

Closed Session

Responding to Humanitarian Crisis in the 21st Century

Ravale Mohydin



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The TRT World Forum 2019, recognised as one of the most significant political events of the year, took place from October 21st- 22nd at the Istanbul Congress Center with over one thousand esteemed guests and panellists. Consisting of nine keynote speeches and exclusive talks, 12 public sessions, and 15 closed sessions this year's Forum succeeded in providing a platform for serious engagement with the most pressing challenges of our time. The themes of the sessions ranged from the rise of far-right terrorism, populism and nationalism, environmental issues, the future of the Middle East, trade wars, the future of the European Union and cooperation of emerging powers. Uniting all of these themes was a focus on the fragmented state of today's world and a sincere desire to offer meaningful solutions.

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WRITTEN BY

RAVALE MOHYDIN

PUBLISHER

TRT WORLD RESEARCH CENTRE

February 2020

TRT WORLD İSTANBUL

AHMET ADNAN SAYGUN STREET NO:83 34347

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TRT WORLD WASHINGTON D.C.

1819 L STREET NW SUITE 700 20036

WASHINGTON DC / UNITED STATES

www.trtworld.com

researchcentre.trtworld.com

Ravale Mohydin,

Ravale Mohydin is a Researcher at TRT World Research Centre. Previously, she was a Program Manager at the Centre for Economic Research in Pakistan. She has an Ed.M. from Harvard University and a M.S. from the University of Pennsylvania, specialising in research strategy, implementation and dissemination. With 10 years of international non-profit experience, her research interests include media effects on society, non conventional warfare, public diplomacy efforts, migration and socio-political trends.

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Background

The world continues to experience the worst humanitarian and refugee crisis since the Second World War. According to the United Nations (UN), war, civil strife and natural disasters have displaced 70.8 million people from their homes. Out of these nearly 71 million people, 41.3 million are internally displaced (IDPs), 25.9 million are refugees and 3.5 million have sought asylum.

According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the top five refugee hosting countries are Turkey (3.7 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), Uganda (1.2 million), Sudan (1.1 million) and Germany (1.1 million). When Palestinian refugees are taken into consideration, the burden being carried by Lebanon and Jordan also becomes apparent with 1.4 million and 2.9 million refugees respectively. As these numbers indicate, the international response to the refugee issue has been largely ineffective, with particular countries continuing to disproportionately bear the burden of hosting refugee populations. On the one hand, the inability of the international community to stabilise countries affected by conflict has meant a continued flow of refugees to neighbouring regions. On the other hand, the situation has been made more complex by rising anti-refugee sentiment around the world, particularly in Europe and the United States, even as their refugee

numbers remain relatively low. As populism continues to rise in Europe and the US and refugee numbers remain concentrated in countries neighbouring refugee-source regions, there is concern that increasing anti-migrant sentiments will result in a declining political will among decision makers to effectively deal with the crisis.

The TRT World Forum, held in Istanbul on October 21-22, 2019, addressed the following themes for discussion in closed session: the main socio-economic pressures being faced by host countries and how the international community can help alleviate them; whether protracted conflicts can be effectively managed by mitigating their human impacts; whether past experience in managing large-scale humanitarian crises can inform current approaches to the ongoing crises; and lessons that can be drawn from the Turkish experience in developing effective approaches to deal with humanitarian crises.

Turkey's Burden: The Syrian Refugee Crisis

The international response to the Syrian refugee crisis has been largely ineffective. The discussion started with a recognition of the huge burden that has to be carried by the government and society of host countries such as Turkey, which has more than 4 million refugees of 80 different nationalities, with an eye-opening 3.6 million from neighboring Syria. According to one of the speakers, provision of public services to refugees is difficult for the Turkish state. Turkey's expenditure on refugees for the past 9 years has exceeded 40 billion USD, while support from the European Union (EU) through NGOs was only 3.3 billion USD. The UN only made available 1.3 billion USD. Additionally, he concluded, the Turkish host communities had to face challenges as well.

venting or intervening to stop the various crimes that were and are still occurring in Syria. One of the speakers highlighted that more than 6.2 million people have been displaced and almost 50 percent of those are minor children. More than a million people, including 360,000 children, are living in areas that are difficult

The international system failed Syria in terms of preventing or intervening to stop the various crimes that were and are still occurring in Syria

to access. More than 300,000 refugee children have been born in Turkey and know no other home. To provide an illustration of the generosity with which refugees have been treated in Turkey, air ambulance services, which cost upwards of 10,000 USD per trip, have been for Syrian refugees more than 4000 times. It can be easily said that refugees in Turkey have been treated the same as Turkish citizens themselves.

It was discussed that conflict and war lead to displacement of people on a large scale. Despite the international community's insistence that attacks upon innocent civilians in Syria be stopped, the Syrian regime has continued its assault. The international community's failure to stop this is condemnable.

The international community's second failure was the humanitarian fallout and its inability to manage that. As noted above, Turkey's expenditure on refugees for the past 9 years has exceeded 40 billion USD. The United Nations (UN) humanitarian response plan was 3.29 billion USD in value. However, unfortunately, only 1.3 billion USD was made available. More than 60 percent of the planned humanitarian response projects were not funded and thus could not benefit Syrian refugees in Turkey. Support from the EU through NGOs was 3.3 billion USD only. The Turkish state managed 3.6 million refugees in Syria, using predominantly Turkish public funds. This is a tremendous feat, as well as a rebuke of the international community's lack of responsible action when it came to the Syrian humanitarian crisis. It is unclear whether other nations would survive such a strain on their public expenditure.

Inefficacy of Humanitarian Responses to Refugee Crises

According to one of the speakers, the main problem with humanitarian aid for refugee crises is that it is responsive, or curative, and not preventative. A clear pattern that has been observed over the years is that when a crisis or disaster happens, resulting in a full-blown refugee crisis, elected politicians are first people who are expected to manage it. Elected politicians have to attend to their own constituencies and may not be able to effectively address humanitarian disasters. This is unfortunately due to many actors, including political leaders and governments, who use human suffering as a tool or a means to reach their political objectives.

This can deepen human suffering, as innocent civilians are forced to face exceptionally challenging conditions to be able even to survive. Unfortunately, this is clearly evident from the Greek handling of the Syrian refugee crisis, that has now become a major political issue in Greece, with far-right opposition groups blaming the Greek government. The newly elected Greek Prime Minister, Kyriakos Mitsotakis, claimed that 'Greece has reached its limits'. He has aligned himself with rising nationalist and racist attitudes in Greece, fuelling calls for more anti-refugee policies. Following the July 2019 election, the Greek PM closed the Ministry of Migration and transferred responsibility to the Ministry of Civil Protection, i.e. the Greek police. Unfortunately, there have been dozens of reports of the Greek police and army pushing asylum seekers away from the country's land and sea borders and committing other abuses. In terms of numbers, 11,867 asylum seekers who were traveling from Turkey to Greece were pushed back to Turkey in 2018, and that number has climbed to 25, 404 people in the first 10 months of 2019. These asylum seekers have testified that after being detained by Greek officials, their personal belongings were confiscated without any official procedure, and they were subjected to unacceptable

abuse. These testimonies and images of refugees pushed back to Turkey reveal the severity of the situation as 'all of those interviewed reported hostile or violent behaviour by Greek police and unidentified forces wearing uniforms and masks without recognizable insignia', as indicated by a 2018 Human Rights Watch report. The abuse included beatings with hands and batons, kicking, and the use of stun guns.

Despite the Greek authorities' denials, findings of non-governmental groups, intergovernmental agencies and media reports are consistent. Inhumane push-back activities have been observed and denounced by a number of international bodies. According to Todor Gardos, the Europe researcher at Human Rights Watch, 'People who have not committed a crime are detained, beaten and thrown out of Greece without any consideration for their rights or safety' (Smith,

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2018). Gardos also said that the Greek authorities should immediately investigate the repeated allegations of illegally pushing refugees that were traveling to Greece from Turkey back to Turkey, and that 'despite government denials, it appears that Greece is intentionally, and with complete impunity, closing the door on many people who seek to reach the European Union through the Evros [Meriç] border'. The Council of Europe has registered Greece's push back practices as violations of international law. It has requested that Greece stop this horrific practice and investigate those responsible. However, the pushing of asylum seekers back to Turkey by Greek officials continues.

Once the political actors fail, the military is asked to step in. Then the same problem is observed – human deprivation is used to achieve military objectives. Another outcome is that heavy-handed military action causes more harm than good. Finally, often by the time the situation has become very dangerous, the humanitarian community is called upon. They are expected to fight a wildfire with a few buckets of water, figuratively speaking. The humanitarian crisis deepens, and with that, human suffering. Humanitarian organisations fear the loss of an entire generation of Syrians due to the Syrian Civil War.

Continuing in the same vein, the speaker concluded that humanitarians are doing the work of international

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organisations. This is not a correct way to manage the problem and leads to worsening conditions. Governments themselves need to take on more responsibility and do more. It is not the fault of the humanitarian community; it is an example of the degradation of humanitarian values by international governments. The speaker went on to clarify that while there is no need for new values or a revamped view of human life, there is a need to democratise and revamp the humanitarian space. Stakeholders should be identified, and the levels of responsibility for these actors should be designated.

The 1951 Refugee Convention is the key legal document that forms the basis of UNHCR's work. Ratified by 145 countries, it defines the term 'refugee' and outlines the rights of the displaced, as well as the legal obligations of states to protect them. A refugee, according to the Convention, is 'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion' (UNHCR, n.d.).

Even though the 1951 Refugee Convention defines what a refugee is, the speakers believed that there is a need to shift the understanding about who can be called a refugee. For example, there is no clarification in the difference between migrants and refugees. Additionally, the current world system is centered around goals concerning security, rather than upon humanitarian issues. An increasingly security-obsessed world leads to increased scrutiny of applications for asylum, and that is problematic for those seeking asylum or refugee status. By making innocent civilians stay in war and conflict zones, preventing them from leaving, even though they are concerned for their safety, or forcing them to leave areas of safety and return to war zones are acts of criminality. However, even though that is clearly understood, there is very little clear consensus on what the right response is, given that there are concerns for security.

Is Turkey's Humanitarian Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis Sustainable?

The speakers went on to agree that the right response comes down to how the refugee crisis is managed. Particularly, a host state cannot be expected to manage the crisis alone. If the host state is unable to manage it, that cannot be ignored. The refugee crisis, according to the speakers, can have a negative social and economic impact on host communities. This is especially the case for the Syrian refugees in Turkey. Public expenditure on Syrian refugees has put significant pressure on community health and education resources, signalling capacity concerns. While social acceptance levels in Turkey are very high, according to the speakers, they can be tested depending on social and economic factors.

With that said, balancing humanitarianism, development and security, while utilising aid effectively, can lead to good outcomes. Two contrasting examples were provided: South Sudan and Turkey. In South Sudan, aid recipients were reached via airdrop. However, after billions of USD were provided in aid, it was later learned that only a small portion of the aid actually reached those who needed it. In Turkey, however, Turkish Kızılay provided debit cards linked with cash transfers directly to refugees. Syrian refugees were able to use this aid effectively and with integrity, while the local community was also supported. As an example, a Syrian refugee would buy bread from a Turkish bakery.

However, in terms of sustainability of Turkey's humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis, one has to account for the host community's belief in the benefits of hosting refugees. The Centre for American Progress, a U.S. think tank, reported that 78 per cent of Turks believe they spent too much money caring for Syrian refugees (Evans & Dikmen, 2018). According to survey research conducted by the World Food Programme (WFP) in 2017, 'economic issues appear to be a key point of contention for both communities. Perceptions of being undercut in the labour market

are strong among the host community, while the refugees feel underpaid and overcharged (WFP, 2017). The International Crisis Group also reported that most Turkish citizens believe the influx of Syrians has had an adverse impact, while a survey of Turkish citizens in Istanbul published in December 2016 found that '72 per cent felt uncomfortable encountering Syrians and 76 per cent had no sympathy for the refugees' (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Many Turks perceive the costs of hosting Syrian refugees in Turkey to include lower wages, an increase in unemployment, and an increase in rental and food costs. They also worry about deterioration of the Turkish economy, as well as the draining of social aid funding for Turkish citizens. Social media campaigns have cropped up against Syrian refugees who have continued to reside in Turkey. It was also damaging that politicians such as CHP Chairman Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and IYI Party Chairwoman Meral Akşener both 'adopted a populist and exclusionary interpretation of nationalism in a bid to garner votes' in March 2019. Even earlier, in 2017, in a speech during a rally in northern Giresun, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu (Atlas, 2019) said:

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There's no money for farmers, but do you know how much has been spent on Syrians? \$30 million. They've become first class citizens. The price of hazelnuts has made people in the Black Sea Region second-class citizens. You will ask for an account of this.

These sentiments emerging from the resentment caused by perceived economic costs can be potentially linked to a threefold increase in intercommunal violence between Turkish host communities and Syrian refugees in the second half of 2017 when compared to the same period in 2016.

Turkish citizens' resentment towards Syrian refugees increased due to perceived (versus actual) changes in employment opportunities, wages and living costs for Turkish citizens. Prior to addressing these particular perceptions, which call the economic contributions of Syrian refugees into question, it is important to highlight the context of the international community's failure to equitably share the responsibility of hosting Syrian refugees. One must also take into account the duration of the conflict, which exceeded initial expectations. In response to the Syrian refugee crisis, Turkey developed its first asylum law - the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP) in 2013 (Mohyidin, 2018). The new law granted temporary protection to Syrian refugees and provided access to some social services, but it did not give refugees the right to work. In January 2016, the Turkish government allowed Syrian refugees to get work permits if their employer applied for them. However, many Syrian refugees accepted informal work, which was more available than formal employment.

An estimated 750,000-900,000 Syrian refugees are employed informally or unofficially. Given the pre-existing size of the informal economy in Turkey, with estimates ranging from 7% to 139% of the formal economy, it is clear that there was already a sizeable informal economy in place prior to the arrival of the Syrian refugees (Akalin & Kesikoğlu 2007 in Esen & Binatli, 2017). This is even more so in southeast Turkey, where most of the cities with a significant proportion of Syrian refugees are located. The presence of Syrian social networks, government-sponsored refugee camps and

a flourishing informal economy in southeast Turkey - including seasonal work offering employment to unskilled workers - has made it the most viable region of the country for Syrian refugees. Classic economic theory states that if there is an increase in the supply of informal labour, it should reduce the demand for it, leading to either lower wages or the displacement of citizens from the informal sector. Living costs, especially rent, are bound to increase where Syrian refugees continue to reside. This is what Turkish citizens believe is happening and anticipate will continue to happen. It is the cause of tensions between host communities and the Syrian refugees.

At the same time, the very existence of Syrian refugees has led to the creation and sustainability of refugee rehabilitative Turkish industries along the Turkey-Syria border, contributing to the growth of formal sector employment for Turkish citizens. Many have set up businesses to be able to support themselves, resulting in Syrian ownership of one quarter of all foreign businesses established in Turkey. According to Vural Çakır, Chair of the Human Development Foundation (INGEV), 8,100 Syrian companies were established with foreign capital status in Turkey, employing more than 100,000 people as of October 2017 (Anadolu Agency, 2017). Investors and merchants have also moved operations from Syria, especially from Aleppo, to Turkey. However, according to Turkish citizens' perceptions of Syrians' economic survival in Turkey, more than 85 per cent believe Syrian refugees are utilising services provided by the Turkish state and 65 per cent believe they are making ends meet 'by begging', while only 49 per cent believe that Syrians are economically surviving 'by working' (Erdogan, 2017). About 77 per cent of Turkish citizens 'do not agree at all' or 'do not agree' that Syrians contribute to the Turkish economy.

To ensure that Turkey's humanitarian response to the Syrian refugee crisis remains sustainable, both refugees and host communities must believe they are in a symbiotic relationship inside of Turkey. One of the ways this can be done is to encourage integration.

Integration Policies and Programs for Improved Sustainability

Given that few Syrian refugees are returning to Syria anytime soon, that more than 1 million of them are under the age of 10, and that it is in Turkey's favour to benefit from the demographic window of opportunity as highlighted above, it is important to continue to offer and expand educational opportunities. One of the speakers pointed out that 'if we want to stop children from being recruited as militia soldiers, we need to ensure there is an education system for them to benefit from'. In terms of encouraging integration in particular, it would be important to include the following:

- Turkish instruction and/or Turkish language lessons to facilitate social and economic integration in the country: This will increase the benefits of the demographic window of opportunity highlighted above. Teacher training can be provided to Turkish citizens who can then be gainfully employed while teaching Syrian refugees.
- Innovative initiatives in education, including family literacy programs where parents and children are taught literacy skills together: This can be more cost effective than educating children and adults separately.

In 2013, female-headed Syrian refugee households constituted 22 percent of the non-camp Syrian refugee population. This is because many women were abandoned, lost their parents or husbands in the war, or their parents or husbands became disabled or could not provide for them (CTDC, 2015). With almost 65 percent of female Syrian refugees being either illiterate or having had primary education only, they do not have the educational qualifications for skilled work. The situation is exacerbated by the fact that many of them do not have the required documentation for legal work permits, or at times even residence permits that might help them gain access to basic fa-

cilities. This leaves them economically vulnerable, as they have to engage in informal employment to make ends meet or live entirely without any income source. Informal employment can be unreliable or exploitative, with women reporting incidents and fears of sexual harassment, poor working conditions and discrimination by Turkish employers. This situation could be helped by the following:

- Women-only programs for adult education, and vocational or specialized training which would create a safe environment for refugee women, encouraging them and empowering them toward success: These must be accompanied by Turkish language lessons. Especially in areas with higher refugee populations, these programs can lead to employment in sectors such as teaching and healthcare for refugees, as well as economic consumption.
- Microenterprise training for refugee women to become child-care providers: Not only will this enable refugee women to support themselves, it will also help the Turkish government to integrate more Turkish women into the workforce by offering subsidised childcare services in underserved

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areas. Turkey has the lowest rate of female labour force participation among OECD countries. The AK Party government has worked to pave the way for more mothers to remain in the workforce by employing a number of financial instruments, including maternity leave, public provision of childcare services and tax credits based on childcare expenses for wage earners. As female labour force participation is an important driver of growth and development, and as the CHP manifesto for local elections has included providing quality child care (TRT World Research Centre, 2019), this can help create more opportunities for not just refugee women but Turkish women as well.

Increased availability of microfinance for refugees funded by private/public partnerships can help refugees who do not have capital to set up businesses. These businesses could also support the local community. Even though policies have been implemented in the past that encourage financial self-sufficiency for Syrian refugees, engagement from the private sector in the form of microfinance availability is required. This is necessary given the scale and longevity of the Syrian refugee crisis, as well as a lack of formal and reliable employment opportunities for refugees.

Exploring Post-Conflict Management of Humanitarian Crises

One of the speakers believed that the EU would benefit if Turkey continued to host Syrian as well as other refugees. It would be cheaper for the EU monetarily, even if they paid the entire amount which they had previously agreed to. Another speaker said, 'Europeans are outsourcing management of refugees to Turkey'. According to them, the International Committee of the Red Cross is raising more money for greater intervention now, but more will be needed for effective post-conflict management.

Additionally, the speakers concluded that it is easy to focus on refugees as they are more visible on our television screens and news headlines, but displaced people within conflict zones such as Syria are even more desperate and in need of help. This is another reason why the definition of who is a refugee needs to be updated, as it fails to recognise the complete fallout from a humanitarian crisis, whether it is due to war and conflict or another reason.

Turkey launched Operation Peace Spring on October 9, 2019, to eliminate terrorists from northern Syria,

thus aiding in the safe return of 2 million Syrian refugees. As stated above, Turkey's expenditure on refugees for the past 9 years has exceeded 40 billion USD, while support from the EU through NGOs was only 3.3 billion USD (Mutlu & Orkan, 2019). The EU, however, does not support Ankara's safe zone. Alternative solutions such as Turkey's safe zone in Syria must be supported for safe repatriation of refugees. Additionally, resources must be utilised towards job creation within the safe zone so that refugees are able to quickly get back on their feet. Those returning must also be provided with psychosocial support, including access to healthcare, mental health services, affordable housing, food and utility stores, and security. In order to manage this in the case of Syria, countries including Russia and France must mobilise resources and play their role in rebuilding the country. The EU must not lose out on the opportunity to help ensure Syrian refugees are able to rebuild their lives, unless it wants another full-blown refugee crisis at its doorstep.

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