

In Pursuit of a Refuge, Six Years On: Revisiting the Refugee Deadlock

By Dr Dina Mansour-Ille

Amid the furore over Trump's controversial executive orders aimed to control migration to the US and the rise of nationalism in Europe in response to the Syrian refugee crisis, the humanitarian situation and living conditions of Syrian refugees in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continue to deteriorate. With the Syrian crisis entering its seventh year this month, there seems to be no solution in sight to the Syrian War. Moreover, Syrian refugees are caught in a deadlock.

As a result of violent conflicts, the MENA region has witnessed waves of forced displacement and migration throughout its history, which have also remarkably shaped the process of state formation in the region's recent history as well as much of its demographics, economics and politics (Fritzsche, et. al. 2016). The region's most recent crisis, has triggered what the European Commission labelled as 'the world's largest humanitarian crisis since World War II' (European Commission 2016). Over the past years, the majority of the burden of the Syrian crisis in the MENA region is being carried by five principal countries: according to the latest UNHCR estimates, over 4.96 million Syrians have fled to Turkey (2.9 million), Lebanon (1 million), Jordan (657,000), Iraq (233,224) and Egypt (120,154).¹ Policy-makers in the region, have been battling between accommodating the mass influx of Syrians escaping the war and safeguarding their countries from pressures on their local economies and infrastructures. In addition, given the severity of the political situation in Syria between all involved actors in the conflict, Arab policy-makers fear that allowing unabated influx of Syrians in their countries may risk dragging them into the conflict. This is particularly the case for Lebanon given its experience with a prolonged civil strife and conflict. On the other hand, it is evident that the general civilian Syrian population is bearing the highest cost and are often forced out of sheer desperation to take the 'journey of death' to Europe instead of remaining in countries that impose sometimes unnecessarily rigorous restrictions and in some cases degrading and/or discriminating treatment.

With the exception of Egypt and Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan are not parties to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Hence, Syrians in Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan are not considered to be 'refugees' under the law – a situation that affords them little protection. Egypt, Lebanon and Jordan all have memoranda of understanding (MoUs) with the UNHCR, which grant UNHCR the right to determine the status of asylum-seekers in the country. As per the 1954 MoU between the UNHCR and the Egyptian government, the 1998 MoU with the Jordanian government and the 2003 MoU with the Lebanese government, the UNHCR is tasked not only with providing humanitarian assistance as per its own mandate, but is also tasked with carrying out the registration process of all asylum-seekers in the country, determining their legal status and working in partnership with other organizations (governmental and non-governmental) to provide persons of concerns with basic assistance. In addition, they are also responsible for the resettlement and voluntary repatriation of refugees to their countries of origin or habitual residence.

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¹ "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal." *UNHCR*, 2016. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/region.php?id=90&country=122>. (accessed March 25, 2017).

Living Conditions in the MENA: From Camps to Cities

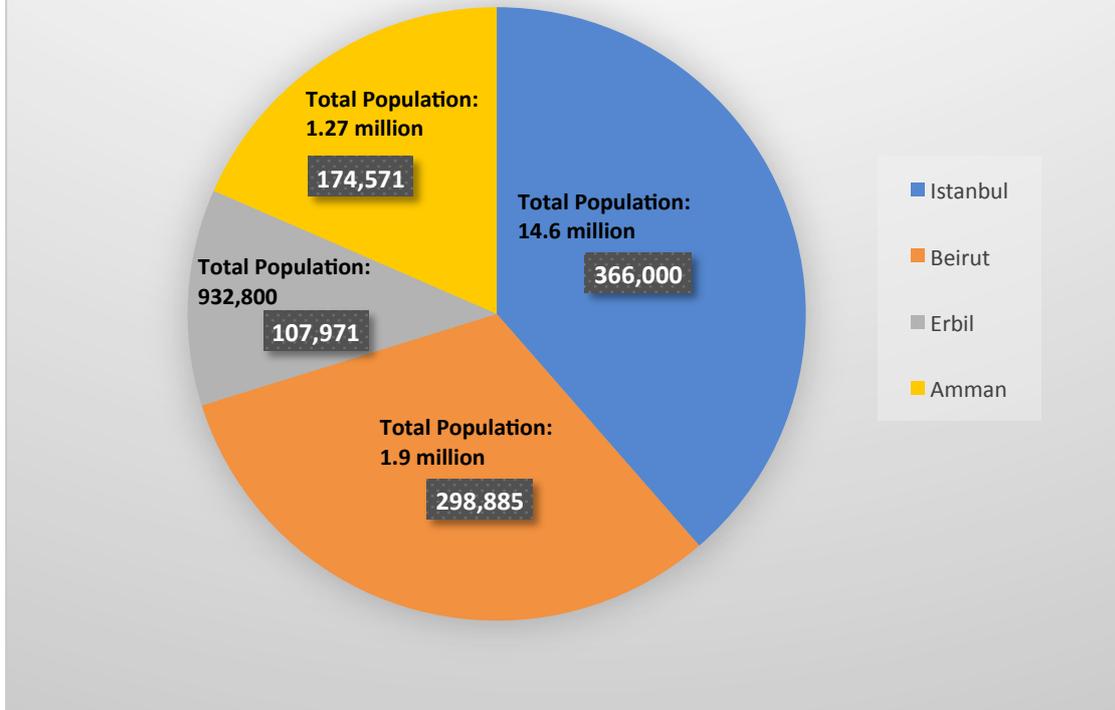
UNHCR official sources in Egypt confirm that Syrian families have been mainly relying on personal savings to provide for their families and to guarantee access to basic services in Egypt. However, battling with an already strained economy and often discriminatory price levels contributed to significantly depleting personal savings. Moreover, Egypt's reservation to the 1951 Refugee Convention limits the access of refugees and asylum-seekers to the labour market, and adds more strain on Syrians trying to find a sustainable source of income to provide for their families. According to UNHCR media spokesperson Marwa Hashem, while many Syrians who have fled to Egypt were able to find jobs, this has not been an easy task due to Egypt's reservation on refugee access to the labour market in the 1951 Refugee Convention (Abaza 2015). This led to an overreliance on the informal sector as a source of income for a large number of Syrian families who either had no personal savings to start with or whose personal savings were depleted over the past few years. As already argued, the informal sector in Egypt can be particularly abusive and can subject anyone (Egyptians and foreigners alike) to degrading and humiliating treatment that denies the incumbents of their most basic human rights. Such conditions undoubtedly end up acting like a 'push factor' for Syrians, who are slowly pushed to leave rather than live a life of subsistence. A large number of Syrians who have fled to Egypt have reported living in poor living conditions and facing all kinds of restrictions to satisfy some of their most basic socio-economic needs (Mansour 2015; Al-Monitor 2012).

In countries across the region, Syrian refugees are partly placed in refugee camps, where opportunities for development, socioeconomic engagements and integration are lacking and where services and security are limited. The situation is not much different in Lebanon and Jordan yet with a major distinction. Syrians in Egypt are not provided with the option of a refugee camp. This arguably provides them with the opportunity to be largely mainstreamed in the society.

In general, UNHCR-registered refugees living in camps are provided with shelter, basic humanitarian assistance, as well as free legal aid and assistance with access to courts, if and when needed. Those residing outside the camps, either voluntarily or involuntarily, are generally only able to access government-subsidized health care and schooling (Kattaa 2015). Yet, a large majority of the displaced population across the region prefer to live in urban cities and neighbourhoods rather than in refugee camps, despite the legal and social hardships of imposed barriers to economic and social integration. This allows them to gain some additional freedom and break free from a life in waiting, insecurity, physical isolation and dependency (Miliband, 2015).

Cities and towns across the MENA region, already suffering from poor infrastructure and services, are struggling to accommodate the mass influx of forcibly displaced migrants that in countries like Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey has sometimes doubled the size of hosting towns. It is estimated that the influx of Syrian refugees resulted in a 10% population increase in Jordan and a 25% increase in Lebanon (UNHCR 2016). Iraq, which already has 3.9 million internally displaced persons, hosts 245,022 refugees from Syria. Erbil, a small urban city of a little under 1 million, alone hosts over 100,000 Syrian refugees (Amnesty 2016; UNHCR 2016).

Number of Displaced Syrians Hosted in Major Cities in the MENA Region Relative to their Population



Source: World Population Review; UNHCR 2016; US Dept. of State 2016; Miliband 2015²

The Syrian displaced community in Egypt is said to be largely urbanised and predominately integrated within the host communities of mainly six governorates: Cairo, Giza, Alexandria, Sharkia, Damietta and Qalyubia (WHO 2015). In many cases these figures reflect only officially registered Syrian refugees and do not account for unregistered Syrians residing in major cities in the MENA region. Cairo is one such example. Whereas according to UNHCR statistics Egypt hosts close to only 115,000 Syrian refugees, other unofficial estimates confirm that the figure of Syrians actually residing in Egypt is close to 500,000 with Cairo alone hosting 300,000 Syrians, a large majority of which are concentrated in and around the satellite town of the 6th of October in Greater Cairo – known by some as ‘little Damascus’ (Kingsely 2013; Mansour 2015; Primo 2016). Some UN and legal experts as well as the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs speculate the actual figure to be rather between 200,000-300,000 Syrian refugees (Shahine 2016; WHO 2015). Yet, regardless of the actual figure, the fact remains that a refugee’s registration status determines their ability to access basic food, cash-based and legal assistance offered by the UNHCR (Sharp 2015). Other than access to education in public schools and health care in public hospitals, which are already overcrowded and underserved due to Egypt’s deteriorating socioeconomic conditions in the post-Arab Spring, the Egyptian government provides refugees with no social benefits nor the right to work (Sadek 2016).

² Though Cairo is one of the major urban cities hosting Syrian refugees in the MENA region, it has been omitted due to the lack of confirmed estimates on the actual number of Syrians residing in Cairo.



Khaled El-Shaher Camp – Bekaa Valley, Lebanon – Photo taken by Haitham and Sally Youssef

While displaced Syrians are provided shelter in camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, the reality is that 80% of the Syrian displaced population in the MENA region live outside refugee camps (Miliband 2015). Turkey, which hosts the highest number of Syrian refugees, accommodates only 220,000 in its 22 camps out of a total of 2.7 million refugees (UNHCR 2014). UNHCR registered refugees living in camps are provided with shelter, basic humanitarian assistance, as well as free legal aid and assistance with access to courts, if and when needed. Those residing outside the camps, either voluntarily or involuntarily, are generally only able to access government-subsidized health care and schooling (Kattaa 2015). Yet, a large majority of the displaced population across the region prefer to live in urban cities and neighbourhoods than in refugee camps. For the most part and despite socioeconomic hardships and in some cases discrimination, cities are seen by the majority of Syrians to be the centres of economic growth and above all opportunities for work, education, personal development, integration within the local communities and for forming social networks. Even though camps provide shelter to only 20% of the displaced population of Syrian refugees in the region, the largest bulk of humanitarian aid still goes to maintaining and running the camps (ibid). The Zaatari camp in Jordan, for example, which is the world's second largest refugee camp, hosts only 20% of Syrian refugees in Jordan. Yet, at one point, it was estimated that the camp cost \$500,000 per day in 2014 to run and maintain (Ledwith 2014; Miliband 2015). Ledwith (2014), in fact, argues that camps like the Zaatari won't just wither away with the end of the crisis, but they represent the foundations for future cities that can either organically develop into bigger urban centres or be absorbed into neighbouring cities as they expand to accommodate a growing urban population.

At the same time, poor living conditions (whether in the cities or the camps) coupled with increasing restrictions on residence and work permits and access to basic services have turned cities across the MENA region into 'transit' destinations. The three most popular routes for illegal migration to Europe today are: The Western Balkan route, the Central Mediterranean route and the Eastern Mediterranean route (Frontex 2016; BBC 2014). In 2016, 122,779 have entered Europe illegally through the Western Balkan route (compared to 764,038 in 2015), 181,126 through the Central

Mediterranean route (compared to 153,946 in 2015) and 182,534 through the Eastern Mediterranean route (compared to 885,386 in 2015) (Frontex 2016). The two largest populations taking the Western Balkan route are the Syrian (43%) and Afghani (26%) forcibly displaced migrants (European Commission 2015).

A Refugee Deadlock? Future Prospects?

At this point in time, the international community seems to be more concerned with containment and control rather than finding practical solutions for the crisis. Countries in the MENA region are unable and possibly unwilling to provide long-term solutions and prospects for refugees on the basis of integration. At the same time, the international community has turned the debate from a humanitarian question to one around security, border control and national identity. As such, and in the current climate, refugees face harsh living conditions in host countries, the possibility of being sent back (e.g. to Libya) or being refused altogether.³

Among the proposed solutions have been the so-called “safe zones” in Syria, which Trump proposed in his first televised interview pledging to “absolutely do safe zones in Syria for the people”.⁴ Echoing Trump’s suggestion, Lebanese President Michel Aoun further added that this should be done through concerted efforts by the international community in collaboration with the Assad government to establish “safe zones” in Syria. This proposal has been said to be excluding the voice of Syrians in deciding and drawing a map for their own future, where countries seem to be more keen on ‘ridding themselves’ of the problem.⁵

Turkey began touting the “safe zones” solution in 2011 with the support of the Syrian opposition.⁶ However, at the time, Obama refused to commit resources to a plan that could draw the US deeper into Syria’s complex civil war.⁷ Yet the proposal has been received with scepticism, especially given that no details were provided as to when, how and who will be involved in implementing this plan in a highly volatile context.⁸ Though the “safe zones” solution may provide a bittersweet glimmer of hope that could facilitate the post-war reconstruction and state building process, effectively it is an

³ See “Sending migrants back to Libya? Possibly counterproductive”, *Clingendael*, 2016, available at: <https://www.clingendael.nl/publication/sending-migrants-back-libya-possibly-counterproductive>.

⁴ Lister, Tim, “Trump wants ‘safe zones’ set up in Syria. But do they work?”, *CNN*, Jan. 27, 2017, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/27/middleeast/trump-syria-safe-zone-explained/>; “ABC News anchor David Muir interviews President Trump”, *ABC News*, Jan. 25, 2017, available at: <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-abc-news-anchor-david-muir-interviews-president/story?id=45047602>.

⁵ See Al-Rashed, Abdulrahman, “The game of safe zones”, *Arab News*, Feb. 8, 2017, available at: <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1050951>.

⁶ See Doyle, Chris, “The illusion of safe zones in Syria”, *Arab News*, Feb. 14, 2017, available at: <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1053886>; Sly, Liz, “Turkey’s Erdogan wants to establish a safe zone in the ISIS capital Raqqa”, *The Washington Post*, Feb. 13, 2017, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkeys-erdogan-wants-to-establish-a-safe-zone-in-the-isis-capital-raqqa/2017/02/13/e7237e1c-f1f3-11e6-8873-a962f11835fb_story.html?utm_term=.237612e3c7b6.

⁷ See McKernan, Bethan, “Russia advises Donald Trump to show caution with his plan for Syrian safe zones”, *Independent*, available at: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-is-not-happy-with-trump-s-plan-to-create-safe-zones-in-syria-a7547586.html>.

⁸ See “Assad splits with Trump over refugee safe zones in Syria”, *New York Post*, Feb. 10, 2017, available at: <http://nypost.com/2017/02/10/assad-splits-with-trump-over-refugee-safe-zones-in-syria/>.

expensive, unrealistic and a potentially dangerous solution that would require the support of all actors involved in the war.⁹

The option to remain in countries across the MENA region under the same conditions is becoming an increasingly difficult option and is likely to be impossible in the long-run, especially as the majority of MENA countries consider themselves as transits with integration not being neither an option nor a priority. At the same time, the already strained economies and service sectors in the MENA can no longer sustain the crisis with refugees being chained to the peripheries and not being allowed to work and contribute to the economy. The five principal countries in the MENA carrying the heaviest burden of the crisis should turn the crisis into an opportunity, while the international community should assist in this endeavour through providing incentives and transferring their knowledge and experience in dealing with such crises. Other countries in the MENA, especially the Gulf, as well as the international community as a whole should share the burden of the refugee crisis on a wider scale. The “safe zones” solution is only viable if it provides the necessary conditions of security and sustainability that would allow for the safe return of Syrian refugees, which requires cooperation on a wider scale by multiple actors and stakeholders.

⁹ See De Bretton-Gordon, Hamish, “Syria’s safe zones offer a glimmer of hope for a once-great nation”, *The Guardian*, Jan. 27, 2017, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jan/27/syria-safe-zones-refugees-turkey-russia-un>; Doyle (2017), op. cit.

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