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BOMBING SYRIA WON'T SOLVE THE REFUGEE CRISIS

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“It’s got out of hand”. “It’s not enough just to take them in”. “Action must be taken at the source”. Since the refugee crisis burst onto the European agenda this summer, we’ve heard this kind of talk on an almost daily basis. The result is a situation that is exceptional, urgent and which has been ably exploited by those whose hopes of military intervention in Syria in September 2013 were frustrated. Two years ago, Bashar al-Assad was the target and nobody was talking about the refugees: they were a problem for Syria’s neighbours back then, not Europe.

In recent weeks, French and British politicians have begun to link the bombings with the need to attack the root causes of Syrians fleeing their country. But none of the bombing campaigns – not the one conducted by the US and its coalition partners for over a year against the Islamic State organisation (also known by its Arab acronym, Daesh), nor that begun by France in September against the same group, and much less that launched by Russia to defend the Damascus regime – will stop the flow of Syrian refugees to Europe. There are five reasons for this.

First, **because the Syrian refugees attempting to reach Europe are not only fleeing Islamic State**. Let us remember the figures: more than 12 million people are displaced, half the Syrian population. Of that number, more than four million have sought refuge in other countries, while another eight remain within Syrian borders but far from their homes. And although there is no exact data on who is fleeing what, everything suggests that many (if not most) are escaping the Assad regime, whether because of affiliation to the political opposition, because of deserting the security forces, because their homes have ended up on the front line of the battle or because the economic activity that supported their families has been destroyed.

Second, **far from reducing the regime’s homicidal capacity, the bombing by Western countries may fuel even more repressive actions**. Damascus and its allies will present any bombing or military action they take as a tool in their fight against terrorism and will point out that other countries are also doing the same. The justification Russia has given for the deployment of its troops and the bombings it has already carried out follows this line of argument. And so there will be more bombing, more destruction and, therefore, more refugees.

Third, **in current circumstances, the bombing campaign against Islamic State can, at most, alter the balance of power: it cannot bring the conflict to an end.** Islamic State may suffer partial defeats or see its offensive capacity diminished, but it will not be wiped off the map. And even in the highly unlikely scenario of this happening, Islamic State is just one of the contenders: the armed conflict between the rest of the actors would continue. None is strong enough to win the battle outright, and none so weak that they can be taken out of the equation by military means. And even if one of the sides came to dominate on the battlefield – something that would certainly require yet more international involvement – it would certainly produce a new flow of refugees from the losing side.

Fourth, **because only the creation of safe zones or no-fly zones could justify the bombings as a means of stopping the flow of refugees.** But Russia's presence in the conflict makes this much less likely for two reasons. On the one hand, because the establishment of such areas would require the approval of the United Nations Security Council and now more than ever Russia would veto it. And, on the other, because the United States and France (as well as a Turkey that would sign up this type of operation with gusto) would run the risk of direct confrontation with Moscow as well as with other regional actors such as Iran or Hezbollah.

Fifth, **because a significant number of the refugees arriving in Europe do so after spending months or years in neighbouring countries.** Until now, they have found themselves in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Reception conditions have deteriorated in these countries. Partly this is due to lack of funding, but also because jobs are scarce and social security networks are insufficient. Negative attitudes are increasing along with the fatigue accumulated by individuals and families over months and in many cases years living in highly precarious conditions. For this reason, in order to understand the flow of Syrian refugees arriving in Europe, it is important to understand both the dynamics of the conflict in Syria and the situation in which the refugees find themselves in these three countries.

There are only two alternatives to this kind of bombing. Either a larger-scale operation (which seems to have been ruled out by the United States and its European partners, at least), or a political solution, something that everybody mentions but nobody seems capable of forcing through. The question of whether this last round of bombings leaves us closer or further away from a negotiated solution must be addressed.

Taking an optimistic view, it could be seen as a manoeuvre to set up a better starting point for negotiations. Nevertheless, only an Assad who sees himself closer to total defeat will be disposed to sit down to negotiate in terms acceptable to the majority of the other actors in play. For the moment, the Russian policy of supporting the regime in no way brings us closer to negotiation. This situation will only change if Moscow threatens to withdraw its support for Assad unless he negotiates, and if that happens Putin will want something in return. In terms of the operations launched by France or the US-led coalition, their objective is not to put an end to the conflict but to stop the expansion of Islamic State and, in the best case scenario, to push it back. It is revealing that, in justifying the bombings, legitimate defence is being invoked, something that has little to do with the true dynamic of the conflict.

In summary, the bombings are taking us towards a scenario of greater destruction, with more refugees and no clear guarantees that any of what is happening is bringing the end of the conflict nearer. So let nobody use the refugees to justify the bombings or say they weren't warned that this escalation could increase the number of Syrians arriving in neighbouring countries or, from there, trying to reach Europe.