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The Situation of Syria's Internally Displaced Persons and their Perceptions

Syrian refugees have received a significant attention worldwide. However, very little is known about the experiences of the internally displaced persons (IDPs) living within the government-controlled areas of Syria. People are crossing the Mediterranean in dilapidated boats and walking through Balkan grasslands. People are getting stuck at border fences and living in tents and are also being exposed to harsh weather because of these conditions. Various investigations, reports and publications are in circulation in Japan regarding people who are forced to leave their homes due to the Syrian conflict. The image of these people and what could be done to support them have somewhat solidified in the public mind. However, very little is known about situations of the internally displaced people living in government-controlled Syrian land.

It is an On-the-Spot Report, so this Time, it Will Surely Be a Major Hit

In many cases, interviews with IDPs are prefaced with a statement that "Syrian government officials are accompanying the interview team; hence, it is hard to believe that the interviewees are reporting with honesty." Often, it is the interviewer who refuses to analyze the local information. People living under authoritarian regimes, in Syria and elsewhere, fear the authorities, and in a sense it is quite natural that they do not feel comfortable reporting the truth of their situation. Currently, those who conduct interviews and investigations must consider who has composed the compulsory model answers they are receiving and for what reasons they are given. They must also consider what kind of claims and messages are contained within these answers, and must go beyond the oversimplification that the interviewees are not telling the truth.

It is possible that people not giving truthful information to researchers may be more frequently encountered in a completely democratic society than in Syria. I was investigating the experiences of Syrians and other Arab people in cross-border migrations before the Syrian conflict, and I have often received advice or concern regarding this issue from those in the same business or survey pioneers. Especially, Syrian refugees living in EU countries and Turkey are over-researched with interviews and surveys, which causes difficulties for research institutions' and investigators. That is, those who dislike excessive concern given to them will be unwilling to respond to the coverage, and those who are looking to benefit will regularly give false testimonies to maximize their profit.

A suitable support method such as investigating the actual condition of aid recipients and implementing assistance based on demand works only if interviewers have learned to discern under- and over-reporting. It is not possible to discern whether it is worth visiting the local areas, especially

conflict sites, just to hear local voices.

Listen to an Array of Local Voices

The information that came up in public opinion surveys on internally displaced people in Syria is introduced in one part. Note that all figures shown are preliminary.

https://cmeps-j.net/ja/poll_surveys/syria2018

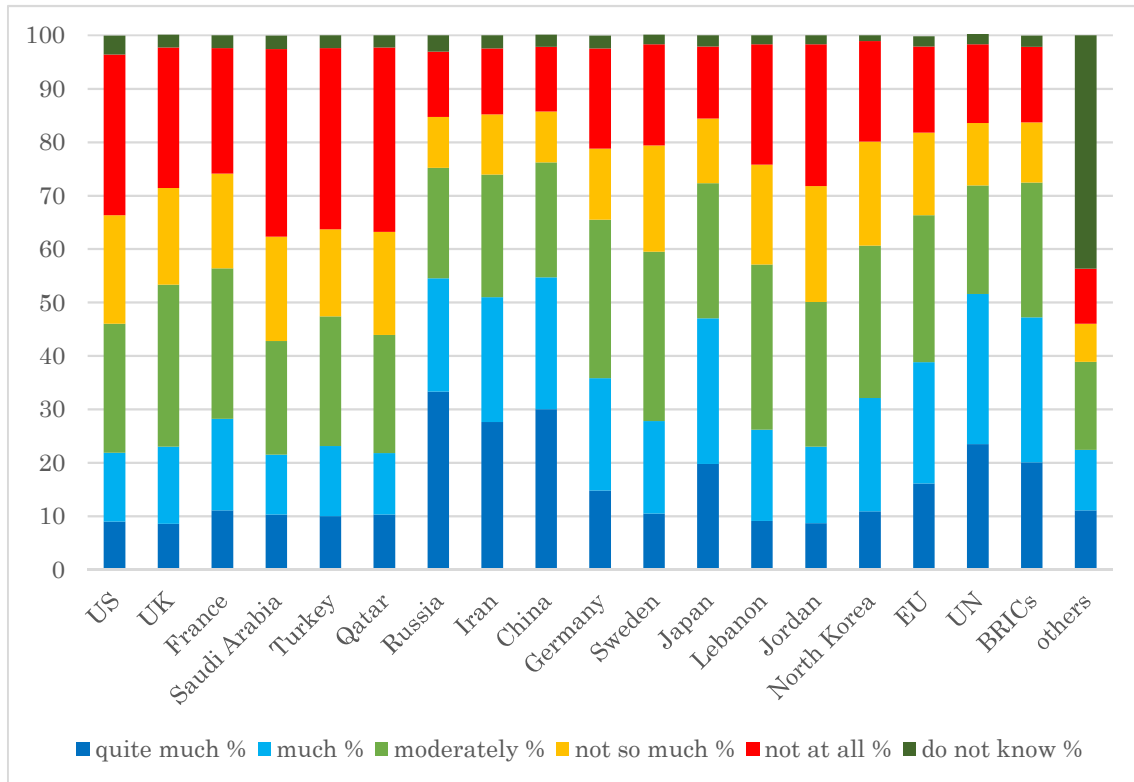
The economic situation of internally displaced people is considerably more serious than the Syrians who have not been displaced. The situation of women, in particular, is striking.

	Men		Women		Total	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
No Income	55	6.24	195	31.5	250	16.67
< US\$100 (SP50,000)	294	33.37	284	45.88	584	38.87
US\$101-200 (SP50,001-100,000)	332	37.68	105	16.96	432	28.8
US\$201-300 (SP100,001-150,000)	106	12.03	23	3.72	129	8.6
US\$301-400 (SP150,001-200,000)	63	7.15	9	1.45	72	4.8
US\$401-500 (SP200,001-250,000)	26	2.95	3	0.48	29	1.93
> US\$501 (SP250,001)	4	0.45	0	0	4	0.27
Unknown	1	0.11	0	0	0	0
Total	881	100	619	100	1,500	100

Of those living in Syria who were not displaced persons, 88% had a monthly income of less than US\$200 in 2016 and that percentage fell to 75% in the first half of 2017. This number fell to two-thirds in the latter half of 2017, showing an improvement in finances. However, fewer than 90% of internally displaced persons in Syria, still continue to have an income of less than US\$200 per month.

<https://news.yahoo.co.jp/byline/takaokayutaka/20170707-00073050/>

Another important perspective is the awareness of IDPs regarding future restoration and reconstruction of Syria. Contributions to the reconstruction of Syria by each country/institution are illustrated in the chart below. For those in Syria, the expectations from “enemy countries,” United States, Great Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar, are low, and they have positive expectations from Russia, Iran, and China as ally countries. Expectations from Japan, Sweden, Germany, and the United Nations are positioned between these two.



Expectations on Japan seem to be quite low given that there was no basis for a simple and substantial positive view prior to the Syrian conflict, and the expectations are surprisingly high in view of Japan’s actions, which can be seen as an “enemy country” throughout the conflict.

I Told You That Propaganda Was Ridiculous

Recent surveys have included comments that the “propaganda of the dictatorship regime is not worth looking at and that there is no significance in conducting it.” However, even if something is termed as propaganda, there remain many points to analyze. For example, if the survey findings were based on false reports forced by the “authoritarian regime,” what did the Syrian government hope to achieve from it? Looking at the survey results on monthly income, it is evident that the result does not serve the propaganda that “Government-controlled areas are a paradise on earth and all people, including IDPs, are living happily.” Conversely, even if they are being used to exaggerate the plight of people and to encourage countries and institutions to lend assistance, the survey results are

full of materials that could be used to assert the following, “deal with issues before asking for assistance.” The struggle of women is not an issue that can be removed by superficial expressions such as “(Weak) women will always be oppressed in conflict.” Their struggle is because of young Syrian males, who were the breadwinners but disappeared because of the conflict. Some have died while the others have been mobilized into the military/militias, arrested/detained/kidnapped, or fled from military mobilization. Although the dead cannot be brought back to life, many measures can be taken by the Syrian government to improve the situation as it stands, such as recruiting breadwinners, demobilization, amnesty, and promoting political and social reconciliation. A glance at the current survey’s findings reveals that even if there has been false reporting, one can still discover just as many “inconvenient truths about the dictatorship” that are assumed to be hidden.

The expectations for Japan’s contribution to Syria’s reconstruction are inadequate. Given that Syrian authorities have thus far achieved over 90% of the votes in the presidential election, it seems that more extreme numbers will appear if they want to fake expectations of other countries, including Japan and promote improved relations with the Syrian government. Additionally, “enemy” countries of UAE and Bahrain re-opened its embassies in the Syria in the at the end of 2018, the Syrian government leaders and intelligence personnel began smartly engaging in foreign relations. Expectations for each country do not carry enough weightage if they are considered as propaganda due to ulterior motives.

If there was no value in looking at propaganda or fake information because the PR activities of Islamic extremists, including “Islamic countries,” are also similar to model examples of propaganda/fake information, those who work hard to observe it, including myself and people in the military and intelligence industry, have been wasting their efforts for many years. What makes this somewhat worthwhile is that we can view the information “as such” and use it as clues to detect intentions and interests of those who transmit it. Whether true local information or propaganda, if one lacks the ability to analyze it and simply describes superficial impressions, it can be harmful. One lesson from public opinion polls in Syria is that prejudice and a lack of critical thinking are the enemies of high-quality analysis.