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Why are Syria's refugees going through hell?

Leila Al Shami

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Violence and repression in Syria have caused half the country's population—some 11 million people—to flee their homes. And now the desperate exodus will grow worse following a scorched-earth assault on Aleppo by the Syrian regime, backed by Russian warplanes and other allied forces.

The root cause of the dire conditions facing the refugees—whether they remain within Syria or have crossed the border to nearby countries or journeyed over the Mediterranean to Europe—is the war by the government of dictator Bashar al-Assad against the pro-democracy uprising that began during the Arab Spring in 2011. Backed by its allies Russia, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, Assad has tried to bomb the Syrian revolution into submission. Meanwhile, the U.S. government has its own plans for Syria, but it is intent on carrying out its war on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), even if that means cooperating with Assad. Meanwhile, the people of Syria are enduring increasingly desperate conditions.

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OVER THE last few weeks, the Syrian regime has carried out a savage siege and bombardment of Aleppo. Why is Assad's regime so intent on crushing Aleppo and its people?

ALEPPO IS strategically and symbolically important for the regime and its allies, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah.

First of all, Aleppo was the primary commercial center in Syria and a center of trade with Turkey. So it's economically very important for the whole country. After the start of the revolution, it also became a key supply line of weapons passing through Turkey to Syrian revolutionaries. It's therefore of great political significance as well.

The city has been at the heart of the revolution from the beginning. Its eastern part, which is the working class district, has been liberated since the summer of 2012. Revolutionaries have held it since then, fending off not only the regime, but also other forms of authoritarianism, including reactionary fundamentalism. For example, the rebels pushed ISIS out of Aleppo in January 2014.

The regime has made Aleppo pay a heavy price for its liberation. It has targeted the liberated area with air strikes. So have the Russian forces.

Aleppo is also important for its symbolic value. It provides a vision of what a liberated Syria could look like. It's now a city that is completely self-organized through its democratically elected local councils, which are responsible for providing services to the civil-

ian population. It also has the highest concentration of civil society groups anywhere in the country.

All of this is new. Such organizations did not exist prior to the revolution. They've set up things like the civil defense force that is rescuing civilians caught in the rubble following air strikes. They've also set up independent trade unions in Aleppo. You have the nurses and paramedics union, and the teachers' union, which has 5,000 members and is run by a woman.

So this is a living breathing and diverse city, and its people are practicing new ways of organizing as a counterpoint to Assad's authoritarianism. He is intent on crushing the city's resistance as well as this model for a new Syria. That's why the regime and Russia have been attacking this revolutionary stronghold.

They justified their assault by claiming they're attacking ISIS. But that's a lie. ISIS doesn't have a presence in the city of Aleppo. In reality, most of the Russian bombs have targeted revolutionary militias and these self-organized democratic communities. So the regime and Russia's combined blitzkrieg and siege is an attempt to crush the revolution.

THE REPORTS describe a horrific situation. What's the likely outcome?

HONESTLY, IT'S a dire situation. Some 300,000 people are trapped in the city in some of the worst conditions you can imagine. We've already seen what has happened in besieged communities in other places in Syria. In Madaya, the regime has been starving people to death. It has done the same thing in Daraya.

In reaction to the humanitarian disaster caused by the regime, the international community promised to deliver aid. But the first delivery it scheduled wasn't food, which is what people needed, but medicine. The people responded with a protest led by a banner saying "Sorry, but I can't take medication on an empty stomach because it's not good for my health."

The regime blocked even the delivery of that medical shipment. On top of that, the regime bombed the civilians that were waiting to receive the aid. So the situation in besieged communities and especially Aleppo is very desperate.

ASSAD'S RULE-or-ruin counterrevolution has caused an enormous displacement of people inside Syria and a big flight of refugees out of the country. What is the scale and nature of this crisis?

THE REGIME'S relentless bombing of liberated areas has driven over half of the prewar population of 22 million people from their homes. This is an astonishing 11 million people. The vast majority of these people can't afford to leave the country, so they're stuck trying to survive in very desperate conditions.

You have people who are in makeshift refugee camps with minimal services inside Syria, such as the Samada camp in Idlib. The regime and Russia recently bombed that camp, killing 28 civilians. Many people are thus scared to enter the camps. So they're just living under bushes or in caves.

That's what its like for the displaced people inside the country. Over 5 million people have fled Syria. The vast majority of those are living in host countries in the region—in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. Look at Lebanon, for example. One in every five people in Lebanon right now is a Syrian refugee.

The flood of refugees has put an enormous strain on the host countries to provide resources and services. So the refugees in general are in a really bad situation. And it is going to get worse. Now the governments in the region have closed down all their borders with Syria and are only accepting people in exceptional circumstances.

So refugees, who in many cases don't possess valid legal documents, are very frightened to move around in the countries they live in. They're afraid they might hit checkpoints, where they might be detained and deported. And this is a real fear since scores of refugees have been deported back to Syria.

will continue to struggle for the values that they've been fighting for over the past five years. It is hard to squelch the newfound spirit of revolt in the region.

Transcription by Andrea Hektor

So they live in very precarious situations. They often can't work legally, so they're taking informal employment, which is very exploitative. I spoke to a lot of refugees that had been working for local employers and they weren't paid at all at the end of the month, and because they're working illegally they have no recourse to complain.

A lot of these refugees are living in impoverished communities. So they're competing with poor locals for jobs, and this competition is one of the key reasons causing tensions in host countries between the local communities and the refugee populations. So that's something obviously which is worrying for the future of the region.

The conditions for women, girls and all children are especially bad. Because of their poverty, refugee families now are getting their children into early marriages, because they can't afford to keep girls at home. You also have women who are engaging in sex work because they have no other opportunities to feed themselves or their children, and many children aren't able to attend school.

Many of the refugees have really lost hope. They don't feel that they have a future in the region. So if they can't work, secure a living and educate their children, they have no other choice but to leave. That's what's driving people to take what they know is a really risky journey to go to Europe—because they want to build a future for themselves.

WHAT HAS been their experience in Europe?

I HAVEN'T worked with refugees in Europe, but I have heard many stories from family and friends who have made that journey. It's incredibly risky, and at every step of the way, people are spending huge amounts of money to pay smugglers to take them across. They've walked across land in the winter months. They risked their lives on boats in the Mediterranean. Untold numbers of people have drowned.

Those who do make it to Europe have found very few services to meet their needs. And now they are the objects of scapegoating in

an increasing climate of xenophobia and hostility towards refugees. So the situation has been very difficult for people.

I think most people would prefer to stay in the region if they felt that they could do so, because the culture is more familiar to them, the language is the same, and they feel more comfortable there. Many have relatives in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey, so it would be easier for them in the region, if there were opportunities available to them. But there aren't. So they find themselves compelled out of desperation to risk everything in the hope that things might be better for them and their children in Europe.

HAS THE Obama administration done anything to address the refugee crisis?

THE U.S. government has let very few people in. Of course, the U.S. is much farther away from the Middle East, and you would need a lot of money to be able to get to the U.S. So few people have tried. On top of that, Obama has only agreed to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees over the next couple of years. This is a pittance, really.

But even in that situation, the right wing seems to have made this paltry number of refugees a big election issue in the U.S. Ben Carson called Syrian refugees "rabid dogs." And Donald Trump has equated all refugees with terrorists and even promised to ban all Muslims from entering the U.S. This is pure bigotry and callous indifference to human suffering.

The U.S. has been involved in the region in a negative way for a long time and has a duty to help people who are fleeing conflict in Syria as well as other countries that the U.S. has had a direct hand in destabilizing with its wars and occupations. There are many refugees fleeing Iraq and Afghanistan for example. The U.S. should open its doors to those people.

ANOTHER IMMEDIATE issue is the closing of the refugees' passage to Europe through Greece with the European Union's deal with the Turkish government, under which refugees who reach Greek camps would be returned to Turkey, in return for aid to the Turkish state. What's your assessment of this deal?

IN MANY ways, it looks like a kind of despairing moment, in which the forces of counterrevolution are so strong. Where are we at in the revolutionary process in Syria?

IT'S SUCH a difficult question to answer because so many states have intervened and distorted the revolutionary process. So a lot of what happens is now out of the hands of the Syrian people.

This makes me quite pessimistic, to be honest. I fear a deal will be forced on the Syrian people that will not be what the revolution has been fighting for over the last five years. This could possibly include an imperial carve-up of the country—a Sykes-Picot 2. It could include a deal to keep the regime in place in the interests of "stability."

At the same time, I am optimistic. I believe that something very fundamental has shifted among the masses of people not only in Syria, but also in the wider region since the Arab Spring. People have lived a revolutionary experience and have had access to new ideas and debates.

In Syria, people have lived freedom. They've lived the experience of self-organizing and self-managing their communities without the state, and there's been a massive explosion in culture and in artistic response coming out of the revolution.

We have a predominately young population, an entire generation of which has grown up in revolution. The hopes and dreams of that revolution are not just going to disappear. I don't think that the region's rulers will be able to re-impose the old security states across the Middle East. I don't think the population will accept the return of that old order.

But then we also have a generation that's grown up in war, that's grown up amid the horrors of torture, seeing their family members and loved ones killed, homes destroyed, and education being taken away. These experiences can drain people of hope.

I think, then, that the good and the bad aspects of the experience of revolution and counterrevolution will be competing against each other for a long time to come. But I do have a lot of hope that people

art groups for children to help them cope with trauma. I find these kinds of initiatives really amazing.

They have also brought a boldness usually not seen among refugees. Before, refugees used to sneak across borders at night. But now you see them marching in huge numbers across Europe, demanding their rights.

I spoke with somebody who'd been working in the refugee camp in Calais, France, known as "The Jungle." It has really disgraceful conditions for people living there. He told me that there are Syrians, Eritreans and Sudanese all trapped there.

Because of their revolutionary background, the Syrian refugees are the ones who are organizing all the others to campaign for better conditions in the camp and fight for the right to go to the country of their choice in Europe. This is testimony to the fact that the revolutionary spirit continues to live among the refugees.

WHAT ORGANIZATIONS should be supported to help with the humanitarian crisis?

THERE ARE a lot of fantastic organizations often set up by expatriate Syrians. There are also many in Syria run by Syrians themselves. These organizations are very connected to the local community. They go into Syria regularly, take humanitarian supplies in, and run schools for displaced people and refugees.

They're often much closer to the local population than the international NGOs and are run by very committed activists. Some obviously are paid because they're working on this full time. Yet if you donate to them, a much larger percentage of the money goes directly to help Syrians.

In America, there are organizations like the Karam Foundation that have been doing wonderful educational work with Syrian refugees. There's also the Syrian American Medical Society, which continues to provide health services in Aleppo. These people take enormous risks to ensure that humanitarian relief is provided to the population. And they need much more support.

THE EU has essentially turned its back on those who are fleeing conflict and trying to find safety. At the beginning, Germany and Sweden let in the most refugees, but then they started to clamp down as the numbers swelled. And then, especially after the Paris attacks, governments throughout the EU turned from sympathy to a full-scale clampdown on desperate people.

The EU inked this deal with Turkey that essentially said that if Turkey stopped the flow of immigrants, the EU would give them money and right of passage for Turkish citizens through the EU. And now the EU is beginning to repatriate many refugees who have come to its member countries back to Turkey, which has become the border guard for Fortress Europe.

Even worse, Turkey has closed its border with Syria and is rounding up and deporting refugees. There are also many reports of border guards shooting and beating Syrian refugees who are trying to enter Turkey. So refugees are trapped along the border in camps without proper access to water and sanitation.

All these states are violating international legal obligations to provide assistance to those who are fleeing conflict and persecution. Their behavior demonstrates the brutality and inhumanity of the border regime in general.

These deportations are very worrying, because sending people back to Syria could be a death sentence. These states have a duty that they must fulfill to provide asylum to Syrians and to ensure they have the means to rebuild their lives—find employment, get health care and have access to education.

THE EU cloaked its deal with Turkey by claiming that it was humanitarian—that it prevented human smugglers from taking advantage of people. What do you think of such claims?

IT'S AN obscene argument to cover up the fact that they are shutting down the borders. People are fleeing Syria because of mass atrocities. The regime has subjected the Syrian people to relentless bombing. And it has conducted a campaign of mass rape, mass ar-

rests and mass torture. Shutting down the borders means trapping them in horrific conditions that they are fleeing.

The refugees are not ignorant of the risks of the dangerous journey to Europe. They're very well aware of the deaths that have occurred on the sea. They're very well aware of the difficult situations that refugees find themselves in in a strange and alien country. They're speaking to family and friends regularly who have made that journey.

They just figure that the chance of death on the sea or persecution in the EU is a better risk to take than certain death and destruction in Syria. So people will continue to make that journey—because they want a better life.

That's why even if borders are closed to them, people will find alternative ways to escape, even if the routes they find become more and more dangerous. Now that the Turkish border is closed, people are fleeing through Libya to take boats across the Mediterranean to Italy. People have even gone up through Russia near the Arctic Circle and then crossed into the EU through Finland and Norway.

Desperate people will do whatever they can to provide a future for their families and for their children. I think any parent with children can understand that you will take enormous risks to ensure a better life for your kids. There's no future for them at the moment in Syria, and there's no future for them in the region.

WHAT KINDS of things should solidarity activists internationally be calling for?

THE FIRST demand is protection for civilians inside Syria. The bombing needs to stop, and more pressure needs to be put on those countries supporting and arming the regime.

In the meantime, Syrians need to find access to weapons to defend themselves against massive aerial bombardment. They've not had the heavy anti-aircraft weapons needed to defend themselves from the regime's barrel bombs and Russia's air strikes. Until

there's some form of protection for civilians, people will continue to flee.

The other demand is for states to open their borders and provide safe haven for those who are fleeing these terrible conditions.

The UN and the wealthy states should also provide much more humanitarian assistance to refugees living in these appalling camps or urban centers across the region. They should also provide support to those countries that are hosting large numbers of refugees, so they can increase their services and infrastructures—not only for the refugees, but also for their own population, whose lives are being affected by the huge numbers of people in their country.

Also, people themselves can and are taking action. They're organizing to work together with refugees to find them living accommodations, to support them with language skills, and help them integrate with their community.

But it's a two-way street. The refugees have a lot to teach. They have lived through a revolutionary experience. Many of them have such good skills in organizing and working to defend their rights. So working together with refugees can be a really mutually beneficial experience for both the refugees and solidarity activists.

WHAT KIND of self-organization is there among the refugees?

I THINK it's very interesting how Syrians have taken their revolutionary experience into exile with them. They've experienced building new democratic structures from the bottom up. I have seen them drawing on this in camps and urban centers in Jordan, Lebanon and in the Kurdish region of Iraq.

There I met young people involved in really different campaigns: working on environmental hygiene; organizing campaigns against early marriage; working together to collect aid or medicines and distribute those to the most vulnerable and needy parts of the refugee population. Young people in these desperate circumstances have even set up music groups, theater groups and