

## BACK TO WHAT FUTURE? What Remains for Syria's Displaced People

**KHEDER KHADDOUR**

The Islamic State has suffered major reversals in eastern Syria with the liberation of Raqqa and Deir Ezzor. But this alone will not facilitate a large-scale return of refugees. Both governorates have lost their status as economic hubs, and rival actors are vying for control. Rising Kurdish-Arab tensions and potentially abusive security screening methods implemented by forces backed by the international coalition have all increased instability and unpredictability. This reduces the prospect of return.

### Syria's Future?

- The defeat of the Islamic State in Raqqa and Deir Ezzor governorates will not, alone, lead to a widespread return of refugees.
- Raqqa's and Deir Ezzor's economic links with neighboring governorates are unlikely to be reestablished in the foreseeable future.
- Because of the conflict, new local leaderships have been put in place by armed groups in a top-down way, making these leaders less representative, therefore less committed to a refugee return.
- The arbitrary vetting mechanisms for returning refugees by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are open to abuse, creating fears of revenge killings.
- Arab suspicions of Kurdish aims in eastern Syria have heightened communal tensions. This, added to a deep sense of uprooting among many refugees, undermines the social cohesion essential for return.

### Recommendations/Findings

- Eastern Syria is vital in the Assad regime's efforts to reconstitute the territory under its control. It is also crucial to the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces for securing political legitimacy in a postwar settlement. That is why the Islamic State's defeat may be followed by a struggle between the two, blocking a refugee return.
- A Syrian political settlement and the refugee crisis should not be addressed separately. A settlement without a refugee return will hinder reconstruction by keeping away needed professionals and civil society actors. A return without a settlement will lead to local conflicts between traditional leaderships and emerging ones empowered during the war.
- To be successful, a refugee return should be embedded in a broader political settlement that aims at restoring Raqqa and Deir Ezzor to their traditional roles in Syria's territorial order, and that engages professionals and civil society, reinforcing social cohesion.
- In areas taken by the SDF, a compromise could involve encouraging it to place local governance bodies it established under the Syrian state's umbrella, while preventing the influence of regime security figures or cadres with a background in the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) over these bodies. This would help the governorates resume their role in Syria's territorial order, encourage the return of technocrats, and maintain a balance between the regime and the PKK.

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