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## MORE TO COME?

# The refugee situation in the Middle East and the EU

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**F**irst Europe pretended that the refugee crisis is a problem of the Middle East; then its central and northern states saw it as a problem of frontier states like Italy, Greece and Bulgaria. They took comfort with the Dublin Regulation, which stipulates that the first points of entry within the EU are obliged to register newly arriving refugees and accommodate them for asylum seeking procedures afterwards. Now that refugee numbers are overwhelming this accord, Europe struggles to share the burden and find common solutions.

The refugees who are arriving today have been displaced some time ago; they were just not displaced to the EU yet. The tragic death of the little Alan Kurdi, who was washed up on a Turkish beach after his family had tried in vain to reach the Greek island of Kos, illustrates this. His parents came from the relative safety of Turkey and after the tragedy his surviving father returned to his native Kobane in northern Syria, which was liberated from ISIS forces in January 2015. So what is the current refugee situation in the Middle East and what does that mean for possible future flows to the EU?

Currently there are 4 million Syrian refugees in neighboring countries and 7.6 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) within the country. This is half of the entire population and almost a fifth of the global refugee population, which currently stands at 60 million, a level not seen since the Second World War. Tiny Lebanon with a population of only 4.5 million has seen the influx of 1.1 million Syrian refugees, another 1.9 million are in Turkey, 630.000 in Jordan, 130.000 in Egypt and 250.000 in Iraq according to the UN Refugee Agency **UNHCR**.

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Adding to these numbers there is Iraq, which has been drawn into the Syrian quagmire by the ISIS phenomenon. During the civil war in the wake of the US occupation, many Iraqis fled to Syria, which was safe at that time. The civil war subsided after 2007 when tribes turned against the ISIS predecessor Islamic State in Iraq and were assisted by a surge in US troops. Some Iraqis returned from Syria, others had moved on to other, preferably Western countries. **ISIS started out in the east of Syria in spring 2013, led by former Baath officers and jihadists from Iraq.** Once they had established

themselves in Syria, they turned on their country of origin. They capitalized on widespread Sunni grievances against the Shiite led government in Baghdad, prepared the ground with sleeper cells and captured large areas, first in the western province of Anbar in the first half of 2014 and then in the northern provinces of Salah ad-Din and Ninewa, where they conquered Mosul in June 2014. Shortly after, they attacked the Yazidi minority in the nearby Sinjar Mountains, killing and enslaving thousands. Further south, **refugee flows** out of Anbar continued for much of 2014 and 2015 and saw a renewed spike after ISIS's conquest of Ramadi in April 2015.

Iraq now has 3.2 million IDPs, mainly from the ISIS provinces Anbar and Ninewa. Most of them (70-80%) do not live in camps, but with relatives or in rented accommodations and hotels. In addition to the IDPs, there are 250.000 Kurdish refugees from northern Syria who have fled to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). About 40 percent of them live in camps like Domiz outside of Dohuk, but the rest of them also live in normal accommodation. Beyond IDPs and refugees there are non-displaced Iraqis who suffer hardship, pushing the total tally of people who are in need of humanitarian assistance to 8.2 million. The announced push by the Iraqi government to retake Mosul, although unlikely in the near future, could cause another 1.5 million IDPs according to estimates of humanitarian organizations.

## It is a crucial challenge how well refugees and IDPs will be integrated in their current surroundings.

Refugees and IDPs constitute a considerable pressure on domestic services and resources, at a time when oil price declines have led to budget shortfalls. Besides, there are security concerns and sectarian prejudice. After the fall of Ramadi the Shiite led government in Baghdad closed the bridge that leads into the city, as it feared the predominantly Sunni refugees might harbor ISIS infiltrators. Similarly, the autonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI) fears ISIS sleeper cells and backdoor Arabization via Sunni IDPs. Hopes for full-fledged independence are widespread in KRI. Beside its three provinces Dohuk, Erbil and Sulaimaniyya there are disputed territories with large Kurdish populations in neighboring provinces like Kirkuk. The Kurds hope to make these disputed territories part of their region and possible future state. In fact, their Peshmerga forces have occupied a lot of them over the recent year in the wake of the chaos that followed the ISIS takeover of Mosul.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon now constitute about a fifth of the population. There are concerns about a spill over of the Syrian civil war. Lebanon's dysfunctional political system is ill equipped to deal with the refugee crisis. The government is paralyzed by sectarian stalemate and cronyism, unable to guarantee electricity provision and garbage disposal. The Shiite militia Hizbollah fights on the side of the Assad regime and is skeptical that Sunni refugees might change Lebanon's delicate sectarian balance against its favor. In the northern city of Tripoli violent clashes between Alawite residents and Sunni Islamists are a common occurrence. Meanwhile beg-

ging Syrian children and shoeshine boys roam the streets of a city that hosts million dollar apartments, Ferrari showrooms and luxury boutiques. They cater to an elite that is increasingly questioned and Gulf tourists who do not visit anymore because of security concerns.

With almost two million people Turkey harbors the largest contingent of Syrian refugees. However, they do not have official refugee status. They are only considered temporary guests. As such they cannot work officially and hardly receive government support if they live outside camps, what 80 percent do. ISIS has undertaken a first bomb attack in the country in 2015, after Turkey embarked on a more resolute policy against the group. For a long time Turkey has given ISIS leeway as it has feared an autonomous Kurdish state in the north of Syria, prioritized a toppling of the Assad regime and has been afraid of possible repercussions for its tourism industry. The Kurdish conflict has re-erupted on the back of Erdogan's intransigent stance, campaign politics and renewed militant attacks by the Kurdish PKK, which is deemed a terrorist organization by the EU. The curfew of Cizre by the Turkish army and the deaths of over a dozen civilians are worrying developments. The reconciliation process between Turks and Kurds that Erdogan himself pushed forward during the Solution Process of 2013 should not be derailed further. Like the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, Turkey is an island of stability in a region that is ravaged by violent conflict. Both better remain so, as regional alternatives for refugees are limited.

The **Gulf countries have been accused of not accommodating refugees** from a war, which they, like Iran and

Russia, have helped to escalate by supporting their respective proxies. Gulf countries are one of the few countries in the world that have not signed the 1951 U.N. treaty on refugees that defines the status of a refugee and the legal obligations of hosting countries. There is no legal basis on which war victims could claim residency as refugees in the Gulf. They have to apply for a visa like anybody else. Visas are usually given based on an employment contract or a sponsorship by a resident relative in the case of minors and elderlies. Gulf countries want to keep the war and its refugees at bay and are concerned about security issues. Expatriates are a large minority in Saudi Arabia and Oman and the majority in the other Gulf states. Governments in the region prefer to have them as temporary workers, not as permanent refugees that might develop a sense of belonging and entitlement. The reproach that they have not accommodated Syrian refugees only captures part of the picture, however. Gulf countries have donated generously to relief operations of the United Nations and have hosted an increasing number of Syrians, just not with the official status of refugees. The **UAE has given visas to more than 100,000 Syrians** since the eruption of the civil war in 2011 and Saudi Arabia to 500,000 of them according to Saudi owned newspaper Al Hayat.

**Israel seems to be an odd candidate for hosting Syrian refugees** given the tumultuous relationships with its Arab neighbors. Yet the opposition has suggested just that, pointing to Israel's own historical experience of a nation founded by refugees. However, Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu nipped

the proposal in the bud saying Israel would not have “the demographic or geographic depth” to accommodate refugees who could be a security risk. Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas’ proposal to accommodate Palestinian refugees from Syria in the occupied West Bank where he has limited self-rule will not be allowed by the Israeli authorities for the same reasons. They have started to build a fence along the border with Jordan to prevent infiltrations, similar to the fence on the Sinai that serves to deter refugees from Sudan and Eritrea. Many Palestinians fled to Syria after the lost wars against Israel in 1948 and 1967 and now have had to pack their things again. The **Palestinian refugee camp Yarmouk in the south of Damascus** has been among the worst hit areas of the civil war. The epic picture of thousands lining up for food amidst ruins that rattled the world in 2014 was taken in Yarmouk. **The Assad regime has tried to starve the neighborhood into submission** and people have died of hunger there.

This leaves Jordan and Egypt as further alternatives. Jordan is still remarkably stable given the turmoil in Syria, but it is at the limit of its capacity with over 600.000 refugees. Egypt on the other hand is farther away and has never been the preferred destination of Syrian refugees. It has grown closer to the Assad regime of late, whose atrocities against civilians are a major push factor in the refugee crisis. The Lebanese daily Al Jumhuriya reported that both countries have agreed to resume diplomatic relations and to coordinate their intelligence activities. This is unlikely to inspire confidence in refugees who have just escaped the barrel bombs of the Assad regime.

The Syrian civil war rages on with no political solution in sight and ISIS is entrenched on both sides of the border. Only about 300.000 refugees have relocated to their former homes in Iraq, mainly in areas of the northern provinces Salah ad-Din, Ninewa and Diyala that have been retaken by the Kurdish Peshmerga or the government in Baghdad. **There is a growing sense among refugees, IDPs and governments that the situation is not temporary, but will last for a protracted period of time.** Some refugees in the camps in Iraq have started to build houses. The policy focus has shifted from emergency assistance to resilient livelihood strategies that put refugees in a position to eke out a living. It is a crucial challenge how well refugees and IDPs will be integrated in their current surroundings. Otherwise many will finally despair and take the arduous and risky journey to Europe, as is already happening.

Europe has moved beyond navel gazing and starts to realize the magnitude of the refugee plight on its borders. It may want to expand its attention further to the places where the refugee treks begin. The World Food Programme (WFP) provides basic food items to 4 million people inside Syria and to 1.3 million refugees in neighboring countries. Its humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan **has been cut by half this year and programs are underfunded by 81 percent.** The Public Distribution System of the Iraqi government, which is the largest subsidized food program globally, has extensive coverage gaps among IDPs. Allocation is tied to official residence in a particular place. After a

displacement IDPs struggle to get the necessary paperwork done that would allow them to access the program. The WFP currently assists 1.8 million Iraqis with basic food items. Like the Syrian program it is severely **underfunded by 61 percent.** It had to reduce its food vouchers per person from \$26 per person and month to \$16. Soon there will be a further reduction to \$10. By November it will need to shut down its operations if no new funding is coming up.

Saudi Arabia gave \$500 million to the UN for emergency assistance in Iraq after the ISIS conquests in summer 2015. Of this sum \$150 million was allocated to the WFP, but it is used up by now. Saudi Arabia seems disinclined to renew its donation and the Europeans are remarkably absent, apart from token contributions. It is high time that they fund more emergency operations in the afflicted countries. They need to engage with local governments and international organizations on how the refugee crisis can be mitigated. It should be in their best interest; otherwise it will become their refugee crisis. For the same reason Europe should embark on an all out diplomatic effort with Russia, Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia to find a political solution to the Syrian crisis.

Where does that leave European migration policy and its reaction to the refugee crisis? Germany currently handles 43 percent of all European asylum applications. Alongside Sweden it has developed into a destination of choice. It pushes for a burden sharing among EU countries, but Eastern Eu-

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ropean countries oppose distribution quotas. If no solution is found, the free movement of persons within the Schengen zone could be compromised. Germany’s temporary reinstatement of controls on the border with Austria on 13 September and Denmark’s halting of trains from Germany a few days earlier are writings on the wall.

Germany has received credit for its decision to accommodate about **1 million refugees** this year, many of them from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. There has been widespread volunteering by citizens and a spontaneous outpour of solidarity. Refugees at the railway station in Munich were greeted with chocolates and gifts. Business circles have welcomed the migration influx, pointing to Germany’s aging society. In one TV show refugees were paraded like trophy pets to corny tunes of German pop singers. In comparison to arson attacks on refugee homes, the sentimental mass psychology was a welcome contrast, but it will not last for long and it is no substitute for a necessary debate about migration and the future of European societies.

The discussion is already shifting to the costs and challenges of integration. Many Germans feel uneasy about the influx of predominantly Muslim immigrants, who bring with them their customs and conflicts and might have differing opinions on gender equality, gay rights, anti-Semitism and freedom of speech. Considerable problems with integration already exist that are specific to some Muslim communities and not

prevalent among migrants from say Poland, Vietnam or Brazil. **Saudi Arabia's alleged offer to build 200 mosques for the new arrivals** that was reported by the Lebanese daily Al Diyar was hardly assuring; the fundamentalist Wahhabi interpretation of Islam in Saudi Arabia stipulates grave human rights violations like the death penalty for Ex-Muslims and is not reconcilable with the constitution of Germany or any other European country. In the necessary debate about migration such concerns are legitimate and should not be swept under the rug for the sake of political correctness. With all its oscillations, the debate in Germany is more mature than in Eastern Europe, which sometimes gives the impression that it is about fighting the Ottomans again. The German debate is also less abrasive than in some Western European countries with established right wing parties that argue categorically against any migration. Yet Germany risks not only to overestimate its bureaucratic capacities for accommodation, it also finds itself questioned within the EU as its push for quotas is perceived by Eastern Europeans as hectoring and the temporary opening of borders for refugees from Hungary earlier this month as a *fait accompli* that has attracted even more.

Currently the EU makes the refugees jump through dangerous and expensive hoops. They have to pay traffickers and cross the Mediterranean or the Balkans to file a petition for asylum. Some of them might not receive it and will be sent back empty handed after they have spent their meager sav-

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ings. The EU should consider offering possibilities to file for asylum in the hosting countries of the Middle East. This would require close collaboration with the respective governments. Many refugees come from relatively safe destinations in neighboring countries like Turkey, KRI or Jordan. They have fled immediate danger when coming there, but not necessarily when leaving from there to the EU. Thus a gradual steering of refugee flows would be possible and the dangerous risks of the trafficking business could be reduced.

Migrants look for a better life; that is what migrants have done in all ages and countries, among them millions of Germans who migrated to North and South America in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Contrary to the populist discourse about “economic refugees” who should be denied entry, there is nothing wrong with that. Given its demographic structure the EU needs such migration, but asylum laws are not the best way to deal with it; an immigration law would be better suited. It could offer legal avenues for economically motivated migration based on a **point-based system like in Canada** that ranks immigrants according to qualification, age, language skills and “adaptability” (e.g. relatives or prior study in Canada).

Europe needs to come to terms with the fact that it is a multicultural continent of migration, should be so for humanitarian reasons and needs to be so for economic ones. The organization of this migration will be a defining moment for the continent and will have a lasting impact over the com-

ing years and decades. It will require open arms, but also the clear communication of values and an iron fist for those who propagate religious, ethnic or gender based violence. Europe should not underestimate the appeal of its way of life, which is one reason why people come here. Rather than fretting about the Islamization of Europe we might see the emergence of a secularized Euro Islam that can give reform impetus to those Muslims in the Middle East who are mired in parochialism and sectarian hatred.