

Berlin Summer Dialogue 2015
International responsibility in refugee situations:
Prevention – regional stability – peace work

17-18 June 2015, Berlin Town Hall

Speech by Tim Eaton

Project Manager
Syria and its Neighbours Policy Initiative
Chatham House, London

Supporting and stabilising countries receiving refugees in crisis regions

Thank you. Thank the organisers.

At Chatham House, I manage a research project that is looking at the long-term and regional implications of the Syria crisis on the neighbouring states. **The status of refugees is of course a key issue** in this regard.

So when I was asked to make some remarks on the challenges that neighbouring countries face, both now and over the coming years, I was delighted to accept.

In my time I would like to focus on three main points:

First, that while international support for the neighbouring states has been admirable in terms of aid, it has been insufficient in terms of sharing the burden of resettlement.

Second, I would like to highlight the fact that **large numbers of Syrian refugees will remain** in the neighbouring states for the medium- to long-term. I will argue that these **already vulnerable** Syrians will **become more vulnerable**.

Thirdly, given that large numbers of Syrians are likely to remain, **supporting their ability to become economically self-reliant is imperative if host states are to weather this storm. Not addressing the politically-charged issue of the right to work and focusing exclusively on hard security concerns is likely to result in bigger problems down the line.**

Since the onset of the Syrian conflict over four years ago, more than **four million** Syrians have fled their homeland in search of safety and shelter.

When we look at this influx from the perspective of **resettlement**, we see that this is a refugee crisis that has been **left to the neighbouring states to absorb**.

Less than 2% of the refugees have been resettled outside of Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey.

As of February 2015, UK had resettled just **187 Syrian refugees**. This is a number that is difficult to defend.

Germany, it should be noted, has been much more receptive, **pledging 30,000** places. This is to be commended. But, overall, we cannot say that there is anything close to fair burden sharing in this crisis.

Here the international community **needs to do more**. Doing so will show commitment to Syrians and host states in the Middle East that the international community is serious about tackling this problem.

According to UN statistics there are 1.76m registered Syrian refugees in Turkey, 1.18m in Lebanon, 630,000 in Jordan and 250,000 in Iraq.

The response of these states to the crisis has hardly been perfect, but we must acknowledge that each **deserves a lot of praise** for allowing so many Syrians to take refuge.

The presence of such large numbers of refugees has **exacerbated existing tensions and economic challenges**. It has done so across many different aspects of life, from the provision of education and healthcare, to jobs and rental markets.

In Jordan and Lebanon, the influx of refugees has had a striking effect on demographics. In Lebanon, registered refugees account for **20% of the population**. In Jordan it is **8%**. The actual numbers are believed to be much higher, although not as high as some of the host states would have you believe.

With the prospects for a political solution in Syria appearing no nearer, it is **increasingly apparent that a large number of these refugees are likely to remain for the medium- to long-term. Many will never return.**

This is made worse by the likelihood that existing levels of international aid given to help combat the impacts of the Syria crisis are likely to **fall** in the coming years.

In March, donors pledged less than half of what the UN sought in its appeal for the Syria response.

Both the host governments and donors are acutely aware of this danger, which highlights the need to transition from an emergency response to a resilience-based approach.

Both Feda and Jason have covered this in detail in their presentations of the 3RP and the Jordan Response Plan.

There is an accepted need to adopt an approach that caters for refugees as well as vulnerable communities in host states. This last point is important as it is the poorest in the host states that have felt the most adverse effects of the refugee crisis.

The **difficulty lies in addressing how this resilience can best be built in a way that is politically possible.**

Here, the issue of economic participation and self-reliance must be broached. The politics of the situation are very difficult to navigate and we should not underestimate the scale of the challenge that this represents for the host states.

This is because moves to grant labour rights to refugees are broadly seen as a **precursor to citizenship and a threat to the existing political order.**

Given the experience of the Palestinian crisis, this is entirely understandable.

Lebanon's confessional system provides a fragile status quo. Should the majority of the Syrians that are in Lebanon today remain, then this will have a lasting impact on its demographics, and likely lead in time to an attendant shift in its politics, as with the Palestinians.

In Jordan, meanwhile, many Jordanians feel that their very identity is under threat. They fear becoming a disempowered minority in their own state. Perception may be more powerful than the reality here, but this is a powerful narrative that cannot be ignored.

In Turkey, home to the greatest number of Syrian refugees, the state is large enough and economically robust enough to absorb the influx.

But this is not to say that there aren't negative impacts, as refugees are concentrated in the south of the country causing localized tensions.

The result of all of this is that Syrian refugees have little access to legal means of paid income in these states.

They predominantly work in low-skilled positions in the informal sector. In all three of these countries, locals complain that this has undercut wages and that it disadvantages them.

The canon of law that surrounds the refugee presence in these states is a minefield. In fact, **Syrians are not classed as 'refugees' in any of them.**

In Jordan, Syrians can apply for work permits but they are relatively expensive and they can only be sought for positions where they will not directly be competing with Jordanians.

This means that most professions are closed to them.

In Lebanon, until this year a personal ID was enough for Syrians to enter and to reside and work there without restrictions.

Yet, citing the massive numbers of Syrians already in Lebanon, the government changed its approach at the beginning of 2015.

Its reforms have left Syrians with difficult choices. **Those already in Lebanon must promise not to work and renew their residency on the basis of UNHCR registration. Or, they must find a Lebanese 'sponsor' who will underwrite their 'worker' status.**

The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies notes that this sponsorship system is likely to lead to the exploitation of Syrians.

In Turkey, the government has implemented a **temporary protection scheme** for Syrians.

But, unlike its schemes for those legally defined as 'refugees' and those under 'international protection', Syrians have limited recourse to labour rights.

This has unsurprisingly led to a dramatic increase in illegal migrant labour in domestic, construction and agricultural sectors with employers seemingly undeterred by the potential sanctions they might face.

Laws in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey therefore give little opportunity for Syrians to contribute through legal means, they encourage idleness and a life of subsistence.

If this does not change, Syrians have little hope of coping when the aid taps begin to run dry.

For host states, the desire to maintain stability and security is seen as paramount.

Yet, their view of security is couched in hard security terms: it is about strong border controls, intelligence gathering and strong enforcement regimes.

This runs the risk of ignoring other key drivers of conflict within the host societies such as the increasingly desperate plight of refugees and vulnerable communities.

While I do not wish to underplay the major external threats that host states face, domestic grievances resulting from the Syrian crisis have the potential to cause significant instability.

When in Jordan two weeks ago, our team held a workshop with local officials, CSOs and analysts based in the North. A clear warning came through that the situation could deteriorate into conflict if local grievances weren't addressed.

Interestingly, the message from those conversations was that the Syrians should be allowed to work, as long as they contributed their fair share to Jordan. The participants at the workshop largely saw the refugees' presence as a fact of life and had no expectation that they would return any time soon.

Theirs was simply a practical response. Their leaders would do well to mirror this in their policies.

Despite the political sensitivities associated with such moves, host states cannot afford to ignore the plight of refugees and their poorest citizens.

As my colleague Doris Carrion points out in a forthcoming paper on the refugee response in Jordan, supporting livelihoods initiatives and Syrian self-reliance does not have to be a precursor to their full local integration.

Rather this can occur while still avoiding policies, such as providing long-term residence status, which would actually encourage Syrians to stay permanently.

No one, including the majority of Syrians, is arguing for their full integration into Jordan, or Lebanon or Turkey. Syrians still intend to go home as soon as circumstances allow.

While accepting that the politics of this situation are difficult, a pragmatic response by the host states is required if they are to meet the acute challenges faced by the presence of refugees over the medium- to long-term.

Thank you.