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MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES

CRISIS RESPONSES FROM THE MIDDLE EAST, THE BALKANS, AND THE EU

Denis J. Sullivan and Allyson Hawkins

EUROPE'S "migrant crisis" did not start in Syria. It began, in fact, *within* Europe, in the heart of the Balkans, so to speak. Before the Syrian civil war began in 2011, or the refugee crisis began in 2012; before the establishment of the Za'atari camp in Jordan or camps in Turkey; and even before chemical weapons attacks in Syria or migrant deaths in the Mediterranean; Kosovo Albanians had been migrating (as refugees or economic migrants) to surrounding countries and well beyond.

The smuggling networks and pathways that Kosovo Albanians and others used are now being used by migrants and refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, and African countries. That being said, let us ask the following question: as EU policy concerning refugees is constantly evolving, and with no end in sight for conflicts that create more refugees, how can the EU and Balkan states work together to effectively manage refugee and migrant flows?

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This essay begins with examining some of the factors driving migration from the Middle East to Europe, and particularly the Balkans and Serbia, as well as the changing nature of refugee flows and settlement. Also examined are the consequences for Syria and its Middle Eastern neighbors in hosting the vast majority of Syrian refugees (those being Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, as well as Iraq and Egypt). Finally, the EU's policy response(s) to this unprecedented "human flow" is also discussed.

SYRIAN REFUGEES AND HOST COMMUNITIES

Forced migration is one of the starkest challenges facing the Middle East today. The unprecedented amount of human movement taking place in the region throughout the last decade is understood to include refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), economic migrants, climate change migrants, and others.



Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

Stuck in between: refugees in the Bosnian town of Velika Kladuša by the Croatian border

It is thus not a one-dimensional issue, by any means. That being said, one aspect, namely the refugee crisis, has garnered by far the most headlines around the world for years, coinciding with (or perhaps created by) political instability, changing political alliances, terrorism, and poverty. As these problems or challenges persist, they give rise to even more migrants and refugees.

Of the 68 million "forcibly displaced people" worldwide, 25 million of these are refugees. Of these refugees, Syrians alone account for 6.3 million—i.e., nearly one in four refugees in the world today is a Syrian.

Another 5.4 million refugees are from Palestine, which means that Syria and Palestine alone account for close to 50 percent of the world's refugees.

And these 6.3 million Syrian refugees have largely stayed "close to home." The majority are not trying, nor are they able, to enter the Western Balkan or EU countries. They are concentrated in Turkey (3.5 million), Lebanon (1 million), and Jordan (670,000). These official UNHCR numbers, however, represent only a piece of the refugee-hosting puzzle these countries face. Jordan and Lebanon also host large numbers of Palestinians, under the mandate of UNRWA.

As hosts of the vast majority of Syrian refugees (among many other refugee populations), Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan are doing so while also facing tremendous strains on their infrastructure—water resources, healthcare and education systems, housing, transportation, and various other public resources—on top of the social strains of serving as hosts for more than six years thus far. Turks, Lebanese, and Jordanians—who may already be facing unemployment, insufficient healthcare and education, housing shortages, and other challenges—feel increased economic and social strain with the protracted presence of refugees.

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Still, refugees desperately seek to contribute socially and economically to the countries and communities to which they have fled. Policymakers in these states are under greater and greater pressure, as refugees will remain in these countries with no end in sight; as long as the Syrian civil war continues, and even when it finally comes to an end, it is realistic to expect the vast majority of refugees to stay where they are for many more years to come—until such time as Syria is deemed safe to return to, and until there are work and educational opportunities for millions of Syrians.

The dire and desperate circumstances facing refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, and

Jordan have “pushed” hundreds of thousands to Europe, coupled with the “pull” of the dream for a more secure (and safe) future beyond their Syrian homeland.

As mentioned above, Europe has well-established routes for the movement of both people and commodities. Refugees and migrants have been taking advantage of these routes for well over three years, whether that means traveling through the Balkans from the Middle East or through Italy and Spain from Sub-Saharan Africa to Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco.

One region to which refugees are *not* actively moving is the Gulf (the Persian Gulf, but specifically to Arab countries in the Gulf). None of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are signatories to the UN’s 1951 Refugee Convention and have very restrictive citizenship laws defined by kinship that limit who can reside there. While there is evidence that GCC countries have accepted a limited number of Syrians since the beginning of the crisis in that country, many of those cases are of Syrians who had been already working there, or who had families residing there with whom they could most easily reunite.

Since GCC countries are not signatories to the aforementioned convention, they have no formal obligation to

recognize the rights of refugees. Instead, GCC countries have collectively attempted to aid refugees primarily through financial and humanitarian aid to other refugee-receiving countries.

THE RISE OF URBAN REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

Compounding the logistical and financial issues associated with refugee assistance is the changing and protracted nature of the conflicts and contexts that create refugees, as well as the ways in which countries attempt to address their presence.

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As UN agencies and host communities attempt to grapple with this reality, we see a shift from traditional refugee assistance (whereby UN institutions “process” refugees and move them to refugee camps) to an explosion in the number of “urban refugees,” whereby refugees live within their host communities, in cities or towns, on farms, and otherwise outside of camps.

Currently in the Middle East & North Africa (MENA), 90 percent of Syrian refugees live outside formal refugee camps. This is indicative of a

shift away from the “camp” model of the post-World War II era. As various recent studies have shown, this new pattern of refugee settlement in urban areas has created security, economic, and political challenges throughout host communities. Furthermore, due to the scale and duration of current refugee waves, humanitarian responders, security agencies, and governments are increasingly challenged to find ways to address these new dynamics in the urban space.

In previous decades, refugee populations tended to skew young and male; young males were most capable of physically relocating during conflict or for

economic reasons. Now, with conflict as a driver, the necessity of relocating does not discriminate on the basis of gender or age, with more and more elderly, women, and children being on the move throughout the region than ever before; and they are relocating to cities rather than camps.

While assistance was more centralized in traditional refugee camps, cities allow for refugees to make more connections and live more autonomously. Urban refugeehood, however, creates certain risks, and refugees with mobility issues, acute health problems, or no familial support system can find settlement in a city particularly challenging.

Life in cities can also leave refugees vulnerable to exploitation, arrest, or detention, and can force them to compete with locals for the riskiest and lowest paying jobs. Women and girls are among the most vulnerable sections of refugee populations (just as they are in any impoverished and vulnerable community).

IMPACT WITHIN MENA

While governments, UN agencies, humanitarian NGOs, and development experts will need years to measure the impact of today's refugee crises, the consequences in the Middle East are immediately more pronounced and the impact is already being felt.

Reconstituting a sense of security and peace in Syria is likely to take decades, if not generations.

Additionally, the political consequences of the Syrian conflict, whatever they might be, will reverberate not only through Syria, but the entire region.

Inside Syria, all manner of infrastructure—homes, hospitals, clinics, schools, factories, and agriculture—have been destroyed to varying levels across the country. Millions of children (both refugees and internally displaced) have been out of school for years, creating a “lost generation” of Syrians that will make potential reconstruction efforts even more challenging. The psycho-social impact of such a conflict, not to mention the long-term trauma and PTSD effect on the Syrian population, is immeasurable.

Even with a resolution to the conflict and eventual reconstruction of the country, reconstituting a sense of

security and peace in Syria is likely to take decades, if not generations. (Here, we can look to Bosnia, and disparate communities forced out of other former Yugoslav republics, for some sense of the long-term process ahead for Syria.)

If and when refugees and IDPs are able to return to their homes in Syria, these efforts will have to be managed carefully, in order to keep the possibility of potential future conflict low—particularly around land use and ownership.

Established efforts and expressed interest in rebuilding Syria already exist, despite no clear end of the conflict in sight.

Moving outwards, examining the impact on Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan is equally distressing. In Jordan, issues around land use, water, and other natural resources will only intensify as the refugee presence persists without sufficient humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, with so much of Jordan's economy dependent on foreign aid, post-conflict assistance to Jordan must remain robust if it hopes to continue to host refugees without serious strain on public services.

Lebanon faces similar challenges, having also hosted Palestinian (and other) refugees for a protracted time throughout the years. Lebanon is less politically stable than Jordan, and the ongoing refugee presence there has created greater security challenges; these could have dire political and economic consequences for the country overall, as the Lebanese political and social environment is generally more volatile and susceptible to rapid changes than elsewhere.

In Turkey, as political scientist Soner Cagaptay and others argue in their respective writings about the impact of Syrian refugees in Turkey, the potentially altered demographics due to the refugee presence could result in political shifts, which represents a unique challenge that Turkey faces, in addition to the expected challenges associated with host-country status.

HOSTING FATIGUE

Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey are all facing “hosting fatigue,” and will be dealing with the fallout from the Syrian refugee influx for decades. All three have been forced to balance the needs of their local populations with the needs and well-being of refugees requiring assistance. As Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan move forward with their mission to host and assist refugees, aid dependency will have to be managed

and carefully accounted for in an effort to circumvent potentially devastating economic consequences.

One way to preempt an aid dependency crisis is “responsibility sharing”—primarily with EU and GCC member states. (Regrettably, given the violent reaction of the Trump Administration, the United States can no longer be counted upon to “share the responsibility” of refugee support.)

Critics warn that there is a fine line

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between responsibility sharing, financial assistance, and a containment policy, which aims to fund (or “bribe?”) refugee-hosting countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and

Jordan, in an effort to keep refugees from moving on to secondary destinations.

Focusing one layer down, by increasing support to local groups and civil society efforts in refugee-hosting countries, can be a sustainable and efficient way to put financial assistance to work, but questions remain on how refugees will be cared for, represented, and able to access social services and employment as the crisis persists.

BALKAN IMPACT

The political effects of refugee flows from the Middle East present the Western Balkan region and the European Union with enormous challenges, but

also opportunities. The overwhelming majority of refugees moving into Western Europe have, in the past, used the Balkan route, placing immense pressure on the countries along that route, particularly Greece, Macedonia, and Serbia, and their responses have seen varying degrees of success.

The March 2016 signing of the EU-Turkey deal supposedly closed the Balkan route; with its closure, many refugees and migrants remained trapped in the Balkans, including in “hot-spots” in Greece, plus those in Italy.

As such, they are unable to either make their way further into the Balkans or elsewhere in Europe; nor can they move back in the directions from which they came. These restrictions on movement, while attempting to prevent increased migration into the Balkans and the EU, have essentially created new destinations wherein refugee populations swell. This still has not stopped refugees from attempting to travel through the Balkans or reach Europe altogether.

In an article entitled “The Anguish of Refugees Trapped in the Balkans,” Berlin- and Zagreb-based journalist Jelena Prtorić outlines how governments, police forces, and security officials have enabled the development of unprecedented surveillance technology and in-

creased police presences along borders. She also notes that there is an underlying current of contradiction in this context; applications for asylum are officially welcomed, but very few are actually granted.

Of key concern for governments, security officials, and humanitarian organizations operating in the Balkans are the rising numbers of unaccompanied minors that have arrived. In an

article entitled “Number of Unaccompanied Child Refugees Rises in Balkans,” Maja Živanović and her co-authors argue that confirming identity and age, and determin-

ing appropriate humanitarian action for unaccompanied minors in this already chaotic context, presents a challenge that, if not properly handled, risks making already vulnerable minors even more vulnerable as they travel through these countries. Examining how the refugee influx is currently affecting Serbia sheds further light on these, and other issues.

REFUGEES IN SERBIA

Serbia has a long history of managing refugees. Preceding the influx of Syrians was a mass migration from Serbia’s breakaway province of Kosovo and Metohija, which opened the floodgates to forced migration from the Middle East. The first instance of mass entry of asylum seekers to EU territory (exceeding 10,000 per week) was in early 2014, as Kosovo

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Albanians crossed central Serbia on their way to Hungary. Their network of smugglers, (successful) strategies for crossing the border at Horgoš and Kelebija, and base in the Serbian border town of Preševo were all defining precedents for the subsequent influx of Middle Eastern refugees. It was precisely these “trailblazers” in Serbia who determined the timing and path of the early stages of the refugee wave in 2014.

As of June 2017, the World Bank asserts that around 5,000 asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in Serbia remain in legal limbo with no clear path forward. Most of

these people came from Afghanistan (62 percent), Iraq (13 percent), Pakistan (12 percent), and Syria (5 percent). However, as with all instances in which people are on the move, many remain unregistered and unaccounted for. A year later, in May 2018, the UNHCR’s Serbia office reported that Pakistan overtook other nations as the largest group of new asylum seekers and refugees (numbering 25 percent of all “new arrivals”); next was Iran (21 percent), Afghanistan (19 percent), Iraq (15 percent) and Syria (9 percent).

There are 18 reception and asylum centers in Serbia, managed by Serbia’s Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, and they are busy with the thousands of asylum seekers, refugees,

and migrants residing in legal limbo. Compounding this issue, Živanović and her co-authors argue in the aforementioned article, are the hundreds of children being hosted by these centers, nearly 700—a considerable portion of which are unaccompanied minors.

Even with the limbo faced by these people on the move, the Western Balkan

migration route remains active, while arrivals and departures continue. Save the Children estimates that more than 3,700 people have entered Serbia since the beginning of 2018. However, these newcomers continually face

inadequate access to international protection, which means that the refugees and migrants making their way to Serbia, often with the help of smugglers, are even more exposed to violence and exploitation.

Border areas represent a particularly dangerous node for people traveling in or out of Serbia. Collective expulsions just push people into another territory where they will eventually be confronted by another (dangerous) border to cross. Violence, at times inflicted by border guards, has also been reported from all borders in the region. Therefore, balancing security and policing needs with the protection needs of refugees and migrants is imperative as this crisis continues.

The first instance of mass entry of asylum seekers to EU territory was in early 2014, as Kosovo Albanians crossed central Serbia on their way to Hungary.

The physical and mental toll on refugees and migrants—as discussed earlier regarding Syrian refugees in MENA—is a serious health problem for those who remain stranded in Serbia for indefinite periods of time. Many have been stranded for months or even years, facing high levels of stress and deteriorating mental health due to the uncertainty of the situation.

Finding navigable pathways to asylum, more defined legal statuses, easier access to humanitarian aid, and greater access to information and options for refugees and migrants in the Balkans can go a long way to tempering the protection and psycho-social challenges faced by refugees stranded in, or making their way through, this region—at least until a political solution can be reached.

The presence of state-run asylum centers in Serbia, and their accompanying efforts, are heartening. Beyond providing basic necessities, Serbia is looking for ways to help combat the financial and social stress faced by many who have *no way forward to Europe* and *no way back to their countries of origin*, at least for the time being.

Initiatives that consider assistance and programming to local populations, alongside assistance for newcomers, as has been the case throughout the Middle East, could be a way to gain political

and financial traction in this challenging context. Furthermore, as a geographical midpoint between many refugee-sending countries in the Middle East and their desired destinations in the EU, coordination between Balkan states and the EU on policy to address the state and human security issues at play, the funding gaps facing the humanitarian community, and potential avenues for legal residence and integration in the Balkans or the EU is much needed.

DOUBLING DOWN

Balkan states and the EU must double their efforts in working together or risk the negative effects of not managing refugee flows. The prolonged nature of the refugee crises, and continuing realities of economic and other migrants, calls for closer coordination than ever before.

Balkan and EU officials can learn from the accumulated experience of other countries hosting refugees, both in transit and in settlements. Certain successes in Turkey and Jordan, as well as in Lebanon, regarding the effective management, integration, and social cohesion of refugees should be studied, leveraged, and modified to help policymakers and humanitarian agencies in the Balkan and EU context.

The refugee crisis is global, and with no end in sight, the search for solutions and effective management must continue. ●