

EVENT CONTRIBUTION

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"Combining forces to tackle the crisis"

LOCAL, NATIONAL, INTERREGIONAL: THE NEED FOR A MULTIDIMENSIONAL COPING STRATEGY IN LIGHT OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Policy recommendations to European decision-makers

As a result of the three-day symposium "Refugee Crisis Without Borders", jointly organised by Regional Office Gulf States and Jordan Office, political analysts and representatives of humanitarian organisations developed the following policy recommendations to European decision-makers. These proposals shall help to counter spiralling violence and any further escalation of the crisis as well as to get new and bold initiatives for political reform off the ground – in affected countries but also the international arena. To put this vision into practice, one will need the political will to breathe new life into key terms, such as security, dignity, integration, solidarity and hope.

The event (November 29 to December 1, 2015) was organised to account for the fact that neighbouring countries as well as Europe and the Gulf States have a mutual responsibility to overcome the interregional crisis and that the escalation of violence in Yemen harbours the threat of creating new reasons for flight, thus prompting people to seek protection in neighbouring countries and beyond.

Demonstrating European solidarity, acting in concert

It is important to note that transnational crises demand stringent, international or even global cooperation and that Europe

has to intensify its efforts to develop a political as well as humanitarian solution for the current refugee challenge and to implement it successfully. Therefore, the following recommendations are directed at the European community:

The European Union (EU) should expand its humanitarian aid and coordinate its efforts better. Neighbouring countries that already bear a heavy burden due to the existing conflicts have to be supported more strongly. A triangular dialogue between Europe, the Levant and the Gulf is inevitable.

The admission of refugees should not be curbed but extended in support of a regularised distribution scheme, which incorporates all European countries. This is the only way to prevent the sustained destabilisation of countries like Jordan and Lebanon. EU member states should discuss scrapping the Dublin Regulation and should concentrate on building consensus with regard to a fair distribution key, which accounts for the capacities of individual member states' preferences.

Crossings via the Mediterranean and people smugglers pose another problem, which has to be tackled. There is the need to overhaul visa requirements in order to guarantee safe passage for refugees seeking protection in Europe. In this context,

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one could discuss establishing a temporary "Humanitarian Schengen Visa", which refugees can apply for in a safe and legal way at European embassies or newly created institutions in conflict states' neighbouring countries. If the application is successful, the EU or the admitting state could provide for safe transport.

A so-called humanitarian visa could suffice as a short-term strategy to combat illegal immigration. In the light of the developments in recent years, however, one should not neglect long-term measures. Especially European experts were among those who demanded the creation of a new supranational EU agency, specialised in the field of migration, asylum and security and endowed with vast competencies to make decisions about asylum applications. Moreover, the conceptualisation, implementation and monitoring of cooperation between the EU and third states should be improved. This is another field, where a European migration and asylum agency could buttress cooperation, as it might increase coordination on different levels and could function as a central contact point for third countries.

Furthermore, the participants of the conference stressed that the European community should invest into conflict-related UN organisations for the long term. After all, the budget cuts on the part of the World Food Programme in 2015, which were a result of western governments' inability to live up to their pledges, were one of the catalysts for the prolonged refugee crisis. Consequently, more than half of all Syrian refugees in Lebanon were starving in May 2015. In order to prevent such a situation in the future, European governments' contributions to the UNHCR's emergency budget have to improve.

At the beginning of the interregional symposium in Jordan, keynote speaker Armin

Laschet – Chairman of the Christian Democrats (CDU) Parliamentary Group, Landtag of NRW and Deputy Chairman, CDU Germany – highlighted that the political debate about refugees should not be detached from reality. The conflicts in Syria and Iraq were said to have drawn closer to Europe, the consequences being felt in every village and city in Germany. As the conference title "Refugee Crisis in the Middle East – From a Local Burden To a Shared Humanitarian Responsibility" already implies, the hardship of refugees is not confined to the local level but constitutes an international challenge for the global community. According to Laschet, it is too big a task to be shouldered by a few states or even one country only. Germany was said to have taken in approximately one million refugees, which presents the country with an unprecedented situation, which becomes clear from the fact that in 2010, for example, only 50,000 asylum seekers arrived in Germany. Therefore, Laschet said it was inevitable for Germany to find a solution at the EU-level in order to bring the current situation under control and to help the refugees in the best possible way.

The biggest mistake, however, was made when the allocation of funds to the United Nation's World Food Programme was reduced from US\$ 28 to 13 per person and month. As a result, refugees in camps in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon were in such a dire situation that they were forced to embark on the perilous path to Europe, Laschet said. In the future, the US, Europe and the Gulf States should prevent such budget cuts from happening. He went on to explain that the agreement on the EU refugee fund for Turkey should be seen as a step in the right direction to take the pressure off one of the central receiving countries and to substantively support its efforts in providing medical and humanitarian assistance. Each of the three regions –

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Europe, the Levant and the Gulf States – bears responsibility, Laschet added. And while Europe is trying to provide relief in the Levant, he concluded, the Gulf States would have to step up their efforts.

Session 1: Assessing the root causes of a refugee crisis without borders

However, before burden-sharing was discussed, the conference participants focussed on bringing to light the primary cause of the refugee crisis: the civil war in Syria. The extent of destruction is becoming more devastating every day and more than half of the population is fleeing, especially within the country. An end to the conflict is not in sight, which amplifies the impression of a total lack of perspectives in the country and urges Syrians to flee to neighbouring states and to Europe, the participants agreed. However, not only the dangerous security situation and the dramatic surge in food prices are reasons for flight: One Syrian participant highlighted the lack of education as a primary cause. "If people cannot find a way to provide their children with education, they will take matters into their own hands and flee in order to allow for their children to have a better future."

Therefore, experts on humanitarian aid pointed to the fact that the Syrian people should be supported by humanitarian aid organisations on the local level, especially in the areas of health and education. In addition, measures to generate income have to be introduced, so that local communities can achieve a large degree of self-sufficiency and economic independence from international organisations. All speakers agreed, however, that the refugee crisis will only be resolved if a political solution for ending the conflict in Syria can be found. This direct causal link between the Syrian civil war and the international refugee crisis was said to have been ig-

nored for a long time by politics and the media in Europe. The conflict seemed far away and it was only recently that it was placed high on the agenda of national and international politics. Since creating perspectives for a future in Syria is of key importance with regard to the return of Syrian refugees, a sustainable peace accord supported by all conflict parties would also have to incorporate long term strategies for the reconstruction of the country.

At the same time, the situation for refugees in Syria's neighbouring states is becoming more precarious, which constitutes another reason for (renewed) flight. Europe and in particular Germany are perceived as "safe harbours", which at least offer the chance for a better life. According to the speakers, the lack of integration and dignity in the receiving countries, represent key motives for the expensive and perilous escape. Without any possibility to work legally and help themselves, the refugees in Syria's neighbouring countries rely on the support of the international community. However, the organisations of the United Nations are insufficiently funded and a sense of fatigue among international donors threatens the timely implementation of programmes helping refugees to meet their basic needs. At the same time, there is a lack of long term perspectives in the primary receiving countries, which leads to a mutually reinforcing cycle of poverty and dependence.

Against this backdrop, the participants advocated for the creation of jobs and education opportunities for Syrian refugees and highlighted the need for securing sufficient food supplies as well as providing for adequate medical treatment. Above that, representatives of humanitarian organisations demanded a general change of thinking about humanitarian aid: Organisations should coordinate and cooperate more strongly. Moreover, earlier work, which

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focussed on emergency relief, should be overhauled and adapted to the realities of Syrian refugees: "We have to show refugees a path to self-help and give them back their dignity", a representative of the European Commission's Humanitarian aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO) in Jordan explained.

Session 2: Shouldering the burden – Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt approaching a breaking point?

Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt alone have taken in more than four million refugees from Syria. The conference's second panel dealt with the current status of the prolonged crisis in the Middle East: 1.2 million refugees from Syria reside in Lebanon; that makes one fifth of the Cedar state's population. In Jordan, 650,000 Syrians make up 10 per cent of the entire population and in Turkey Syrian refugees number 1.9 million. Iraq with its 250,000 refugees (in addition to three million internally displaced persons) and Egypt with more than 130,000 Syrian refugees also play an important role. Without a doubt, Syria's less developed neighbouring states bear the largest share of the burden, not Europe. Although all of these states are under pressure and the coping strategies differ substantially: In Jordan, for example, there are two official refugee camps, whereas Lebanon is strictly against creating such camps as a result of its experiences with Palestinian refugees.

The speakers and experts from Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey all stressed that registration procedures were implemented too late. As a consequence, many refugees were not officially registered making it difficult to assess the exact number of arrivals. In all of these predominantly resource-poor states the impact of refugees on the national budget, the economy and infrastructure – including the health and

education sector, waste management and water supplies – is decisive. Especially, schools and hospitals were said to be overburdened. Moreover, the crime rate might rise, the experts stressed. They also criticised that there was a lack of much-needed strategies to cope with refugees and their needs in the long run. In particular the issue of integrating refugees into the labour market is being discussed very controversially in the different host states, experts agreed. There was also consensus that the international community has to step up its support, especially with regard to the development of sustainable economic projects and the expansion of national infrastructures. Moreover, increased investments into the labour market by the private sector were said to be needed. An advisor to the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs spoke out in favour of a long-term action plan to be jointly devised by the government, UN organisations and national NGOs to better coordinate humanitarian assistance.

Session 3: Inside Yemen's forgotten conflict – a new Syria in the making?

Similar plans were demanded in the third panel discussion for the "forgotten conflict" in Yemen. After all and amid an escalation of the fighting, the international community has neglected its responsibility to mediate between the Houthi rebels and the Saudi-led Arab coalition, which supports the Yemeni government in exile. Ever since fighting broke out in March 2015, more than 6,500 people were killed, approximately one million were wounded and some 2.5 million Yemenis became internally displaced persons (IDPs). Due to air strikes, blockades and prolonged skirmishes, the humanitarian situation is catastrophic: around 80 per cent of the population are dependent on food aid, an expert explained. Especially the country's destroyed infrastructure and the tense securi-

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ty situation are increasingly complicating the work of local aid organisations.

To alleviate the suffering, the coordination between aid organisations has to be improved significantly and more support has to be given to local partners. However, experts agreed that – contrary to Syria – no mass exodus is to be expected in Yemen. After all, the majority of the population wants to remain in Yemen despite increasing violence. Still every effort should be made to bring the conflict to an end. A variety of structural and political factors as well as the interference of regional actors increase the potential for violence and pose serious challenges to a solution. In particular, Saudi Arabia's ambivalent role in the conflict was discussed thoroughly by the panellists from Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Yemeni side demanded that Saudi Arabia should take greater responsibility for the humanitarian situation in Yemen. One of the participants from the Gulf, however, said that the Saudi government was making efforts to end the conflict and to keep the suffering of Yemeni civilians at a minimum. In line with this, the participant argued that the Kingdom had taken in approximately two million Yemenis as "guests" over the course of one year, while the King Salman Center was trying to better coordinate and increase the amount of aid delivered to people in combat areas. Despite all differences, the panellists agreed that the efforts made so far were not sufficient in deescalating the conflict and closing the power vacuum, which was said to be currently developing in the fragile Yemeni state.

Against this backdrop, one of the discussants warned that at present this power vacuum was being filled by Islamist militias, which take over control whenever Houthis give up positions. For the reason of renewed and more consistent counter-

terrorism efforts alone, the Yemen conflict has to be put at the top of the agenda of the international community, the expert argued. Consequently, the international community should pressure both warring factions to continue the peace talks. Moreover, programmes for supporting state actors should be developed as local political actors were said to be often inexperienced and overwhelmed by the current situation. Also programmes focussing on local governance initiatives and based on partnership with the Yemeni government could be established to counter the influence of Islamist groups by working together with civil servants on the local level. Additionally, the United Nations could lead international mandated troops to monitor the transition and redevelopment of the country as well as to stabilise the situation for a limited period of time once a ceasefire has been firmly established, some experts suggested.

Referring to the political future of the country, most experts spoke in favour of a federal political system with specific political and religious rights granting a certain amount of autonomy to the individual regions. Participants also discussed the establishment of a massive reconstruction programme for Yemen, which could be financed through funds set up by the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In addition and as a short-term political measure, aid to Yemen should be increased drastically and right away in order to avert the same kind of implosion as in Syria.

Session 4: Europe and the Gulf – reluctant refuge or saviour of the day?

However, it is not just with regard to Yemen but also Syria and Iraq that voices demanding more responsibility on the part of the Gulf States grow louder. Whereas European and small resource-poor Arab coun-

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tries, such as Jordan and Lebanon, admit vast numbers of refugees, the Gulf States show more restraint, participants on the fourth panel concluded. From different sides the countries of the Arabian Peninsula were criticised for their hesitant response and lack of solidarity. It was for example stressed that Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain had the space and optimal conditions to host many refugees as the Gulf States are sparsely populated and have sufficient financial resources. After all, the Gulf States' median salaries are higher than those of European countries and the relatively small populations in the Gulf region live in great prosperity. Moreover, in terms of their cultural, religious, and linguistic background the Gulf States are closer to the Syrians than European societies.

The reasons why GCC-States nevertheless do not admit large numbers of refugees, are multifaceted, the panellists explained. Security concerns, however, were said to be the primary motif. After all, one defining characteristic of the Gulf States is their tremendously high percentage of expatriates among the local population: In Saudi Arabia some 30 per cent of the total population are from foreign countries with different cultures; in smaller Gulf States, such as the UAE or Qatar, only 10 per cent of the population are native to the country. Moreover, many foreigners are migrant workers from South East Asia, India, the Philippines or Indonesia, but also the US or Europe. Therefore, the Gulf States feel they would become even more overwhelmed by immigrants if large numbers of refugees were admitted to the country. What is more, GCC-countries fear that social unrest could develop more quickly – not least against the background of comparatively high living expenses. Consequently, it is more reasonable if refugees go to Lebanon or Jordan where living standards are similar, the Gulf States ar-

gue. In line with this, entry and residence regulations in individual Gulf States were toughened in recent years. The extremist attacks in the Gulf States in the last couple of years were said to have illustrated that terrorism does not spare this part of the world. Consequently, the often criticised lack of solidarity on the Arabian Peninsula was explained a fear of a massive threat to national security.

Experts from the Gulf, however, stressed that Gulf States do not refrain from offering help entirely. GCC-states were said to be actively involved in alleviating the suffering by providing direct, humanitarian help and donations. All governments in the Gulf region are offering generous funding to the United Nations and are providing humanitarian aid through their national relief agencies, such as the Qatari Red Crescent, which supports Syrian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, the same experts explained.

Finally, decision-makers, political analysts and representatives of humanitarian aid organisations from Europe, the Levant and the Gulf underlined the fact that migration and refugee issues do not stop at national borders and are only to be solved by concerted efforts. Far too long, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey bore all humanitarian responsibility. What is more, the Yemen conflict should not be ignored, since in the long run the conflict harbours the potential of renewed, dramatic refugee movements, even though Yemenis have so far remained in their country as IDPs.