significant methodological problems that stem from access, yet think much can be gained from the combination of interviewing people who have fled, tapping into the tacit knowledge of observers on the ground, and a more fine-grained analysis of existing statistical data.

The lack of attention to potential for IDP mobilization is in itself conspicuous, and calls for a thorough rethink of how the global humanitarian community (widely defined) is able to fulfil a mandate of protecting the most vulnerable in a situation where most actors pay no respect for basic humanitarian principles. One reason the issue receives so little attention is a concern that talking about a possible connection between displacement and militant mobilization may undermine existent norms and commitments. Yet, the challenge at hand is real, even though it is in itself readily addressed by existent codifications, such as the 1998 UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement. Given the importance of the IDP mobilization to the success of armed actors (both state and non-state), and its evident impact on the protractedness of conflicts in the scope and the various mechanisms at play for IDP mobilization in the Syrian conflict. Any attempt to address the problem must start from analysis. We recognize the significant methodological problems that stem from access, yet think much can be gained from the combination of interviewing people who have fled, tapping into the tacit knowledge of observers on the ground, and a more fine-grained analysis of existing statistical data.

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Notes


The policy brief stems from the project ‘Establishing the Peace’, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is rooted in findings from the project ‘Going Home to Fight? Explaining Refugees, Return and Violence’, funded by the Research Council of Norway.

The Project

The Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) is a non-profit peace research institute established in 1959 whose overarching purpose is to conduct research on the conditions for peaceful relations between states, groups and people. The institute is independent, international and interdisciplinary, and explores issues related to all facets of peace and conflict.

PRIO

www.prio.org
Four main factors: Recruitment (as a critical aspect of work on refugee mobilization). We will focus on one.

If there is one thing that has been brought to light during the past two years of Syria’s war, it is how the conflict has fundamentally altered the landscape of recruitment to armed groups. This transformation has been so profound that it is difficult to imagine it going back to the way it was before. The nature of recruitment has changed, and so have the motivations behind it.

Definition: “persons or groups of persons […] who are subject to threats of violence, or whose lives or personal safety are at risk, either for the sole reason that they are members of particular groups, have committed, or are perceived to have committed, acts of violence, or have otherwise been involved in armed fighting, or have taken an active part in hostilities, even if an internationally recognized state border.”

Protection: “Threats and incitement to commit acts of violence against, in particular, displaced persons are prohibited.”

Humanitarian resources are seen as a means by which the international community can provide assistance to those in need. However, many of those who are displaced have found that the risks of being someone unknown or hidden in the battle is too high.

Unlike refugee mobilization, which has been seen as a serious concern since the late 1980s, a similar risk for internally displaced People (IDPs) is rarely openly discussed, even though it is well known by practitioners. IDPs differ from refugees in that they have not crossed an international border but remain within the state whose territory they are contesting. Yet, in many domestic conflicts, the armed combatants end up with sustained control over distinct areas, effectively creating new border lines, and the displaced will be fully aware of both what they are fleeing from and fleeing to. By implication, the armed actors in control of a particular area may end up with both responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, and the authority to demand their contributions to the larger whole.

Exactly because of the encompassing war, which has left the media sector, as well as to journalists or humanitarian workers – so difficult, it is impossible to obtain precise data on the nature of, as well as the number of, IDPs. It is clear that these difficulties are not only the result of the weakness of data, we want to explore the issue on the basis of what is known from news sources and various reports, and thereby not only highlight the issue, but also build a foundation for more solid empirical inquiries.

In framing our inquiry, we have taken a lead from work on refugee mobilization.1 We will focus on four main factors: Recruitment (as a critical aspect of work on refugee mobilization), Humanitarian resources, Justice and Socialization (as protection) and, finally, Socialization (incl. education). We will get to each of these in turn, but will first provide a brief background on internal displacement in the course of Syria’s civil war. At the end, we will also be offering some overarching and – hopefully – tentative conclusions, including recommendations for work to follow up.

Internal Displacement and the Conflict Syria

By beginning of 2016, the best available estimate for the amount of people who are internally displaced in Syria stands at an astounding 6.6 million.2 This corresponds to 40% of the entire population still within the country. Another 3.9 million are registered as refugees in the wider region (most importantly in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey). Altogether, about half of the pre-war population is displaced.

While potential militancy among the Syrian refugee populations in itself is deserving of analysis, we will here focus on the internally displaced.

It was the regime clampdown on peaceful protestors in Dara’a in March 2011 that ignited Syria’s violent conflict, soon followed by mass defection on the conflict. Are those displaced within Syria’s borders at an astounding 6.6 million. This corresponds to 40% of the entire population still within the country. Another 3.9 million are registered as refugees in the wider region (most importantly in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey). Altogether, about half of the pre-war population is displaced.

Recruitment

Data on recruitment to Syria’s government forces, as well as its armed opposition groups, are virtually non-existent. Pinpointing whether – or to what extent – there is recruitment amongst the displaced is therefore impossible. Yet, some anecdotal evidence exists, and one can draw some inferences from the way in which the conflict has evolved and displacement patterns have shifted as a result. While highly uncertain, what is known gives reason for concern.

The government has a working conception system in all areas under its control, and, depending on the area and the source for concern.

The conflict has taken on more of a sectarian (Shia-Sun- ni) character in the spring of 2013, as the government, with support from Iran, Russia and Lebanon, engaged control over most areas bordering on Lebanon. The war has a clear multi-front character, where shifting tactical alliances and massive violence leads to rapid changes in who controls what, generating new displacement, often across longer distances, creating massive security challenges for those who have already moved.

By early 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) had become a major off-shoot, first in Iraq, then increasingly also in Syria. By late June, the group declared itself the Islamic State (IS), denouncing the Iraqi-Syrian border. The group’s brutal violence – including executions explicitly on sectarian grounds – was extensively publicized, and deepened the sense of an existential conflict. By September 2014, an international bombing campaign, targeting IS positions, was initiated by the United States. A year later, Russia entered in aerial bomb- bardment on the side of the Assad government. As devastating powers and regional actors engage in the conflict, either supporting or directly working with the group’s insignia, has been an increasingly marginalized state border.

Protection: “All internally displaced persons shall be protected against discriminatory practices in recruitment into armed forces or groups in all areas of their displacement.”

Assistance: “All internally displaced persons have the right to an adequate standard of living.”

Reception: “Internally displaced persons should respect their cultural identity, language and religion.”

Excerpts from the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (authors’ additions), pending

Among the islands, most is known about the IS’s recruitment, which in the early phase was clearly characterized by forcing boys from those neighboring Iraq, bolstered through large-scale transnational recruitment. However, by early 2014, many displaced from Aleppo and elsewhere reportedly joined its ranks, more or less voluntarily. By early 2015, international actors have become increasingly concerned about IS recruitment amongst the displaced, both within Syria and in the region. “You can imagine some of the living conditions, which create the environment for recruiting. That’s a great concern,” stated James Clapper, director of US national intelligence, in March 2015. Interestingly, while most observers see the vulnerabilities of the displaced as a wary, few would compare that to the state-like organizational control that armed groups have in many areas.

Humanitarian resources

Humanitarian aid has been highly politicized during the Syrian conflict. The paucity of reliable information, even on basic humanitarian needs, is an easy avenue for accessing and funneling humanitarian assistance to groups that are of interest to those who wish to shift to a territory controlled by a group they believe to have one, has gone on to lengthen the access of international humanitarian actors, distributed aid through its channels, and systematically prevented aid from reaching areas controlled by the opposition. Humanitarian aid, states the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, “has been instrumentalised for military gain.”

IS is no less aware of the utility of controlling humanitar- ian resources. There are indications that the organization has distributed humanitarian aid that it has captured, after reballing the packages with the group’s insignia. Claiming transport fees from humanitarian actors is one source of income, but its impact of recruiting amongst the displaced is indirect at best. More important is its tactic for building local support in areas in which it pursues control by securing people access to various necessities, coining it as “zakat” (Islamic alms). The more moderate groups – often referred to as FSA – would have access to international humanitarian aid, not the least from the US. Both the groups and their suppliers of humanitarian goods are clearly cognizant of its military significance. Yet, although FSA groups have frequently been accused of mismanaging aid, little is known about how it is distributed.

Undoubtedly, all actors see humanitarian assis- tance as important – to maintain that it is necessary to be part of the armed opposition. As the dividing lines have become more clearly identity based, many displaced single out where to go. With no third source of security. Also, within this, various groups within the more moderate parts of the opposition have become more clearly identified with one specific source of security. And, by implication, their credibility as a possible source of security for others diminishes.

We know from other instances that when individu- als – not the least displaced people – rely exclusively on one major source of support, they become vulnerable to pressure for actively engaging with the group. The situation for internally displaced, who belong to the independent third party to stand up for them – certainly not in Syria – is particularly grave. Again, our data on how Syria’s political uncertainty and its use of protection to insist on engaging amongst the displaced are limited, but from what we know about the modus operandi of the various actors, it may be that the victims of the war may be a true disaster for humans.

Socialization

The politicization of education in Syria is nothing new, but it has taken on a new character in the course of the war, with the active involvement of educational institutions by armed opposition groups in general, and ISIL in particular. Some of the
The potential for militarization of internally displaced persons within Syria is a serious concern, yet one that is largely left untouched in the debate on the conflict. Are those displaced within Syria facing risks of militarization that are different from those facing the displaced who have not moved? There is good reason to assume that for many of those who are displaced, the wish to get away from an armed actor (whether government or non-state) that is prone to recruit them may have been clear. The wish to settle in a territory controlled by a group they subsequently identify with, and engage militarily with, it may have been a reason to move. Those displaced within Syria, where the government and multiple armed groups are engaged in an existential fight, are therefore extremely vulnerable to the risk of them being somehow engaged in the battle is therefore high.

Unlike refugee militarization, which has been seen as a serious concern since the late 1980s, a similar risk for internally Displaced People (IDPs) is rarely openly discussed, even though it is well known by experienced practitioners. IDPs differ from refugees in that they have not crossed an international border and remain within the state whose territory is contested. Yet, in many domestic conflicts, the armed contenders end up with sustained control over distinct areas, effectively creating new boundaries, and the displaced will be fully aware of both what they are fleeing from and fleeing to. By implication, the armed actors in control of a particular area may end up with both a responsibility for the welfare of its citizens, and the authority to demand their contributions to the larger whole.

The conflict took on more of a sectarian (Shia-Sunni) character in the spring of 2013, when the government, with support from its main ally Iran, began to step up its assault on rebel-held districts in parts of Syria. The war has a clear multi-front character, with shifting tactical alliances and massive violence that leads to rapid changes in who controls what, generating new displacement, often across longer distances, creating massive security challenges for those who have already moved.

By early 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) had become a major offshoot, first in Iraq, then increasingly also in Syria. By late June, the group declared itself the Islamic State (IS), denouncing the Iraqi-Syrian border. The IS group’s brutal violence – including executions explicitly on sectarian grounds – was extensively publicized, and deeply en- demized of an existential conflict. By September 2014, an international bombing campaign, targeting IS groups, was initiated by the United States. A year later, Russia engaged in a significant way in the conflict, either supporting or directly working with the government’s partisans in certain areas, while the conflict has become a truly internationalized civil war. As many as 1.3 million may have been displaced in 2015 alone, most of whom had already undergone one or several rounds of displacement. The gravity of the threat to the displaced is mounting, and it seems likely that many of the displaced respond by moving on. By early March 2016, a cessation of hostilities is implemented, but fighting and bombing continues in many areas, and it is by no means clear that a political settlement is within sight.

The potential for militarization of internally displaced persons in the course of Syria’s civil war. At the end, we will also be offering some overarching and highly tentative – conclusions, including recommendations for work to follow-up.

By the end of 2016, the best available estimate for the number of displaced persons internally displaced in Syria stands at an astounding 6.6 million. This corresponds to 40% of the entire population still within the country. Another 3.5 million are registered as refugees in the wider region (most importantly in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey). Altogether, about half of the pre-war population is displaced. While potential military anxiety of the Syrian refugee populations in itself is deserving of analysis, we will here focus on the internally displaced.

It was the regime clampdown on peaceful protest- ers in Daraa in March 2011 that ignited Syria’s violent conflict, soon followed by mass defection from the army, with officers forming the Free Syrian Army (FSA), an umbrella for a variety of groups, hampered by internal power struggles. The People’s Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian-Kurdish group, soon also engaged in the fighting.

By mid-2012, the armed opposition had gained control over large areas around Aleppo and Idlib in the northwest. Deraa and in the east, and Daraa’s in the south, as violence also spread to Damascus. Fighting between Islamist groups and more moderate groups escalated. Displacement was at first largely temporary and short-distance within cit- ies or to adjacent rural areas, but gradually took on a more permanent character. By mid-summer 2012, the estimated number of IDPs exceeded 1.5 million.

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Recruitment

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The government has a working conception system in all areas under its control, and, depend- ing on the circumstances, in search for filling the hole it is taking new numbers of measures to identify those that see as eviders? Displaced people are no exception. In the early period of the war, the regime would even pursue enrolment in areas with strong opposition presence. In areas under its control, the regime’s recruitment campaigns do not aim at physically obtaining residence, or the military’s needs, but gain a foothold in the area. In areas under the control of the regime, the regime’s armed groups, is indirect at best. More important is its tactic for building local support in areas where it pursues control by securing people access to necessary services, coining as it za’lat (Islamic alms). The more moderate groups – often referred to as FSA – would have access to international humani- tarian aid, not the least from the US. Both the groups and their suppliers of humanitarian goods are clearly cognizant of their military significance. Yet, although FSA groups have frequently been accused of mismanaging aid, little is known about how it is distributed.

Undoubtedly, all actors see humanitarian assis- tance as important to maintain – or build political support among the population. The displaced, of course, are more dependent on humanitarian aid than anybody, and clearly, receiving aid is aligned in part to support the cause. The pattern is where one is the area controlled by one or another group are also the areas where humanitarian aid is available, often the same areas where population data are – and are logically also the areas that most IDPs move to.

Protection (i.e. Security)

In the early period of the war, when temporary short-distance displacement was the dominant mode, the question was one of getting away from situations of acute insecurity, but not necessarily many killed exclusively on the basis of their sectar- ian identity, and, by implication, their credibility as a source of security. Also, within this, various groups within the more moderate parts of the opposition become more clearly identified with one specific IDP category, and, by implication, their credibility as a possible source of security for others diminishes.

We know from other instances that when individu- als – not the least displaced people – rely exclusively on one group for protection, they become vulnerable to pressure for actively engaging with the group. The situation for internally displaced, who belong to the independent third party that stand up for them – certainly not in Syria – is particularly grave. Again, our data on how Syria’s other actors use protection to insist on engaging amongst the displaced are limited, but from what we know about the modus operandi of the various actors, it would be counterintuitive not to happen.

Socialization

The politicization of education in Syria is nothing new, but it has taken on a new character in the course of the war, with the active influence of education- al institutions by armed opposition groups in general, and by IS in particular. Some of the
While we know far too little about the scope of the tapping into the IDPs in order to build a sup-
portable – are now widely seen as a sign that the IS has a particular area in sight. The mis-
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The IS evidently has a focus on controlling the educational system, and in areas where they have gained control, schools have been temporarily closed as the organization gets a new curricula in place and has the teachers undergo religious-ideo-
logical training. Teachers in general face a choice between compliance and displacement. Those already displaced to areas under IS control have no alternative to the ideological schooling, and indica-
tions are that opting out is often impossible.
But the IS is not alone in using the education system for their cause, although – in large part because they market it so extensively themselves, seeing it as a carrier of their claim to be a state – it is the best known. Groups associated with the FSA are also known to have imposed their own cur-
ricula in areas under their control, and to provide military training to school pupils.

What Next?
The belligerents in the Syrian conflict are actively tapping into the IDPs in order to build a sup-
portable as well as swell their ranks for fighters. While we know far too little about the scope of the problem, its exact manifestations, and variation between various actors, we certainly know enough to say that this is a serious concern, and that it men-
ts much more international attention. Given the limits on our knowledge of the problem, we stand back from formulating specific implications for policy and practice, at current, that simply seems premature.
Yet, the paucity of knowledge in itself calls for not only more attention, but for concerted work on doc-
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Notes
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