



## ***International Cooperation in Responsibility-Sharing for Refugees in the Euro-Mediterranean Space***

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Refugee situations have grown in magnitude in the Middle East. They have become protracted and affected neighboring Europe. International actors must work together to share in the responsibility of refugees by extending proportionate international cooperation to developing host countries in the region.

Countries of the Middle East have historically been a hub for refugees. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire drove Armenians and populations fleeing their countries of birth to the region. Europeans escaping Fascism and Nazism also took refuge in the region, such as in Egypt. At present, the Middle East is the largest host region in the world.

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In the last seven decades, countries of the Middle East have also produced successive waves of refugees of their own. The most protracted refugee situation is that of the Palestinians, who sought shelter, protection and livelihood in bordering countries, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria and in smaller numbers in Iraq and Egypt. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, flows of Iraqi refugees arrived in Jordan and Syria as well as in Egypt and Lebanon.

More recently refugees originated in Syria. Beginning in March 2011, with the outbreak of the Syrian uprising and steadily increasing in magnitude, flows refugees from Syria which included Palestinians, headed for bordering Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq as well as Turkey, in addition to Egypt. When violence in Syria became untenable, many Iraqis



present in Syria since 2006-07 returned to their country accompanied by waves of Syrian refugees. Instability in Iraq did not deter Iraqis and Syrians from seeking shelter there.

Estimated at 1.5 million registered and unregistered Syrian refugees, Lebanon's refugees account for 20% of the total population in the country, making it the largest country ever in terms of the number of refugees relative to its population. In Jordan, registered Syrian refugees were estimated at some 700,000, representing 8 per cent of the population.

When the two countries became saturated with Syrian refugees around 2014, fresh flows from Syria and others seeking secondary refuge took the direction of Turkey. This is when volumes of refugees in Turkey greatly increased, exceeding 2 and soon 2.7 million.

The new flows did not end in Turkey. Refugees overflowed to Europe. Crossing the Aegean Sea from the Turkish coast, some reached the Greek Islands, essentially intending to reach European Union (EU) countries further north. Others took the road to Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary also aiming at arriving and seeking asylum in North European countries, such as Germany and Sweden. Flows to Europe increased in 2014 and especially 2015 when the volume exceeded one million. Refugees from Syria, Iraq and countries as far as Eritrea and Afghanistan arrived in Europe. From the very beginning, the flows were mixed, including refugees and migrants from Iraq, Pakistan, Bangladesh, West African and even European countries. Noteworthy is that among the largest population groups arriving in Hungary at one point in 2015 was that constituted by nationals of

European countries of the Balkans such as Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia.

The Mediterranean Sea was another channel for refugees to reach Europe, principally benefiting from the vacuum of power in Libya. Here also mixed flows included migrants. In addition to Syria, refugees originated from much the same countries as for the Balkans route. The relative weight of nationals of West African countries was more important in these flows.

The Preamble of the 1951 convention emphasizes the importance of international cooperation for the solution of the refugee situations. The need for this cooperation cannot be sufficiently emphasized with respect to developing host countries. In the case of Syrian refugees, countries of first refuge cannot meet protection and livelihood obligations on their own. Local integration is not an option for the same reasons and obviously neither is voluntary repatriation. International cooperation, therefore, is indispensable for facing up to the Syrian refugee situation in a way that could guarantee the right of refugees to protection and decent livelihoods. International cooperation also is in the best interest of industrialized countries, especially EU Member States, because it diminishes unexpected population movements to their territories. It equally allows them to plan in advance and formulate policies on reception, treatment of asylum applications and on hosting of refugees. International cooperation takes the form of financial and technical assistance and of resettlement opportunities for refugees from their first countries of refuge. Resettlement along with local integration and voluntary repatriation are the three types of durable solutions envisaged by the 1951 convention.



In 2015, in its proposals to defuse the refugee crisis, the European Commission (EC) added to classical types of durable solutions other categories of admission such as for humanitarian reasons and private sponsorships. The EU and Member States have provided financial assistance directly to countries of first refuge or through international organizations. Civil society organizations (CSOs) from Member States engaged in fieldwork with refugees and provided technical assistance. Before the proposals of the EC, Member States had offered resettlement opportunities. Clearly, international cooperation extended to countries of first refuge was not sufficient to keep refugees from seeking better protection, livelihoods and resettlement in precisely Member States of the EU. The movements of refugees brought home the validity of the EU's identification of the Arab Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries as falling in its "neighborhood".

But the Syrian crisis was also the occasion for international actors to engage in other types of international cooperation in facing up to refugee situations. The March 2016 deal between the EU and Turkey is an example. In broad lines, according to the deal, Turkey committed to stem the flow of refugees to EU Member States in return for financial assistance of six billion euros. The agreement also provided for the exchange of one refugee staying in Turkey for one irregular migrant having reached territories of the EU. In other words, Turkey committed to the readmission of asylum seekers having traveled from its territory to one of the EU Member States and found not to be deserving of refugee status. The conformity of this deal to international law needs to be analyzed. Its implementation and consequences are also to be followed and evaluated.

The exceptional refugee situation in the Euro-Mediterranean space prompted the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to convene a Summit on the Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants during its 71st session in September 2016. United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) to convene a Summit on the Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants during its 71<sup>st</sup> session in September 2016. At the end of the Summit, a UNGA resolution provided for the adoption of a Compact on Large Movements of Refugees in 2018.

Discussions have arisen about giving concrete substance to the principle of international cooperation. Criteria for sharing the responsibility for hosting refugees with countries of first refuge will have to be developed. These criteria may not be binding soon. However, discussions and resulting guidelines should prove useful for the situation of Syrian refugee and others that may arise in the future.

On October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2016, a one-day closed roundtable discussion was held in Cairo to discuss major issues raised by the refugee flows in the Euro-Mediterranean space. The discussion was organized by the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies (CMRS) and the Middle East Studies Center (MESC) of the School of Global Affairs and Public Policy (GAPP), The American University in Cairo (AUC). The participants included academics, representatives from the League of Arab State (LAS), the EU, and representatives of international intergovernmental organizations (IGOs).

Participants in the roundtable agreed on convening a conference on International Cooperation in responsibility-sharing for Refugees in the Euro-Mediterranean Space. The conference was considered a contribution to



discussions on international cooperation in responsibility-sharing, including in the context of the Compact on Large Movements of Refugees.

On 9-10 October, 2017, CMRS held the agreed upon international conference under the title *International Cooperation in Responsibility-sharing for Refugees in the Euro-Mediterranean Space*. Academics, researchers, experts, officials of international intergovernmental organizations and civil society representatives from the Arab Middle East, Europe, Africa and North America participated in the six panels of the conference. The following were the subjects of the panels:

1. The refugee protection regime: shortcomings at the international, regional and national levels, and possible remedies
2. The political discourse about refugees
3. The migration-refugee nexus
4. Refugees' livelihoods: shelter, education, healthcare
5. Refugees' access to the labor market in host countries
6. Media and the refugee crisis

For each panel, a background paper was produced by one of the panel participants and disseminated in advance for discussion during the conference. These background papers as well as papers by other speakers will be consolidated in a special issue of a journal or a book.

In addition to drawing lessons from the refugee situation in the Euro-Mediterranean

Space in the last few years, academics, researchers and experts seized the opportunity to contribute to the preparatory process of the Global Compact on Refugees. Their contribution took the form of a Statement<sup>1</sup> where they expressed their views about provisions to be included in the Programme of Action that will accompany the Compact. (The Statement can be accessed at <http://schools.aucegypt.edu/GAPP/cmrs/Pages/default.aspx>)

Conclusions of the conference can be used as guidelines in similar refugee situations and negotiating processes. They can also be benefited from as policy advice by wishing governments and international organizations and serve as bases for further research by academics.

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