Tackling the real reasons causing
people to flee Syria

By Bernhard Trautner,
German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)

The Current Column
of 8 October 2015

Tackling the real reasons causing people to flee Syria

Bonn, 8 October 2015. Those misusing the refugee crisis as cover for their own inaction and ignorance with regard to the Syrian conflict may be soon be exposed.

Misconception 1: the only effective way to fight 'Islamic State' is with the help of the Assad regime.

A number of Western politicians are again calling for talks with Assad. At the same time, a coalition of Arab and Western states is bombing 'Islamic State', while Russia is deploying its bombs in support of Assad. What is really at stake here? While it is tacitly accepted that the brutality of IS cannot be stopped with air strikes alone, the goal is to at least prevent it and other Islamic groups from taking Damascus. The regime would not be able to hold on to the parts of the country it still possesses without support from Iran, Lebanese group Hezbollah and Russia. Quite apart from this, there is no fundamental conflict between the Assad administration and IS; rather, their ideological battle for power affords them mutual legitimacy. The Islamic Nusra Front poses a greater threat to the Russian-backed Assad regime and IS alike, but even that does not match the strength of civil opposition in Syria. Having represented Syrians in their desire for peace and participation since 2011, the opposition movement enjoys popular backing. And this is precisely why the Nusra Front and the secular opposition are the primary target of Russian air-strikes, despite claims to the contrary by Moscow and Damascus. Russia and Assad are using the fight against IS as a smokescreen and source of legitimacy to secure support from the West and from Arab governments. While this fight is absolutely necessary, it is too important to leave it entirely to the military. Those who use (exclusively) military means to combat IS are following the group's openly formulated strategy to the letter and unintentionally strengthening its global appeal as the only politically independent power in the Arab Middle East. At the same time, pursuing a military campaign against IS (alone) serves to further the cause of the Assad regime as the latter takes military action against the opposition and, worse still, terrorises the remaining civilian population. This is not the way to tackle the reasons causing people to flee Syria.

Misconception 2: the only way to tackle the reasons forcing Syrians to flee to other parts of Syria, to neighbouring countries and to Europe is to push back 'Islamic State'.

Syrian civilians are aware that they could be killed or injured at any time, but do not know whether this will be by the IS sword, Assad's barrel bombs or, more recently, Russian air raids. The number of beheadings carried out by the Raqqa-based 'caliphate' this year is less than the number of executions performed under Sharia law in the same period by Saudi Arabia. The barrel-bomb campaign of the Assad government has proved far more effective at spreading terror than either of the aforementioned methods. Cynics suspect that the Syrian regime intended to internally displace people and force them to flee the country to ensure that its opponents and enemies paid as high a price as possible for their resistance. Why would the regime abandon an effective survival strategy and stop portraying itself as the enemy of the 'caliphate'? By contrast, it is doubtful whether the latter has any interest in the mass displacement of the population. Despite Western perceptions, IS is primarily concerned with the ideological expansion of its power in the region, and acts of terror are merely an effective means to an end – to demonstrate the supposed weakness of its opponents' world view.

What should be done? Syrians are because of fear of physical harm. Those who lose hope of a future in their own country then flee to neighbouring countries or to Europe. And it is precisely this hope that is dashed when international policy-makers present the Syrian people with the choice of living under IS or living under Assad. Such a move sends out the wrong signal. If we want to end the downward spiral of people being internally displaced and forced to flee to neighbouring countries and then on to Europe, of Syria being bled dry, and of the human capital for rebuilding being destroyed, then we must form international coalitions on two fronts.

Proposal 1: we need to end the physical threat to the civilian population or achieve a temporary cessation of hostilities in individual regions until a comprehensive solution is found. This could be accomplished by providing alternative places of refuge within Syria - safe zones that are protected against all attacks, whether from IS, from Russian forces or from other regional actors (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia), along the lines of the no-fly zones that operated in northern and southern Iraq between 1991 and 2003. In the absence of a UN mandate, this would provide a de facto means for the international community to fulfil its international legal responsibility to protect (R2P).

Proposal number two: we need to offer the people, not the power holders, prospects for political solutions. While there is no such thing as an exclusively military solution, the past four years have taught us that political negotiations are not enough. Establishing safe zones would deprive Damascus of a key lever in its military campaign. This could generate the political will (solution-readiness) among the main rivals in the conflict and others to find a lasting solution. Nonetheless, the greatest hope of keeping Syria's multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society alive rests with local people at grass-roots level, provided they do not continue to be massacred.