

Testing the Water: Refugee Returns to Syria

Betül Beyza Öztürk

2074982

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Supervisor: Matthew Longo

Second Reader: M.F. Meffert

Abstract

As the number of refugees worldwide is at the highest level, repatriation strategies become more important than ever. Since repatriation is given such attention, refugees taking short visits to their country of origin becomes a contested issue. The same phenomenon happened in Turkey last year as refugees in Turkey visited Syria for the Eid al-Fitr and the Eid al-Adha. This research studies these mini vacations as a microcosm of refugee returns. The aim of this study is to determine what motivates refugees to go back to their country of origin whether it is for a few weeks or permanently. Because there is no accessible data, and what data there is does not include attitudinal information, interviews were conducted with refugees that made the journey from Turkey to Syria to tease out individual motivations. The responses received show that emotional attachment is the primary motivations behind these short visits, most dominantly attachment to family. On the other hand, long term motivations are about improved life conditions (such as electricity, employment, access to water) and safety. Consequently, despite its limited scope, this research reveals that making assumptions over mass return based on these short-term visits does not produce accurate repatriation strategies.

Research Topic

UNHCR reveals that currently, the world is facing the highest level of people forcibly being displaced, 65.6 million to be specific¹. Refugees constitute one-third of this number, 22.5 million people worldwide had to flee their homes to host states that accept them due to violent conflict or persecution. While the situation is extremely grave and does not seem to be resolved quickly, any solution to the global refugee crisis is welcomed by every party involved in the process- from the refugee to the donor state. Repatriation is considered one of the most desired solutions to any refugee crisis along with local integration in the country of

¹ United Nations, "Figures at a Glance," UNHCR, , accessed May 12, 2018, <http://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

asylum and resettlement to a third country. However, it is crucial that the repatriation be timely and a right choice because an unsuccessful repatriation program not only fails to solve the cause of the phenomena but wastes further aid that donor states keep providing. At this point, it becomes even more critical to understand refugee behavior and how and why refugees might decide to return to their home countries.

Since the emphasis on repatriation is strong, refugees taking mini-vacations to conflicted areas become a point of debate, whether such visits hint at a mass-return or whether states should treat as if they are hinting at a mass-return. The inability to explain this behavior points to the lack of knowledge we have on the perception of the refugees and how they decide to return or what elements are they take into consideration. Therefore these mini-vacations represent a perspective of repatriation that needs more focus. For example only in Turkey alone, 268.803 Syrian refugees decided to make the journey while at least 33.952 chose to remain in Syria, defying expectations. The fact that some of the refugees stayed in Syria while most them returned brings about the question of repatriation which is ultimately linked to the motivations of the refugees: Why would someone who had fled from a civil war return there whether it is for a few weeks or longer? Thus, this study focuses on refugee motivations and repatriation.

Literature Review

The decision to return to the country of origin is influenced by various factors. Primarily, repatriation can be triggered by state policies and/or refugee decision making. Apart from the state affect, some crucial elements of repatriation are security, material expectations from the country of origin, emotional attachment, and concerns over the property.

Security is considered primarily linked with repatriation. Because violent conflict force refugees to flee from their home countries, any improvement regarding their safety is generally considered as a positive development in terms of return. Focusing on the return of Congolese refugees the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, Lange mentions “spontaneous returns” where refugees come and visit the area, with some of them staying and some of them going back to Rwanda. Lange asserts that in the case of DRC, the main determinant of return is an improvement of security in the areas refugees initially fled from². Similarly, Graham and Khosravi point to the same reasons, this time for the case of Iranian refugees in Sweden, citing that for those refugees that decide to return, personal safety is the most apparent factor noting that there are other factors to be considered as well³. Likewise, while interviewing Somali and Afghan refugees in the UK, Zimmerman found that they had same concerns about the return. As long as their home countries remained dangerous, Afghan and Somali refugees refrained from return however the author states that focusing solely on security is a too narrow perception⁴. This generates the first hypothesis; H1: when security conditions improve in the country of origin refugees return.

Another factor that prompt repatriation is the state, more specifically donor state, host state or the state of origin. States can facilitate repatriation processes based on their assessments of the source of conflict, which makes them influential actors. Because states are such powerful actors, Crisp and Long warn that “Host countries are often impatient to see uninvited refugees leave. Countries of origin are sometimes impatient to see them return and signal the end of the conflict. Donor states are eager to bring an end to the long-term refugee

² Maria Lange. "Refugee return and root causes of conflict." *Forced Migration Review*, no. 36, 48.

³ M. Graham and S. Khosravi, "Home Is Where You Make It: Repatriation and Diaspora Culture among Iranians in Sweden," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no. 2 (1997): 121, doi:10.1093/jrs/10.2.115.

⁴ Susan Zimmermann, "Understanding Repatriation: Refugee Perspectives on the Importance of Safety, Reintegration, and Hope," *Population, Space and Place* 18, no. 1 (2010): 54, doi:10.1002/psp.647.

assistance programs that they fund”⁵. To be able to regulate state behavior, the UN 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees emphasizes the element of well-founded fear of persecution regarding the assessment of repatriation. The convention asserts that “Such fear, as defined in Article 1, is central to the refugee definition of the Convention. The fact that repatriation must be voluntary implies that the subjective fear should have ceased. Refugee status can cease, however, once meaningful national protection is re-established”⁶. The notion of safety was again emphasized by UNHCR in 1985 and 1992. Therefore, physical safety and the absence of fear of persecution in the country of origin are essential to any repatriation process according to the UNHCR. Recent examples of state influence over repatriation are Afghanistan and South Sudan, the largest organized refugee repatriations in the world history⁷. In both cases, repatriation was ultimately linked to the aspirations of host states rather than the agency of the refugees and eventually hindered the voluntariness of the repatriation while making states the decision maker. This generates the second hypothesis; H2: Based on their assessments on issues such as safety in the country of origin, states can make refugees return.

Material expectations upon return are also considered to influence repatriation. Kibreab argues that not all host states can provide adequate resources and services to the refugees. Consequently, refugees choose to return to their country of origin as they hope to be treated as first-class citizens and where they expect to be provided with goods such as social services, relatively secure employment and self-employment⁸. According to him, this is the reason why only 124 Eritrean refugees decided to repatriate despite the fact that 15000

⁵ Jeff Crisp and Katy Long, "Safe and Voluntary Refugee Repatriation: From Principle to Practice," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 4, no. 3 (2016): 142, doi:10.14240/jmhs.v4i3.65.

⁶ Handbook Voluntary Repatriation: International Protection, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/3bfe68d32.pdf> (accessed March 03, 2018).⁶

⁷ Katy Long. "Repatriation in the Twenty-First Century: Learning History's Lessons?" In *The Point of No Return: Refugees, Rights, and Repatriation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013: 2. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199673315.003.0007

⁸ Gaim Kibreab, "Citizenship Rights and Repatriation of Refugees," *International Migration Review* 37, no. 1 (2006): 59, doi:10.1111/j.1747-7379.2003.tb00129.60.

Eritrean refugees residing in the United States participated in a referendum on independence in 1993 following the end of the war on independence. Briefly, USA offered better conditions for them ⁹. Similarly, in the case of Liberian refugees in Ghana, Hardgrove found that repatriation did not occur because returning to Liberia would not contribute to their material well-being. Liberian refugees ultimately decided to stay in Ghana and invest in their children's education, believing that they would be better off in the long run ¹⁰. Thus H3: refugees return when they expect to benefit materially from their home country.

Emotional attachment to the country of origin is another reason why refugees return. To assess whether UK's policy toward Afghan refugees in 2003 undermines the agency of refugees and lead to politics of non-voluntary return, Blitz et al. conducted interviews among Afghan refugees in the UK. According to this study, Afghan participants had two dominant and related reasons for wanting to return. The first one was their strong emotional attachment to Afghanistan linked to nostalgia and a desire to help rebuild it. The second one is that they wanted to use the education they got in West and use it in their country of origin. Even though participants could not give a definite answer on how to return or when to return, this emotional attachment and the feeling of *giving something back* is evident¹¹. Therefore, H4: the more refugees feel an emotional attachment to their country of origin, the more likely they will return. On the other hand, there are many kinds of reasons we might return for emotional reasons – but they are not limited to feelings of attachment to the home country. To take the fourth hypothesis one step further, we might add that feeling of attachment could be towards family in situations where family members are torn between the country of origin and the host country or a third country. This creates Hypothesis 4a: as refugees feel emotional attachment

⁹ *ibid*

¹⁰ A. Hardgrove, "Liberian Refugee Families in Ghana: The Implications of Family Demands and Capabilities for Return to Liberia," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 22, no. 4 (December 05, 2009): 497, doi:10.1093/jrs/fep029.

¹¹ Brad K. Blitz, Rosemary Sales, and Lisa Marzano, "Non-Voluntary Return? The Politics of Return to Afghanistan," *Political Studies* 53, no. 1 (2005): 190, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9248.2005.00523.x.

to the family members that stayed at the country of origin, they are more likely to return. Similarly, refugees may feel an emotional attachment to their hometowns/neighborhoods that they spent most of their lives in but had to leave behind as they left the country. Again, this perspective generates another hypothesis, the hypothesis 4b: the more refugees feel emotional attachment towards the places they had to leave behind, they are more likely to return.

Property is another reason why refugees return. Harild et al. assert that between 2007 and 2010, Iraqi refugees decided to return Iraq over two assessments; whether they could reclaim their property and whether Iraq was safe enough¹². Similarly, according to the study of International Organization for Migration on Syrian refugees, the need to protect assets and properties was the primary reason they decided to return. 96.3% of the returnees were able to return to their own houses, although many of these houses needed repair¹³. This generates the final hypothesis; H5: if refugees have properties, they are more likely to return.

Methodology

Case Selection

To analyze the mini-vacations refugees take to the conflict zones and therefore further study refugee returns, Turkey appears to be the most suitable choice. Currently, Turkey hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees. According to the latest data published by Turkish Directorate General for Migration Management (DGMM), only %8 of Syrians (approximately 228 thousand people¹⁴) live in camps¹⁵. According to the Governor's Offices, the number of refugees who visited Syria for the holidays and who returned is as follows;

¹² Niels Harild, Asger Christensen, Roger William Zetter. "Sustainable refugee return : triggers, constraints, and lessons on addressing the development challenges of forced displacement (English)". 2015. GPDF issue note series. Washington, D.C. : World Bank Group. 12

¹³ Nearly 715,000 Syrian Displaced Returned Home Between January and October 2017," International Organization for Migration, November 21, 2017, , accessed March 10, 2018, <https://www.iom.int/news/nearly-715000-syrian-displaced-returned-home-between-january-and-october-2017>

¹⁴ "Migration Statistics ," Ministry Of Interior Directorate General Of Migration Management, , accessed March 03, 2018, http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik6/temporary-protection_915_1024_4748_icerik.

City: Kilis	Eid al-Fitr (June 13 and July 14)	Eid al-Adha (August 15 and 29)	City: Hatay	Eid al-Fitr (June 1 and June 23)	Eid al-Adha (August 15 and 29)
Total number of refugees	64.179	53.798	Total number refugees	120.826	33.336
Stayed in Syria	4.597	6.715	Stayed in Syria	22.640	2.120
Returned to Turkey	59.582	47.083	Returned to Turkey	98.186	31.216

Refugees are allowed to visit safe places created after the “Operation Euphrates Shield” by the Turkish army specified as; Azaz, Mare, Sawran, Aktarin, Al-Rai, Jarabulus, and al-Bab. With only registration being a condition, Syrian refugees that reside in Turkey are free to return to their conflicted state without having to face repercussions later. This is not the case for all countries such as Germany which hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in Europe but by law cannot ask for information about their journey destinations. Moreover, Chancellor Merkel herself advised refugees not to visit Syria, stating that such visits could affect their legal status in Germany¹⁶. Thus currently, Turkey is a viable and a logical choice to study the spontaneous visits of Syrians refugees to Syria.

¹⁵ Migrant Presence Monitoring Situation Report July, 2016

¹⁶ Abby Young-Powell, "Angela Merkel Tells Asylum Seekers Not to Take Holidays in Their Country of Origin," *The Telegraph*, August 27, 2017, , accessed April 7, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/08/27/angela-merkel-tells-asylum-seekers-not-take-holidays-country/>.

Data Collection

To be able to study why Syrian refugees go back to Syria, this study relies on first-hand experiences of the refugees who visited Syria for religious holidays. The only data available on this issue is the number of people passing the border and the fact that these visits occur during religious holidays. There is no information regarding the emotional and attitudinal aspects of these visits. Therefore, this study aims to create in-depth knowledge about the individual motivations through one-to-one interviews.

Apart from that, there are few sources of secondary data that will be used to back up the interviews. The information that Turkish authorities hold regarding the refugees will be used for statistical data. Possible sources of this data are Governorates of Hatay and Kilis and the Directorate General of Migration Management (which works under Ministry of Interior). In addition to this statistical data, newspaper articles are analyzed in order to get further information. Primarily the local newspaper agencies in border cities like Hatay and Kilis provide the most information as they conducted interviews with the refugees that are either about to visit Syria or to return to Turkey.

Research Design

The primary plan of this research is to conduct semi-structured interviews with refugees who visited Syria for religious holidays. According to Barakso et al. a researcher should opt for using interviews when the information cannot be obtained from somewhere else, which is the primary issue here¹⁷. This method enables the researcher to learn the topic of study straight from the people who have the experience of. Thus, the most effective way to learn the motivations of refugees is to ask them a series of questions to clarify the issue and make assessments of their answers.

¹⁷ Maryann Barakso, *Understanding political science research methods: the challenge of inference* (Place of publication not identified: Routledge, 2015), 194.

The primary way of reaching to potential interviewees and forming a sample is the snowball sampling method. Mainly this method presupposes that the first set of interviewees can give information about other possible candidates¹⁸. As communities like refugees tend to share information with each other and keep in touch, this method has the potential to generate a reliable sample. The sample size is limited by accessibility, as not all refugees are willing to participate in a study and language, as again not all refugees know Turkish. However, because it is not easy to reach out to refugees willing to answer questions, there is the possibility that the study will inherently involve non-response bias which occurs when respondents either refuse to answer a particular question or to participate anymore¹⁹. However, based on the interviews I have conducted so far, non-response bias does not seem to be a big issue.

The interview guide assesses three issues. The first issue is identifying the nature of these visits. The second part of the interview is prepared to establish the importance of culture. The last part of the interview is concerned with the decision to return Turkey and repatriation.

Interviewees will be chosen among refugees that live outside the camps. Because the theory assumes that refugees are rational actors and can make a cost-benefit analysis, child refugees will not be included. Since the demographics vary, eligibility to the study is dependent on whether participants have traveled to Syria during the Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. Since all participants have been to Syria during the two religious holidays, they have had experiences related to the issue this paper is concerned with. Magnusson and Marecek state that "Researchers seek to learn about the many different experiences that people may have had. Researchers, therefore, select people for the study who are likely to have had the

¹⁸ "Snowball Sampling," *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*, 2008, , doi:10.4135/9781412963909.n425.

¹⁹ Gary T. Henry , " Practical Sample Design," in *Practical sampling*(Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2011), 38, Sage

experiences of interest”²⁰. From this point of view, these participants are representative of the overall population as they can give insights into the experience of these temporary returns to Syria. The major limitation of the representativeness is the question of what motivates these refugees to visit Syria despite the ongoing conflict. Due to the snowballing approach, there is a chance that participants will keep referring to people like them thus there is the probability that people educated in Turkey (university students) will dominate the sample. Therefore currently, this study is limited to adult Syrian refugees whose relatives live in regions the Turkish military declared safe, that know Turkish (probably through having education in Turkey) and can afford the journey.

The main way of conducting interviews is the telephone. Because this research must be completed in a short time, telephone interviewing is the most appropriate method. According to Shuy, telephone interviewing has greater cost-efficiency and result faster than face to face interviews²¹. As there are no travel expenses, telephone interviewing is currently more beneficial.

Because the sample size is limited by accessibility to the refugees, these interviews will be supported by news videos that Turkish and international news agencies such Euronews, İlke News Agency, İhlas News Agency, Turkey Newspaper, and National Channel, have published online from the border gates and interviewed 29 refugees in total. These videos are informative for various reasons. First of all, they reveal the overall population of this research, most notably age, gender and the emphasis of family. Second, these videos show the conditions under which refugees pass from the Turkish border, such as queues, the services provided by Turkey (such as healthcare, security, and transportation services) and help for the elderly and the disabled people. These conditions might contribute to the prior decision-

²⁰ Eva Magnusson and Jeanne Marecek, "Making Decisions about Participants," in *Doing Interview-based Qualitative Research*(Cambridge University Press, 2015), 35.

²¹ Roger W Shuy. "In-Person Versus Telephone Interviewing." In *Handbook of Interview Research*, 540-541. : SAGE Publications, Inc., 2001. doi: 10.4135/9781412973588.

making process of the refugees. Most importantly, the interviews also include old people and people that do not know Turkish, which is missing in the sample I have formed for the interviews I conduct. In addition, these interview questions are not very detailed and mostly are beneficial for understanding the visits rather than the motivations behind them.

Findings

The interviews were aimed at assessing the views of Syrian refugees reside in Turkey about the return to Syria, with a special focus on return for a short time and return for good. The findings below first present new information about how these little visits take place and then introduce recurrent and central arguments that the participants often referred to.

The Journey

The interviews I have conducted and the videos news agencies published indicate that refugees come from different cities. While the current sample reveals that more people come from nearby cities such as Gaziantep, people from as far as İstanbul, İzmir or Karabük travel to Syria as well. People say that they take public transportation after they cross the border, to whichever city they want to Travelling expenses does not seem to be a nuisance according to the interviews.

Almost all interviewees refer to the struggles they face at the Turkish border and gate. They complain that they had to wait for hours (One refugee talked about having to wait at the border for 8-9 hours). In addition, there seem to be long queues at the border gate, where the Turkish officers take care of the bureaucratic process and check the necessary documents refugees have to bring. According to one refugee, the border gate is so crowded that people do not want to travel alone, which is one reason families travel together. Still, it is possible to see old people waiting at lines for hours with others. Also, parents take their children with them- they even take their babies. Thus, although these visits require money and endurance, people

seem to get over these hardships to cross the border. Another thing I have learned from the interviews is the fact that although refugees have to declare which cities they want to go (Turkey authorizes them to visit certain cities which are Azaz, Mare, Sawran, Aktarin, Al-Rai, Jarabulus, and al-Bab), there is no possible monitoring on their actions. All the interviewees so far have told me that there is nothing that stops them from roaming the country apart from the current political order.

Safety

The participants have a similar understanding of safety. They all said that the cities they visited are safe and defined it as “the absence of bombings and airstrikes.” This understanding of safety in negative terms is a common thing for all participants for both places Turkey declared safe, and refugees visited even though Turkey does not officially approve of, such as Aleppo or Idlib. For example, Resûl explains this rationale as “We have already experienced the big fear. We lived under bombardments. There cannot be a greater fear than that. So, we went [there]. It was normal. No planes are passing, no bombs dropping.” In addition to the absence of bombs and airstrikes, refugees referred to theft, kidnappings, and the risk of being enlisted to the “Assad’s army.” The only exception to this definition was Eda, who says she believes her hometown is safe because her relatives and people living there say it is.

One thing about safety that the participants seem to disagree is the effect of the Turkish military and consequently the policies of Turkey. One refugee, Ömer explicitly says that “[people] can go there [Idlib and places Turkey declared safe] because of the Operation Euphrates Shield. These regions are under the protectorate of the Free Syrian Army and the Turkish military. They can go these places. It is safe”. He adds that people can even go to Afrin this Eid al-Fitr because of the most recent Turkish military operation there. Similarly, Resûl talks about how people should not go to areas Turkish military is absent because they

would not be “under the protection of Turkey.” This trust in the Turkish military does not seem to be blind though, as some participants refused to comment on the influence of the Turkish military simply because they have not been to other cities or they do not know anyone lives there. Therefore, both the policies of Turkey and refugees’ own information networks seem to build up their evaluation of safety and thus affect their return. Yet three participants claimed that there is no place safe in Syria. On the other hand, these participants visited areas in Turkey is not present which are Idlib, Aleppo and Damascus. Furthermore, Cafer, who visited Idlib, refused to explain when I ask whether the Turkish military operations provided any safety.

While each refugee referred to safety as a factor they considered both for returning for the religious holidays and return for good, safety does not come forward in the case of return for a limited time. For example, Abbas reveals that although the reason why his wife went to Aleppo was to see her son, she was also aware that the road to Aleppo was dangerous. Abbas was worried about her safety, but they decided she could travel nevertheless. There is a risk acknowledged with going to Syria for a limited time. On the other hand, Abbas dismisses the idea of returning to Syria permanently as he says the war continues and they would not be safe there. Similarly, Abdul refuses to return to Syria indefinitely because he won’t be safe there, while at the same time revealing that he had travelled to Damascus for both the Eid al-Fitr and the Eid al-Adha. Therefore hypothesis one is more influential in terms of long-term return rather than for a limited time.

The timing of the Visits: Convenience over religion/culture

One aspect of this research was to understand whether the host state policies affected the refugee decision making, as hypothesis 2 proposes. One sign of the state influence is the timing of the visits. Because these visits occurred during the religious holidays, it was important to see whether people decided to make the journey for personal reasons or they just

seized the opportunity Turkey provides. Only one refugee, Ömer said that going back to Syria during the Eid al-Adha and the Eid al-Fitr held meaning and therefore he was conforming with the traditions. Similarly, Cafer said that personally for him, visiting his family during religious holidays was important too but he adds that he has been visiting his family a lot. For those refugees who cannot visit Syria as much as he does (occupation is the most crucial obstacle) these visits to Syria during Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr is about taking advantage of the policies of the Turkish state rather than conforming to the Islamic tradition that prompts people to visit their families for the sole purpose of getting together of families.

The feeling of Longing: Family

One dominant theme present in all interviews is the feeling of longing towards family and home. Almost all participants referred to both factors while some prioritized family over home or vice versa. With only one exception (this participant was already living with his family in Turkey), all participants refer to the family as their reason to return. For some this means relatives such as cousins, aunts or uncles. One example is Hacer, who lives with her parents and sister. She told me that the most important for her (and her family) to visit Syria was none other than the desire to gather with the rest of their family. She says that “All my relatives are there. We, especially during these religious holidays, feel very alone here. That’s why we decided to go”. Because it is the Islamic tradition to see other relatives during religious holidays, her and her family’s action seem to conform to the tradition however at this point, it is not objectively possible to distinguish family from religion here although she explicitly said that the reason they visited Syria was just to see their relatives. Similar to Hacer, Abbas’s wife visited Aleppo for the sole purpose of seeing her son while Abbas could not because he feared he would be enlisted to the Assad’s army. While both Abbas and his wife acknowledge that Aleppo and the road to Aleppo is not safe, she nevertheless took the opportunity to visit solely because she missed her son. Likewise, Abdul went to Damascus

well aware that the road there is not safe, but he did nevertheless because he had not seen his family for the last three years. In a similar manner, Cafer cites family as the primary reason he went back to Syria. What is interesting in his case is that his father in fact did not want him to visit them saying that “there is nothing for you here anymore”. Cafer went to Idlib despite his father’s objection, again for the sole purpose of being with his family and checking on them.

The feeling of Longing: Home

Just as participants revealed that they went back to Syria to visit their families, seeing the neighborhood they grew up in was another reason they cited. Muhammed is the only one to prioritize seeing the neighborhood he was raised in over his family. He refers to the concept of *memleket* which the Turks and the Arabs share. The word is generally associated with the land one was born and raised in and ultimately has an emotional sense to it rather than a patriotic one. When I asked him why he decided to visit Syria, he told me that it was about longing, the fact that he missed *there*, more than he missed his relatives. Similarly, Ömer too talks about how he missed his family but also how he missed the air of his hometown, the streets, and the buildings, whatever is left. The only one referring to Syria in a patriotic sense is Abdul although he too went to Syria to see his family first.

Education

For all the participants that have been studying at the Turkish universities, education is the one thing they prioritized over everything else. For example, Hacer says that she has started university in Turkey and she intends to graduate here as well. Similarly, Resûl says that he has poured so much labor into his university education for years and did not want to give up all on that. The only instance where education was challenged is the case of Muhammed. Muhammed was initially very indecisive about whether to return to Turkey or stay at Idlib. He is the only one to consider family as a reason to return indefinitely rather than

thinking of family as a reason for a short visit. However, even though he missed his family and his hometown, after careful consideration, he decided to return for the sole purpose of finishing his education in Turkey.

Another factor that led participants to pursue their education in Turkey is the fact that Syria cannot offer the same quality of education, which hints at the third hypothesis- the inability of the Syria state to offer them basic goods. When I ask what exactly the problem is, almost every participant gives a different answer to it, and most of their reasons are not directly linked to safety, which shows how inadequate Syrian state resources are. For example, while Hacer talks about how there are hardly any students left in Syria, Cafer points out to being able to reach to facilities such as labs in Turkey. He adds that there is a shortage of teachers left in Syria and they can not reach to information as free as they do in Turkey. Therefore, education is one reason that keeps student refugees in Turkey while simultaneously keeping them away from Syria in the long run.

One interesting outcome of having education in Turkey seems to be the idea to be useful to both Syria and Turkey. Only some refugees that are studying at Turkey revealed such aspirations. Ömer for example, only said that he would like to have a job that could make him a bridge between Syria and Turkey without getting into specifics on where he would live in. Similarly, Resûl mentions that he would like to be of service to both Syria and Turkey which is the reason why he is getting his education in the first place.

Property

Concerns over property (which concerns the fifth hypothesis) do not come forward as an influential factor for return neither for the mini-vacations nor return for good. For example, Muhammed says that he (and consequently his family) has properties at Idlib, but he is not concerned of their wellbeing because they are either rented or entrusted to the family

members that live there. Similarly, Eda mentions the properties her family has back in Syria, but she too is not concerned with their well-being as she receives information about them. The only participant to cite property as the number one reason to go back is Sayid. Sayid lost his house because of airstrikes (He did not tell where he visited in Syria) but he still owns fields there. However, he told me that the fields are ruined (this was his first visit for the last seven years) which is why he does not think he can go back to Syria for good. As not all participants referred to property, and those that mentioned do not prioritize concerns over property, it is safe to say that hypothesis five is not applicable in the case of Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Why Stay in Syria

According to the participants refugees either cannot return to Turkey because of factors such as bureaucracy or failing to follow the rules Turkey brings or because they choose not to. Some narratives suggest that some refugees stayed at Syria not by choice but because they had to. The reason is the fact that refugees actually could not pass the border. Hacer points out that because of the bureaucracy and the rules refugees failed to follow are the reasons why they had to stay. She says that “Honestly, some of my relatives- some people I know... They went there but they could not return. At the border they were told that ‘you can enter but you have to come back in a month’. They were given a month to return. When they returned in that time, they were not allowed to enter Turkey”. In a similar manner, Cafer points out to the bureaucracy at the border gates. He tells me about his friend, who stood at the wrong queue because he does not speak Turkish well and eventually could not return because of the misunderstandings that took place at the gate. In addition, Cafer mentions illegal refugees who somehow managed to copy the identity cards Turkish authorities provided to refugees but the Turkish officers at the gate caught their fake cards which is why they could not return either. Therefore, the statistics Turkish authorities shared does not mean that all refugees that stayed at Syria chose to do so.

Conversely, there are instances where refugees stay in Syria because of they chose to do so. For example, Ömer indicates that people stay at Syria for safety and property. They believe they are safe and they still have their property left after the war (for example their houses still stand). In addition to improved security, Muhammed indicates that life in Turkey is expensive which is why those refugees might have felt the need to stay in Syria. Cafer and Abbas, on the other hand, reveal that staying in Syria very much depends on age. Abbas says that the youth (he defines it as ages between fifteen and fifty) do not want to stay in Syria. Men do not want to because they are afraid they will be enlisted in the army if they do, and women follow men because there is nothing left for them. Cafer identifies a similar phenomenon saying that those above 40 years of age are so attached to the life they had had in Syria, and they are so caught up in their nostalgia that they refuse to return to Turkey. Furthermore, Abdul brings a new perspective drawing upon the importance of currency and economy for the refugees. He says that families are torn between to countries and talks about how men stay at Turkey to earn money and send whatever they can to Syria, to their family. However, the money they send is on dollar currency. As the Turkish lira get weaker, more people choose to return since staying at Turkey does not financially make sense now.

Return Eventually?

None of the refugees are thinking of returning to Syria anytime soon. Even the ones that said they would eventually return to Syria such as Muhammed or Resûl, the return is an ambiguous act in the future. For example, Resûl says that he would return to Syria if he cannot land a job in Turkey. There seem to be various obstacles that hinder repatriation in the long run. The first one is safety. Not all refugees believe Syria is safe enough for them to return for good, which indicates that there is a level of risk some refugees are willing to take for short visits. Secondly, there are several common goods the Syrian state fails to provide to its citizens, which is about the third hypothesis. Participants refer to electricity shortages that

happen too often, roads being in poor condition, not being able to access to water, the high unemployment rates, and low wages. Therefore, because these refugees do not expect to materially benefit from being in Syria, they do not want to go back there.

Some participants revealed that they knew they would not return to Syria. One of these participants is Eda, who revealed that she knew she was not going to return before the mini-vacations and being there did not change her mind. Likewise, Sayid admitted that he would never return. He said “There is no Syria anymore. There is no return. There is no life. There is no safety.... Nothing is where it is supposed to be. Only old memories exist now”. Therefore, for some refugees, whether they are educated in Turkey or not, return is not an option. On the other hand, few participants did not dismiss the idea of return. However, they either hinted at distant future or told me that they have not planned that far in future

Discussion

In the case of Syrian refugees, it is possible to analyze return in two phases: short visits and return permanently. While some factors are more influential for short-term visits, other factors prove to be more influential in terms of long-term returns. This is the case for all participants. Reasons to return for a limited time does not always correspond to reasons to return for good. For example, Hacer talks about feeling lonely in Turkey and how loneliness prompted her to go back to Syria for the religious holidays. For her, feeling lonely was enough a reason to go back for a limited time while she needs more than emotional attachment to go back permanently. At this point, she identifies education as the crucial factor in terms of permanent return. Similarly, Abbas’s wife went to Aleppo for the sole purpose of reuniting with her son, therefore for her, family was primary motivation for a short visit. However, when it comes to discussing repatriation, while Abbas says that he cannot due to the risk of being enlisted to the Syrian army, his wife says that repatriation depends on their own safety in Syria and they would not return as long as the war continues. This two-level analysis

of the situation in the country of origin is the case for each participant which first and foremost shows how little we know about what actually motivates refugees to consider return and how these decisions are made. Secondly, and as important as the previous point, deep analysis such as this research conducted shows there is not always a correlation between returning for a limited time and returning indefinitely. Therefore, it is not the best strategy to expect refugees return to their country of origin based on such mini-vacations.

Another aspect of refugee decision making this research shows is the interplay of countervailing pulls and how refugees weigh different factors as the method used in this research enables to tease out these different causal mechanisms. Each participant took various factors into account both while trying to decide whether to go back to Syria for the religious holidays and return indefinitely. Especially Muhammed who was genuinely conflicted when he visited his parents for the Eid al-Fitr. When it came to decide whether he was going to go to Turkey or stay at Syria he was indecisive. He explained that “At least people here [in Idlib] are all my relatives. In Turkey I only have friends. I mean, it would be better in Syria with my family and all other relatives. That’s what I thought. But, I said no to myself. I finish my education first”. In the long run, education was much more influential than his emotional attachment to his family. On the contrary, Eda was well aware that the main reason she went back to Syria was to visit the rest of her family. Checking up on her family’s properties was of a lesser importance. Similarly, Cafer cites family as the motivation behind his visit to Syria as he does not feel an emotional connection to his country, which makes him the only one to not see Syria as homeland.

According to the data derived from the interviews, religion is the least considered factor when refugees decided to visit Syria. At first, the fact that these visits from Turkey happen during the religious holidays might seem to give a religious meaning to the mini vacations. Arguments such as Muslim refugees conforming to the Islamic traditions can be

made on the basis of focusing on the timing of the visits. However, the method used in this research enabled me to tease out these two seemingly intertwined factors, which reveals that the role religion plays in this case of refugee decision making is only on the state level. To put it another way, religion played a role in shaping the Turkish state's policies towards refugees, as both Turkey and Syria have Muslim populations, both Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha are celebrated in Turkey as well. Combined with Turkey's assessment over security in Syria (the region Turkey conducted military operations in are safe), religion played a crucial role for Turkey to allow refugees within its borders to visit their country. Therefore, the role of religion is an indirect one because it shaped Turkey's policies. As the interviews show, being able to go to Syria was valued over being able to go to Syria for the Eid al-Adha and the Eid al-Fitr. Therefore, convenience rather than religion shaped refugee decision making. As most of the participants revealed that they went back to Syria simply because they were allowed to, host state's policies towards refugees comes forward as the factor that paved the way for the mini-vacations. When Turkey allowed them to leave is when various motivations came into play. Thus, it is possible to say that the second hypothesis was very much influential at the pre-decision stage, in which refugees did not have any motivations yet because they could not leave Turkey for Syria.

Safety is one factor that has a different influence over returning for a few weeks and returning indefinitely. The interviews suggest that the influence safety has over refugee decision making is not the same for each individual. All participants defined safety mainly as the absence of bombings and airstrikes, while kidnapping, theft and risk of being enlisted to the military are mentioned as well. Although there is somewhat agreement over a basic definition of safety, the answer to the question whether Syria safe or not is greatly contested among participants. For some, such as Ömer and Resûl, the existence of the Turkish army provides security. They believe that the recent Turkish military operations in Syria bought an

end to the conflict, at least for a certain region, and provided the safety very much needed. Therefore, their assessments are linked to the Turkish state policies which hints at the second hypothesis. On the other hand, others do not believe that Syria is safe regardless of the presence of the Turkish army. Nonetheless, these refugees still visited Syria, some even went to cities where war is still very much present, therefore dangerous. For example, Abbas and his wife knew that the journey would be dangerous, but she visited Aleppo nevertheless. Similarly, Abdul travelled all the way to the Damascus while acknowledging that he took a risk going there. What is striking is that the same two participants are the ones to reveal that they would not go back to Syria because Syria is not safe, but then again, they travelled there nevertheless. While such an argument is valid for assessing what factors affect mass repatriation (which means hypothesis one is more applicable to mass repatriation), the same line of reasoning is not applicable to the case of short visits, as some participants were ready to disregard safety and take risks. The difference between the assessments of safety between return for good and return for a limited time shows that there are “levels of safety” when refugees consider going back to their country of origin such as safe enough during the Eid but not safe enough to return. As it is the case of Abbas and Abdul, there are instances where refugees are willing to visit their country accepting risks involving their personal safety; however, the same assessment of safety may prevent them from returning to their country of origin indefinitely. This potentially has great importance for mass repatriation projects prompted by states (donor states or host states) as mini-vacations such as the Syrian refugees in Turkey take for the religious holidays could initially look promising for future mass repatriation strategies, but the findings of this research suggest that such an assumption is superficial. It is not a viable strategy to project short term safety to long term return.

The interviews suggest that the primary motivation to return is the feeling of longing which is directed towards two different concepts. The first one is family, which

without an exception all participants referred to. The concept seems to include not just the immediate family, but other relatives as well, since some of the refugees I interviewed are living with their parents and siblings. As families are torn between two countries and undocumented refugees are not allowed to use the border gates during the Eid al-Fitr and the Eid al-Adha, the only way for families to unite is if refugees in Turkey seize the opportunity Turkish authorities provide and visit the rest of their family in Turkey. This emotional attachment towards family members living at the country of origin seems to be the dominant motivation behind these visits. While all of them referred to seeing their family, this desire was expressed in various ways. For example, the emotional attachment towards family is explicit in the case of Hacer. She identifies feeling lonely in Turkey as the source of her desire to see her relatives back in Syria. Similarly, Abdul and Abbas' wife visit Damascus and Aleppo (both cities outside the Turkish influence) despite having acknowledged that what they did was very dangerous. In their cases, the strength of their emotional attachment to their family members out scaled their concerns over safety. This prominent value of family over safety combined with the fact that all participants referring to family as the reason why they visited Syria makes hypothesis 4a the primary motivation behind these visits. This research reveals that Blitz et al.'s assessment of emotional attachment is very much limited to the country of origin. Other factors, in this case family, is not included in their assessment although such scattered families are not a rare case for refugees. Further research could further expand what we know so far about refugee motivations, as this research proves that there is more to learn.

Apart from family, refugees still seem to feel connected to the places they grew up in. While the motivation behind this visit is overwhelmingly the desire to see family members, the emotional attachment to the places refugees were raised in was brought up by most of the participants as well, making hypothesis 4b able to explain these visits as well. However, this

concept of *memleket*, the emotional attachment to the neighborhood, to the streets of where one was raised in, comes as a different perspective that is not discussed. The conventional attribution of home in return migration in the literature refers to the notion of nostalgia in which refugees tend to go back to their homes because the memories they hold and the association they make between the return and those memories. This research suggests that the emotional attachment towards home does not necessarily come in the form of nostalgia. The participants referred to “missing the air” of their hometown, and “wanting to see the streets, the neighborhood they used to live in”. Nostalgia is associated with the past, it is about reminiscing how life was before refugees had to leave those places and holding on to those sweet memories. However, in the case of Syrian refugees, the type of emotional attachment they feel towards their *memleket* is not entirely about them being attached to the life they used to have in Syria but also about the present. It is about the love one feels towards their hometown, without a doubt strengthened with the memories of the past but not entirely made up from it. On the issue of nostalgia, participants referred to the concept for the refugees that chose to stay in Syria. They believe that especially the older members of the refugee society cling to the life they used to have in Syria which prompts them to not being able to adapt to the life in Turkey. This feeling of nostalgia reinforces itself as they fail to integrate and eventually they go back to Syria. The participants believe that nostalgia is a reason to return for good. On the other hand, none of the participants who said they missed their hometown expressed any intention to return indefinitely. Therefore, one reason why Blitz et al. failed to acknowledge the different types of emotional attachment to location (to home) is because while nostalgia is a reason to return for good, the notion of *memleket* expressed by these participants is a reason to return for a limited time. Once again, different motivations have different values depending on the duration of return.

Problems Addressed

The most important limitation of this research is the current form of the sample. More than half of the sample is made up of young Syrian refugees that have been getting their education in Turkey. Another issue with the sample is the language barrier. All interviews were conducted in Turkish therefore refugees that cannot speak in Turkish are excluded from the sample. Also, again because of the language barrier, the sample does not represent the older segments of the refugee society. Therefore the results on education and property could be biased. Researches that know arabic could form a more balanced sample for further research of the issue.

Furthermore there has been evident non-response bias. Some participants refused to answer the question regarding whether the Turkish military operations in the region contributed to their safety in the area. Similarly, some possible candidates refused to conduct interviews with me out of fear over held responsible for their thoughts later.

Conclusion

This research has attempted to determine why Syrian in Turkey visit Syria for a few weeks during Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, with a special focus on their motivations. There are several conclusions that can be drawn from this research. First of all, the interviews conducted revealed that the primary motivation behind these visits to Syria is the emotional attachment refugees felt towards the rest of their family members that still live in Syria. This motivation was followed by the emotional attachment participants felt towards the places they were raised in. Furthermore, although the visits coincide with religious holidays, the Eid al-Fitr and the Eid al-Adha, refugees are not motivated by the fact that these visits happen during the religious holidays which indicate that culture did not have a meaningful effect. What was important for them was being able to see their family and home which shows that they were benefiting from the Turkish state's policies on the issue of refugees. On the other hand, while

the feeling of emotional attachment was the primary motivation for short visits, when it comes to going back to Syria permanently, refugees have different criteria. Participants revealed that the most important thing for their return to Syria for good is the improvement of security throughout the country and the ability of the Syrian state to provide them certain common goods such as electricity, water and infrastructure while simultaneously revealing that hypothesis 1 and 3 explain long term returns better. This two-level analysis has potentially great impacts on public policy. As mentioned in this research, if refugees are able to visit their country of origin for a limited time and then go back to the donor state or the state they resettled, this might generate the idea that they can return permanently. However according to this research, it is not accurate to plan mass return to the country of origin based on short visits, refugees do not look for the same thing in both cases.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this research is the assessment of safety. The study reveals that the level of safety refugees desire to visit their country of origin for a short, limited time and to return permanently are not the same. While they are willing to risk their safety to see their relatives living in as far as Damascus, the same conditions are deemed not suitable and desirable to return permanently. This again refers to the disparity between short-term return and long-term return and is another reason to not to rely on possible mass repatriation based on short-term visits.

Any healthy and efficient repatriation program needs to know about refugees and how they decide to return. Further research on such short vacations could generate a deeper understanding of refugee decision making and behavior and therefore help us understand why and under what conditions refugees return to their country of origin. In the context of Turkey and the Syrian refugees living in Turkey what is needed the most for further research and deeper analysis is being able to speak Arabic. Majority of refugees in Turkey cannot speak Turkish well enough to conduct interviews and those who do know Turkish well enough are

mostly students. Without the language barrier, future studies are better able to analyze different segments of the refugee society in Turkey.

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