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A Discussion on Syria: Managing Flows of Refugees and Migrants

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Managing Flows of Refugees and Migrants

Leaving aside the irrational use of force that is prevalent in Syria and the gross violations of human rights by most parties to the conflict, the Syrian refugee and migrant crisis has to be dealt with from two different angles. On one side is the question of refugees and their integration into host countries; on the other is support to the refugee camps already in operation as stopgap measures until a peace agreement is reached. Properly addressing these two issues can make a big difference for the victims of the conflict.

Regarding refugees, Argentina maintains a generous tradition of acceptance and integration. Argentina's "nationality" is composed mostly of immigrants from Spain, Italy, Ireland, the Middle East, and neighboring nations. Argentina was open to displaced persons from Europe, most of whom were escaping the Nazi regime, before and during World War II. In fact, James G. McDonald, then the League of Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees, travelled to Argentina to that end.¹ Ambassador Richard Holbrooke's family benefited from this open policy, as he told me several times when we served together at the United Nations.

This same approach was maintained for asylum seekers from the Spanish Civil War. Ambassador Daniel García Mansilla even rented the Palace Hotel in Madrid to hide people from both sides of the conflict until the opportunity to arrange for their safe travel to Argentina materialized. Many Latin American countries took similar approaches. During the Washington Conference on the former Soviet Union, in 1992, Argentina offered to take in some migrants from Ukraine, a pledge that was accomplished with cooperation from local groups of eastern European descent.

Moreover, Argentina has enjoyed a vibrant Middle Eastern community since the beginning of the twentieth century, so receiving families from Syria should not pose any cultural adjustment problem. Nevertheless, providing fast-track visas and temporary shelter is not enough. The refugees should get the dignity they deserve. That means a decent job, education, language and health services, and a promising future. Unfortunately, in times of recession, slow growth, and unemployment, governments tend to remain aloof. Strong, extensive stimulus and consensus are necessary now more than ever.

Within Mercosur, Argentina and Brazil have implemented programs to rapidly grant visas to refugees. According to UN figures, about 1,900 Syrians refugees have taken advantage of measures adopted a couple of years ago to enter Brazil. Last year, Argentina accepted five hundred refugees. Uruguay has also been generous. However, problems have arisen and assistance has fallen short because most refugees from the Middle East prefer to be resettled in Western European countries, Canada, the United States, and Australia. South Africa, Turkey, and Malaysia have also been open to migrants.

When it comes to financial contribution to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the United States, Western European nations, Japan, Canada, Sweden, Norway, Netherlands, Denmark, and Australia take most of the burden and the credit. From Mercosur, Brazil, Argentina, Chile, and Uruguay also contribute, but at much lower levels. Besides financial aid, Proyecto Hebesa in Mexico is working to offer education to Syrian students.²

However, there is much room for improvement regarding Mercosur's assistance in the refugee crisis. Stephen Kurczy and Sarah Bons have suggested some ideas to increase Latin America's contributions. Besides improving information and streamlining bureaucracy, a coordinated regional response necessitates additional infrastructure in place, such as possible hubs in Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires, to establish large-capacity welcome centers. However, cofinancing these projects in a period of high demand and scarcity has become a real challenge. Argentina's Foreign Minister Susana Malcorra, however, has hinted that the Mercosur officers are going to meet to study the challenges. Whatever the results of that initiative, the fact remains that in terms of alleviating the situation of refugees, Mercosur as a group, or Argentina individually, has not played a substantial role.

U.S. President Barack Obama discussed the problem with Argentine President Mauricio Macri during an official visit to Argentina in March 2016. Both leaders recognized the need to address the global refugee situation. Argentina agreed to resettle a "significant number of refugees displaced by the war in Syria," while the United States would "support that effort in partnership with international organizations and other donors."³

Another way for Mercosur to help make a difference would be by, in close cooperation with the World Food Program (WFP), committing to substantially increase its contribution of food and medicines to refugee camps. There are more than four million refugees in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, and more than six millions displaced persons within Syria.

Mercosur can also become a player in the peace negotiations and other aid efforts, but only if it generates political determination—by substantially increasing its contribution—proportional to each country's capacities. However, Mercosur is not entirely absent from these relief efforts. According to the WFP, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Bolivia, and Argentina are already contributing. But what would the reaction be if Mercosur decided to move forward in this direction, and, for instance, "adopt" one or two refugee camps, committing itself to be responsible for the necessary food and medicine? That would likely lead to similar responses from other countries and to more responsibility on the part of governments and their citizens, making them closer to human suffering.

Emirati Jordanian is a relatively small camp located close to Amman in Jordan. It has a population of around 6,500, consisting mostly of women and children. WFP currently ensures food security there through food baskets. Emirati Jordanian refugees annually consume 348 tons of rice and 464 tons of wheat.⁴ Mercosur nations could contribute this amount of food to the camp because they are huge food exporters, providing up to 30 percent of global net food exports. Traditionally, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay have been global actors in food security matters. Therefore, additional contributions are possible, and more is expected. It is no longer a question of solidarity for those who suffer; rather, it is a question of global responsibility in an increasingly interconnected world.

The 2016 World Humanitarian Forum and the High-Level Meeting on refugees and migrants, planned for the opening of the UN General Assembly, should be able to increase awareness of the refugee tragedies. Preventing and containing the conflict, as well as respecting the rules of war, should be a principle concern for discussion. Assigning regional roles and responsibilities in resettling refugees, increasing monetary contributions, and providing food security should also be of paramount importance in these discussions. Latin America has to be prepared to do its share, as it did on issues of climate change and the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

A Discussion on Syria

The Syrian crisis has violated many principles of the international political and legal order that have given substance and tools to global governance after the Cold War. The principles of nonintervention, peaceful solutions to disputes, territorial integrity, humanitarian law, protection of civilian populations, state accountability, non-actor accountability, and—despite the best efforts of the UN—the principle of responsibility to protect, among others, have all been called into question.

We have to start again. Syria's crisis will require a clear reaffirmation of sound diplomacy as the best instrument to conduct relations among nations and non-state actors whose relevance cannot be ignored any longer. The open or covert use of force can only be an emergency and temporary measure. Force has proved to be useless to bring about sustainable solutions. Iraq and Libya seem to be apt examples. The idea of regime change should be put to rest for the time being.

If inspiration is needed, we should look to Woodrow Wilson's fourteen points after World War I. Will self-determination be useful once more? What about territorial integrity? How should both be balanced? How should we deal with "minorities" in the region? Shall we experiment with new boundaries? How shall we reconcile peace and justice? If necessary, how can the role of the International Syria Support Group be reformed? Who is going to draft the new fourteen points we need to solve the Syrian crisis politically?

The credibility of the United Nations and the UN Security Council is not at stake. International organizations do not have the capacity to operate outside the will of their members. Ensuring peace and security requires more than just debates and adopting resolutions. Enforcing them on the ground is a different story. Enforcement requires the will of major powers in a coordinated effort and a precise mandate from the UN Security Council. Yet, at this time, there is no other scenario or institution that can replace the United Nations to voice the drama of war, hunger, displaced persons, and other abuses that provides the legitimacy for countering the evil.

It is possible to measure the dimension of the tragedy and the implications for innocent peoples by following the debates on the Syria crisis, seeing the anguish of UN Special Envoy Staffan de Mistura or WFP relief coordinators, and listening to the UN Security Council speeches. Cessation of hostilities must hold. Unimpeded access of humanitarian aid should be guaranteed and, if violations occur, a coordinated response is critical. Strong will and coordination by the United States and Russia should be made clear for that purpose. The risk of doing nothing can be costlier in terms of regional and global consequences.

Solving or controlling the Syrian tragedy, even partially, will rapidly mitigate the refugee situation. However, focusing mostly on the consequences of the tragedy in the form of refugees is not sufficient. Efforts should be made by the two main external actors, the United States and Russia, to make the battling forces, whoever they are, stop the carnage or face dire consequences. The cost of leaving the situation as it is today can be heavier than resorting to more robust action by those who have the means.⁵ Other external actors with political interests in the area should immediately stop fueling the conflict. According to the Spanish newspaper *El País*, the arms trade is active in the area.⁶ It is legitimate to ask where the final destination for all these weapons is.

Let us hope that the time will soon come for families to resettle, start reconstruction, and create a new political organization representative of the peoples themselves. I greatly hope that Latin America will have a say and a role in the reconstruction of the region.

Finally, let us bear in mind that diplomacy is there to provide reasonable and sustainable solutions to be translated into regional stability and less so to bring about radical changes.

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 5. Kenneth M. Pollack, “Fight or Flight: America’s Choice in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-02-16/fight-or-flight>
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