

Thoughts on a Cooperation Mechanism for Syrian Refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey

Michael Nasr

Abstract: This brief paper discusses the challenges that Syrian Refugees face in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. In short, it analyzes the situation of refugees in each of these three countries. The piece then proposes a method of cooperation between these three countries for dealing with the refugees. It uses a theory of transparency in order to tackle the issue of corruption, which is used as the primary example for obstructions to successful cooperation. Other suggestions are also cited in the paper to encourage regional cooperation over Syrian refugees. The paper attempts to highlight both the difficulties and the necessity of having a regional plan to deal with the massive refugee crisis that has been caused by the conflict in Syria. The paper sheds some light on these specific issues and highlights the need for further research to propose alternative venues for cooperation over refugees' crisis in the MENA region.

Introduction

The conflict in Syria has been ongoing for seven years now, with a continually rising death toll. The fallout of this conflict has caused mass displacement for the Syrian people. According to the World Bank, over 6.3 million people are internally displaced, while 4.9 million are officially registered as refugees in other countries¹. In reality, the number of refugees is probably significantly higher when taking into consideration the large number of refugees who have not been yet registered. This brief paper will explore the different refugee situations in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. It will delve into and investigate the different approaches that these countries employ vis-a-vis refugees, how they differ and how they are similar. Furthermore, by analyzing the different methods these countries use in dealing with the refugee crisis, it will attempt to create mutually beneficial options for the countries to cooperate through a regional cooperation mechanism when dealing with refugees. Looking into a cooperation mechanism that deals with corruption will be the main example used in this paper. It must be noted that creating a regional cooperation mechanism is very difficult as all three countries have very different political systems with vastly varying views. As a result, this paper can be viewed as a first expedition into this very complex topic with the goal of assessing its viability for further research.

Lebanon

Lebanon is one of the three countries that will be explored in this brief paper. The small country has a long history of political division, making the country politically fragile. This is evident when considering the few years period during which time the country did not have a president because the politicians could not agree on a suitable candidate that satisfied all of them. Moreover, Lebanon is characterized by a sectarian and religious balance which is a very sensitive topic. Meanwhile, the corruption in this small country runs deep. In short, looking at Lebanon and contemplating how to explore its situation regarding Syrian refugees becomes a very complex endeavor when considering all the issues that are and were inherently already residing within the country.

Lebanon hosts around one million officially registered refugees, and for a country of 4.4 million people, this is quite a significant amount². This number does not include the refugees in the country who have not registered³. “In the past seven years, the massive influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has placed the country and its people under significant political, socio-economic, and humanitarian strain, where now one in five people is a refugee—the highest population of refugee per capita in the world”⁴. With the unregistered refugees, an exact number is not possible to discern, but the number is quite substantial. However, the strain that this great number puts on the country is evident in many respects. The reason for this is that Lebanon has a policy of non-encampment; rather the Syrian refugees live in host communities. A great number of the refugees live in urban areas as well as in the Bekaa Valley⁵. One of the reasons

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behind Lebanon’s prohibition of formal and official refugee camps is due to their experience with the Palestinian refugees who are still in Lebanon today. This is because “the Palestinian refugee crisis... is often held responsible for bringing about the Lebanese Civil War”⁶. This fear of another civil war causes a great deal of worry to the Lebanese people, and as a result, creates a lot of tension between the Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host communities.

Moreover, the resources in Lebanon were already insufficient to supply the country’s original population with basic goods and services, and these limited supplies were strained even further with the addition of the Syrian people who have entered the country since the war began. This becomes even worse when regarded in conjunction with the fact that one and a half million Lebanese people live below the poverty line, as does 76 percent of the refugees in the country⁷. Within this context and people in similar financial conditions competing for the same resources in a country that already struggles, it is quite understandable that tensions in host communities have arisen.

One of the main points of contention that poses a significant challenge to a cooperation mechanism between countries is the issue of corruption. This is clearly evident in Lebanon where “issues of corruption and lack of accountability, good governance, and compliance from institutions, in addition to a consuming bureaucracy, have exacerbated the



impediments of many Syrian refugees and Lebanese communities alike”⁸. Furthermore, the political leaders of the country are much more concerned with satisfying the ruling elite class of the country rather than dealing with serious problems that plague the general population, and this has been the case long before the influx of Syrians into the country. Also, the ruling elite of the country seem to have little to no desire to enhance the Lebanese infrastructure, which would benefit the Lebanese population as well as the refugees, but rather they are more interested in using the Syrian people as a cheap source of labor whom they can exploit for extremely low wages⁹.

Although the UNHCR is more or less in charge of dealing with the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, there is only so much that they can do without support from the state. With such a high level of corruption where a country’s own elected political rulers refuse to help their own people, how can they be encouraged to help refugees, be they inside their own borders or outside? Furthermore, how do you make them accountable for their actions and make sure that they do not abuse their power through such a mechanism? These are very concerning questions that need to be addressed, because without doing this would mean starting something that is doomed to fail.

Jordan

Jordan is the second refugee hosting country that will be examined in this brief. The UNHCR has officially registered an estimated 630,000 Syrian refugees within the borders of Jordan, leading to an approximate eight percent increase in Jordan’s overall population¹⁰. Similar to the case in Lebanon, most of the Syrian refugees in Jordan live in urban areas

rather than in the two most prominent camps in Zaatari and Azraq¹¹. However, where this situation differs from the one in Lebanon is that the camps are officially allowed in Jordan. As a result, it can be assumed that many refugees prefer to live in urban areas rather than in camps. This, unfortunately has led to more competition for resources, especially in the border towns and cities, “the governorates of Mafraq, Irbid, Ar-Ramtha and Zarqa, which border Syria, have seen the most refugees move in relative to original population, and they face the most pronounced impacts. The quality and availability of education and healthcare have declined as overburdened facilities are unable to adequately cope with the significant increase in students and patients”¹².

When these facts are taken together with the knowledge that Syrians are having more and more difficulty being resettled into third countries, and with any return to their homes increasingly pushed into a distant future, it is quite obvious that something must be done in the meantime to mitigate the negative effects of this crisis

This competition for resources is not only limited to education and healthcare, but also to jobs and living accommodations as well. For example, many Jordanian citizens have been evicted from their homes due to the massive influx of Syrians driving the market rent prices up higher¹³. Moreover, the increase in population is causing increased competition for specific jobs. Furthermore, “despite the evidently protracted nature of the situation, assistance efforts focus primarily on short-term plans, while national development goals are sidelined”¹⁴. When these facts are taken together with the knowledge that Syrians are having more and more



difficulty being resettled into third countries, and with any return to their homes increasingly pushed into a distant future, it is quite obvious that something must be done in the meantime to mitigate the negative effects of this crisis. New ideas and methods of increasing national development in the long term must be implemented, because it is quite clear that short term plans will not solve the problem, they will only delay dealing with the issue to a later date. However, as Culbertson, et al mention, “the problem, particularly in coordination, may not be one of different models, but dueling perspectives of what needs to be done. Most of the humanitarian community sees its primary duty as assisting refugees. It is uncomfortable with programs focused on host communities, even if they also benefit refugees”¹⁵.

Turkey

Turkey is the final Syrian refugee hosting country that will be explored in this brief paper. In terms of numbers, Turkey hosts the largest number of refugees, with over 3 million¹⁶. However, it can be argued that 3 million people is not that great a number when the original population of the country is around 80 million. This does not mean that Turkey’s efforts should be undermined in the slightest, hosting 3 million registered refugees is a huge burden for any country regardless of its size and population. The situation for refugees in Turkey is still very difficult because it “does not grant Syrians ‘refugee status’ which would imply legal rights, but only grants a temporary asylum seeker status”¹⁷. Moreover, with the majority of refugees living outside of camps, the problems of not having refugee status are increased because of their limited access to basic services. In fact, according to the World Bank, roughly only 12 percent of the Syrian refugees in Turkey live in

camps of temporary tents and shelters, while the rest live in host communities where they compete for work and have to look for places to live¹⁸.

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As is the case with both Lebanon and Jordan, the strain on the host communities in Turkey is sometimes very tough indeed. This is particularly true for the cities in the Southeast of Turkey where rent prices and job competition have caused a great deal of tension between the refugees and the hosting community¹⁹. The reasoning for the tension is quite apparent. This is because the increased in population of the border regions has created an increase in demand. For example, with an increase in demand for places to live, rent prices have also risen a significant amount²⁰. Similarly, with an increased supply of workers, the demand for jobs has also increased, allowing employers to offer lower wages. These factors will obviously cause tension in host communities, because the local residents will blame the newcomers for the new financial problems that they face. As a result, it is vital that long term planning be implemented in order to increase the infrastructure and to allow for a system where refugees can provide a positive benefit to the country rather than a negative one.

Thoughts and Recommendations

Constructing or formulating a basis for a mode of cooperation for dealing with the refugee situation between these three countries is extremely difficult. As was clearly shown above, each of the three countries faces its own challenges when



confronting this issue. However, the main commonalities between all three are the issues of resource scarcity and that large number of refugees living in host communities and not in formal camps. As a result, a beneficial modicum of cooperation can be ascertained between these three countries focusing on these commonalities. Unfortunately, there is always the risk of corruption. What is to keep each individual state from trying to exploit the other two into shouldering more of the burden than themselves? As a solution to this, Michel Foucault's theory of transparency can be evoked. This theory comes from his work *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*²¹.

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If Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan agreed upon a system of cooperation amongst each other and signed an agreement stipulating the roles, rules, and regulations of the system, a starting point could be achieved. This contract would have to outline the roles of each of the countries as well as appropriate punishments for breaching the terms of the contract. Moreover, in order to make the system transparent, it would require the responsible authorities in each of the countries to be representative of the mixed nationalities of these three countries. For example, the responsible authorities in the system in Lebanon would have to be from all three countries in order to make sure that at any time there are people from all sides in order to ensure that one party is not taking advantage of the other two. The situation would have to be the same in Turkey and Jordan as well. Such a

solution is most probably not achievable as no institution would sign a contract that could potentially restrict their freedom, however, if some semblance of a transparency system with a little bit of accountability could be achieved, it would be a good starting point.

With a transparency mechanism in place, cooperation can begin in various forms. One example could be the establishment of an international fund organized by the three countries. This would benefit both the refugees as well as the host countries because, “the majority are competing for limited resources”²². A fund could relieve the strain on the countries' own resources; while at the same time provide much needed assistance to the Syrian refugees. Moreover, with a transparency mechanism, a joint fund between the three countries runs a lower risk of corruption in an instance where countries might try to use less of the funds for the refugees and more for themselves.

Another important aspect of a cooperation between these three countries could be how they deal with international agencies such as the United Nations and how they deal with the Syrian government on the issue of return. Syrian refugees have many concerns when considering return. The refugees need access to basic services when they return, such as shelter, healthcare, education, etc..²³. Furthermore, “the guarantee of safety, security and absence of retaliation for individuals returning, including for young men escaping forced conscription in the army, and, second, some prospect of a future in Syria, including reconstruction of the country” are vital to a safe and dignified return²⁴. The question remains, how will Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan negotiate with the Syrian government and the international



community with regards to return? Each country would most likely approach this obstacle from a different angle; however, it is important that there be some degree of communication between the three in order to maintain a common objective. It is clear that having the refugees return will most likely be beneficial to the host countries, as it will relieve some of the strain on their resources. However, how can they negotiate with the other parties in order to provide a safe return for the refugees? In addition, they will need to provide a joint front to ask for international aid to help the refugees return, as it should be a global responsibility and not the responsibility of the hosting countries alone. These are significant issues and questions that need further research.

By investing in national development and infrastructure, allocating refugees with specific skills would become even more useful as new areas and fields of work would need added labor

A point of entry that could encourage these three countries to cooperate is related to the issue of difficulty in finding specific types of jobs in the host countries. As was mentioned above, many refugees are having difficulty finding specific jobs. One very ambitious solution could be to create a platform where Syrians could sign up to list their professions and then accept to be matched or referred to jobs relating to their skills in any of these three countries. Once this is done, the countries could then determine which country needs which specific kind of labor and then ask the people with the appropriate skill sets if they would like to relocate to the job location. This way the refugees would be formally employed, benefiting the refugees with higher wages as well as the countries that could

collect income tax from the as well since they would be formally employed. By doing this, the countries could allocate human resources to each other in areas where these specific skills are needed and wanted.

This brings us to the final recommendation that can be surmised from this brief paper. It has been mentioned in several sections above that national development in each country's infrastructure and job capacity is necessary for a long-term solution to this crisis. Specifically housing, education, medical care, and job availability are important in this scenario. This is due to several factors like the fact that returning home is still a long way away for the majority of refugees, or that development could create a space for the refugees to have a positive effect on their host country. By investing in national development and infrastructure, allocating refugees with specific skills would become even more useful as new areas and fields of work would need added labor. Not only would this be beneficial to the hosting countries because the refugees would be providing a positive source of labor, but it would also benefit the refugees in multiple ways. For one, it would allow them to earn an income, which benefits them as well as the host country since they would no longer have to provide care for people doing nothing in return. Because as the World Bank states "Experience shows that when refugees are supported in becoming socially and economically self-reliant, and given freedom of movement and protection, they are more likely to contribute economically to their host country. They are also more likely to be able to undertake a successful return process"²⁵.



Conclusion

In conclusion, there are more issues that can be explored in this topic. For example, the issues of healthcare and education could be explored in much more detail. However, such a study would need to be much more in depth and much longer. On another note, it is quite clear that Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey could all learn from each other and how they approach the issue, and maybe if they work together, they could combine the positive aspects from each approach in a new cooperative approach. These countries all face similar problems and by allocating people to the right places they could ease their burdens by allowing each country to tackle what it is best at. On the other hand, it is a very difficult task to formulate a mechanism for cooperation between them, while making it beneficial enough to encourage all three to agree to it. The major issue that remains is to discern what can motivate these countries to work together for a goal that is beneficial to them all, and is beneficial to the Syrian people as well. Such an endeavor needs much more analysis and much more research and it is this brief paper's recommendation that this topic be explored in much more detail and with a much lengthier analysis.



Endnotes

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Nasr is a Research Assistant at the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. He received his M. A. in Humanitarianism and Conflict Response from the University of Manchester in 2016 and a B.A. in English Literature from the American University of Beirut in 2015. He works as a research assistant on the National Agenda for the Future of Syria Project at UNESCWA. His current research is about war economies in Syria, and Syrian refugees.

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Address: Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Plaza Floor:6
No:68 Postal Code: 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org

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