

President Assad's Amnesty Decree to Military Deserters

Helpful, But Not Everyone Will Follow It

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The world should welcome President Assad's latest decree granting amnesty to military deserters inside and outside of the country, but observers shouldn't forget that it isn't a new initiative and might therefore not be observed by the parties that matter most because they ignored his government's identical outreaches over the past couple of years.

Europe's Much-Needed "Pressure Valve"

President Assad issued a [decree](#) earlier this week granting amnesty to military deserters inside and outside of the country, which was [lauded by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov](#) as a step towards "national reconciliation". In theory, this could encourage civilians whose only crime has been to evade military service to return to the liberated portions of the country where the majority of the population lives and begin the process of reintegrating into society. Not only might he see some deserters leaving their homes in Idlib and the US-occupied but Kurdish-controlled northeastern part of the country, but it could also put at ease the fears of many migrants who were worried about being prosecuted for evading their duty if they ever came back to their homeland. Accordingly, the second-mentioned element might make it more "politically viable" for the EU to repatriate Syrian migrants, which could in turn provide a much-needed "pressure valve" from the grassroots opposition that many political leaders such as the bloc's de-facto leader Merkel are presently experiencing.

Military And Political Implications

There are also two other implications that could be extrapolated from this announcement. The first is that there's a lingering ambiguity over whether returning deserters would still be eligible for mandatory conscription. It hasn't thus far been clarified in English-language media if the amnesty also means that they're no longer obligated to serve their nation, so the possibility remains that they might, at least pending an official follow-up comment on the matter. Relatedly, the answer to this question would say a lot about the intentions of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) in terms of the next phase of the country's conflict. Allowing for these returning deserters to hypothetically be drafted into the same armed forces that they originally fled from would indicate that the SAA isn't preparing to end the kinetic phase of war like some have thought but could be seeking to increase its ranks prior to a possible campaign in Idlib and/or the northeast. These possibilities are realistically slim, but can't yet be discounted.

About the second implication of this decision, the return of Syrian nationals back to the

Damascus-administered areas of the country could put the Arab Republic on the path of finally making progress on UNSC 2254's mandated constitutional reform and the holding of new elections. It's a lot easier for everyone if as many Syrians as possible returned home prior to a possible referendum on the outcome of the ongoing constitutional reform negotiations and the national elections that would eventually follow instead of attempting to ensure that the voting rights of millions of Syrians outside of the country are respected in states which don't even recognize the present government as legitimate. The larger the number of Syrians that don't have a chance at participating in these votes for that aforementioned political reason, the more likely it is that the results might be considered "illegitimate" by the West on the supposed basis that too many people were "disenfranchised", even though this wouldn't be through any fault of Damascus' own.

"Politically Incorrect" Realities

For as well-intentioned as President Assad's amnesty decree might be and the strong possibility that it would lead to positive progress in advancing a so-called "political solution" to the country's conflict if people take advantage of it, there's actually nothing inherently new in what the Syrian leader promulgated because this [exact same thing](#) was tried before in February 2016 with little success. Although the military situation in the Arab Republic was much different back then when compared to now, some of the inhibiting issues from that time are still relevant in the present day. For example, whether justified or not, some deserters still fear that they'll be discriminated against if they return home, be it by the state or even their own neighbors. These feelings could also be manipulated from abroad through social and other media by self-interested actors who don't want to see the large-scale return of refugees and other categories of people to Syria.

Another factor is that some of the military deserters might not want to return to the liberated portions of Syria, no matter how "politically incorrect" this is to countenance among many of the government's most ardent social media supporters. Whether living in Idlib, the northeast, or outside of the country, they might have become accustomed to their places of residence, possibly because they sympathize with the Islamist or "[Neo-Marxist](#)" ideologies of the first two mentioned de-facto self-administrated regions inside of Syria. Many points have been put forth arguing that Syrians as whole might have a more promising future inside of the liberated areas of the Arab Republic, but some might still think that they'll live better lives elsewhere. Idlib and the Kurdish-controlled northeast are attractive for ideological reasons and also because comparatively smaller amounts of reconstruction aid could have a relatively larger effect on improving the locals' livelihoods after the war. As for the migrants, they might have settled into other societies and simply prefer living there instead.

Concluding Thoughts

Syria, for all intents and purposes, seems to be on the cusp of finally (and some would say, belatedly) transitioning its conflict from the kinetic phase of military hostilities to the non-kinetic one of political negotiations aimed at ultimately achieving "national reconciliation". President Assad's decree to grant amnesty to SAA deserters should therefore be seen in this context, which means that it might have a greater chance of success than the identical one issued two and a half years ago did given the different context in which it was made. If everything goes according to plan, then a chain reaction of peacemaking moves could rapidly be set into motion, though no one should get their hopes unrealistically high that the best scenario will enter into being, let alone that easily. There are still plenty of obstacles

impeding it from happening, not least of which is the “politically inconvenient” fact that some Syrians just don’t want to return back to the liberated areas of their country.

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