

Opinion

Editorial

Syrian refugees still deserve attention

This is the seventh year running that Syrian refugees are in the news. Just days ago, the United Nations' humanitarian coordination branch said escalating violence in north-western Syria caused more than 200,000 displacements since mid-December.

The new wave of displaced men, women and children is making the precarious situation of Syria's refugees even worse, especially in the inclement days of winter.

The Reuters news agency reported that nine Syrians "froze to death" in the Lebanese mountains near the Syrian border. Five others were rescued near a border crossing with Syria.

It is hardly surprising that 2018 has begun this way. The Syrian conflict, which began in late 2011, continues to force people to flee their homes within Syria and outward to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and beyond.

As of March 2017, the UN refugee agency estimated more than 5 million Syrians had fled their country and 6.3 million were displaced internally.

Turkey, which is host to 3 million Syrian refugees, expressed concern about a new wave of migration from Idlib, near its southern border. This, because Bashar Assad's regime has begun a new offensive in the rebel-held region without taking steps to protect vulnerable civilians.

There was yet more bad news about Syrian refugees in the first weeks of 2018. A Syrian man set himself on fire outside a UN office in Lebanon, desperate to draw attention to his family's plight because their aid had been cut off.

From Jordan came the belated assurance of one-off humanitarian aid to at least 45,000 Syrian refugees stranded for months near the Rukban border crossing and, based on their survey of conditions faced by 1.5 million refugees in Lebanon, three UN agencies declared the Syrians' plight was far worse than at the beginning of the crisis.

From 2015, the unfolding Syrian refugee crisis has triggered a massive alarm in the West, with the issue serving as a favourable factor in the rise of the far right in France, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany and several other European countries.

Syrian refugees are a people who have been forced to leave home and hearth for no fault of theirs. Mostly, they have found uncertain refuge in inadequate camps and informal settlements in countries that barely welcome them. They are truly a dispossessed people.

Syria, as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, has said, is the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time. Everyone is diminished by the Syrians' continuing tragedy.

Iran's dangerous support to Houthis

Yet again Iran-supplied missiles were lobbed by Yemen's Houthis onto Saudi territory and promptly intercepted.

The January 16 and 20 incidents are more of the same from Tehran. On November 4, there was a similar attack on Riyadh. It led Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz to declare such attacks "may amount to an act of war" involving Iran.

Despite mounting evidence of its involvement in hostile activities in the region, Iran seems to think denials are the best answer. Hence, it denies involvement in the Yemen war and says it has nothing to do with arming the Houthis.

A new confidential UN report, leaked by diplomats to CNN, offers strong evidence of Iran's role in the Yemen conflict.

The report says: "The (UN) panel has identified missile remnants, related military equipment and military unmanned aerial vehicles that are of Iranian origin and were introduced into Yemen after the imposition of the targeted arms embargo." It went on to pronounce Iran in "non-compliance" of the 2015 UN resolution that imposed an arms embargo on the Houthis.

These are tough words but they reflect the real dangers lurking behind Tehran's attitude. Iran continues to meddle in the region, stoking conflict and sectarian division. Yet, Tehran mendaciously insists that it is opposed to foreign interference in other countries' "internal affairs." It denounces "blatant intervention" by foreign countries in Syria even though it deploys and positions thousands of advisers and proxy fighters there.

For too long has the world ignored this double standard. The UN report lays bare the contours of the regional game that Iran seems to think it can pursue with impunity and without consequences.

The recent turmoil faced by Iran's ruling clergy at home shows there are eventually consequences to its destructive and costly enterprise.



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Al-Bashir cannot solve Sudan's problems by aligning himself with Doha and Ankara

Mohamad Kawas

is a Lebanese writer.



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Al-Bashir is being unwise and jeopardising his country's national security.

Since the 1989 Sudanese coup that put Omar al-Bashir in power, the regime in Khartoum has been the antipode of the neighbouring regime in Cairo. Claims by both governments that the two Nile countries share the same fate were just words. Both countries are now levelling accusations at each other.

Cairo has reportedly dispatched military units to Eritrea, while Khartoum declared a state of emergency in the eastern governorate of Kassala on the border with Eritrea. Despite the tensions between Egypt and Sudan, claims that their relations have deteriorated to a state of war are overstated.

The fact remains, however, that the Egyptian regime cannot put any faith in a Sudanese one that is based on the doctrines of the Muslim Brotherhood. While it is true that al-Bashir and the late Hassan al-Turabi, the spiritual father of the Brotherhood in Sudan, had a major falling out, al-Bashir still managed to consolidate his power by relying on the military and the Brotherhood's political Islam. Sudan's wars in Darfur and southern Sudan have given him a Machiavellian edge that explains his longevity as Sudan's strongman.

The Egyptian government, under former President Hosni Mubarak, accused al-Bashir's regime of plotting assassination attempts on Mubarak. Al-Bashir put the blame on Turabi and sought to mend relations with Egypt.

At the same time, however, al-Bashir opened Sudan to Muslim Brotherhood members fleeing persecution in Egypt, as well as to jihadist movements in the region. Let's not forget that Osama bin Laden found refuge in Sudan. Cairo had no choice but to consider the Sudanese

regime a threat to Egypt's national security.

Relations between the two regimes have continued to deteriorate. Khartoum accused Cairo of equipping and supporting rebels in Darfur and the south and of harbouring Sudanese opposition. Sudan has cooperated militarily with Iran and supplied weapons to Gaza behind Egypt's back. Khartoum continues to enjoy what can only be described as an ill-intentioned relationship with Turkey.

The Hala'ib crisis has been another bad chapter in Egyptian-Sudanese relations. Egypt occupied the disputed territory in 1996 and the situation has fluctuated due to changing political moods. What is clear, however, is that through its relations with Ankara, Khartoum is provoking Cairo.

While Egypt's presence in Hala'ib can be seen as a challenge to Khartoum, Sudan allowing Turkey to have a foothold in the country, and thus jeopardising Egypt's regional security, is a slap in the face to Egypt. Al-Bashir, therefore, has proven to be efficient and pragmatic in protecting his regime.

Al-Bashir has also taken a pragmatic approach to Saudi Arabia. He sided with the kingdom in the Yemeni crisis, perhaps to atone for his ties to Iran and Islamist movements in the region. Saudi Arabia, in turn, did its best to have the United States lift its sanctions on Sudan and to protect al-Bashir from the International Criminal Court. Al-Bashir got what he wanted from Saudi Arabia and has moved to another feeding ground, namely Turkey.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan's visit to Sudan in December was the first by a Turkish president since the decline of the Ottoman Empire in 1885. It reshuffled all the cards in the region.

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Al-Bashir knows very well that Egypt will not tolerate a Turkish presence in Sudan threatening both the Red Sea and Egypt. It is thus not far-fetched to think that the political war between Khartoum and Cairo could escalate into a military confrontation.

What is new is that the Sudanese regime is convinced that Egypt's is a threat to it that must be countered. This view is held by Addis Ababa regarding the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and the Nile waters.

It stands to logic that Egypt would be willing to go to war with Ethiopia over what it sees as a threat to its very existence. Similar reasoning could be used to justify Egypt's reaction to Turkey's military presence on the island of Suakin, even though it was Sudan's sovereign right to offer the island to Turkey.

Al-Bashir is naive to think that he can solve his country's economic and political woes by aligning himself with Ankara and Doha. He's forgetting that an embargo against Qatar is still in place and Egypt is part of it. He is also being strangely opportunistic by aligning himself with Russia while Washington is lifting its sanctions against Sudan.

By relying on far-away defensive partners rather than considering geographic proximity, he is being unwise and jeopardising his country's national security.

The Sudanese regime may be justified in seeking economic advantages from relations with far-away countries but, despite Khartoum's official declarations that there is nothing suspicious in its relations with Ankara, it will be exceptionally difficult to convince Cairo that its deal with Turkey over Suakin is not a threat to its national security.