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Cultivating conflict and violence?
A conflict perspective on the EU approach to the Syrian refugee crisis

The European Agenda on Migration combines humanitarian and development assistance to encourage refugees to seek shelter in their 'region of origin' with a border externalisation strategy that aims to contain irregular migration into Europe. This policy brief maintains that the implementation of the Agenda is problematic from a conflict perspective because it inadvertently contributes to an environment in which refugees are increasingly marginalised and exploited. A longer-term danger is that these patterns of marginalisation and exploitation may become structural drivers of future conflict and instability.

Introduction

In 2016, worldwide displacement has hit an all-time high, with more than 60 million people fleeing war and persecution. The influx of a relatively small portion of these refugees into the European Union (EU) has left its member states grappling with the consequences of the refugee crisis. While many communities have deployed initiatives to welcome refugees, a large number of protests have been organised against their arrival. At EU policy level, the crisis has solicited a complex and multifaceted response, now loosely organised under the European Agenda on Migration (2015).[1]

Although the Agenda can be seen as a diplomatic success in light of a tougher domestic climate towards refugees in EU countries, its content inevitably reflects the EU's uneasy balancing act between what is necessary and what is politically feasible. In practice, the ever-increasing popular demand to regulate refugee flows at the EU's borders consistently subsumes the Agenda's refugee protection objectives in regions of origin. The dynamics unfolding in relation to the Syrian refugee crisis are, unfortunately, no exception. This has repercussions for stability in Europe's neighbouring countries, which will be discussed in this policy brief.

A two-pronged approach to the refugee crisis

To understand the impact of the European Agenda on Migration on regional instability, we need to look into the external dimension of the Agenda, which is managed through the Partnership Framework that was launched in June 2016.[2] One of the

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1   The European Agenda on Migration contains four pillars, ranging from reducing the incentives for irregular migration and saving lives and securing borders to internal asylum and legal migration policies. For an overview of the Agenda, see: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/background-information/index_en.htm

2   European Commission, DG Migration and Home Affairs, *Managing the refugee crisis. A new partnership framework*, 7 June 2016.

Framework's immediate objectives is the formation of Migration Partnerships with third countries of origin or transit to "enable migrants and refugees to stay close to home and to avoid taking dangerous journeys".[3] The measures to achieve this objective can be divided roughly into two components. One set of actions focuses on strengthening and outsourcing European border management and the other aims at supporting third countries in dealing with the protracted refugee crisis.

The strategy of border externalisation consists of forging agreements that reduce irregular migration to Europe by setting up virtual walls or physical barriers in countries of origin or transit. The Khartoum Process (November 2014), the Valetta Agreement (November 2015), and the recent EU-Turkey refugee deal (March 2016) are all examples of this approach. These agreements are based on an understanding that partner countries will prevent irregular migration through the construction of border walls, the refurbishing of detention centres, and by accepting failed asylum seekers via readmission agreements. In return, these countries receive perks, such as development funding and visa liberalisation.

The externalisation of border control is complemented by a humanitarian and development approach to the refugee crisis. As well as attending to the immediate humanitarian needs of people fleeing war and persecution, this assistance aims to support host governments in managing the protracted refugee crisis and enable refugees to find shelter in their 'region of origin'. This policy pillar responds to the challenges created by the heavy inflow of refugees in the region, where the host countries' physical and social infrastructures are becoming overburdened,[4] leading to an increasingly antagonistic attitude towards refugees at all levels within society and the state. To address these conflictive dynamics, the traditional

humanitarian and development responses are complemented by a so-called 'resilience' component that aims to invest in local communities and job creation schemes more generally. This should – in theory – lead to refugees being seen as a contribution rather than a competitor over scarce resources.

The international community has set in place an intricate aid structure to support the humanitarian, development and resilience objectives in the Near East. For example, the EU's Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP) aspires to support the build-up of sustainable capacities in third countries to respond to the crisis in the medium and longer term.[5] The EU's 'Madad Fund' is a regional trust fund set up as the main way forward to bridge the international gap in the funding of resilience programmes in the region. Its primary aim is to fund the local resilience component of the overarching United Nation's Regional Refugee and Resilience Plans (3RPs), which combine humanitarian and development strategies on a larger scale.[6]

In practice, the resilience components of the many response programmes remain structurally underfunded[7] and it is debatable

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3   Ibid.
4   Conservative estimates suggest that 2.7 million registered Syrian refugees currently reside in Turkey, over 1 million in Lebanon, 657,000 in Jordan, and 250,000 in Iraq. See: http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional/php

5   European Resettlement Network. Available at: http://www.resettlement.eu/page/regional-protection-programmes
6   The United Nation's Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) is jointly led by the UN refugee agency UNHCR and its development counterpart UNDP, and aligns with national priorities as identified by national governments in the region (Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan and Iraq). The 3RP furthermore aims to coordinate the activities and needs of over 200 regional partners that are currently working to alleviate the situation of refugees and host communities in one plan.
7   The Madad Fund allocates a little over 10 per cent of its funding to 3RP resilience and local development programmes (EU Regional Trust Fund in Response to the Syrian Crisis, the Madad Fund, *State of play and outlook 2016*). This does little to alleviate the pressure on the resilience pillar of the structurally underfunded 3RP. Indeed, whereas the overall funding of this regional resilience plan failed to exceed a troubling 62 per cent in 2015, the resilience component itself managed to get only 39 per cent of its proposed projects funded. (3RP *Annual Report 2015*)

whether the international community can ensure that the limited funds available for resilience can actually be funnelled towards meeting refugees' and host communities' needs. Donor money risks becoming entwined in a web of vested inter-elite struggles and rent-seeking structures because of heavy donor reliance on national policies and structures that have historically serviced specific constituencies.

Emerging drivers of conflict and violence in the region

Even more problematic is that, paradoxically, the more the EU and its international partners would like its immediate neighbours to step up to the challenges posed by the refugee crisis, the less conducive the environment becomes to effectively improve the outlook for refugees. This is because the two core objectives of the Partnership Framework – border externalisation and protracted shelter in the region of origin – do not fit well together.

This is visible first and foremost in the self-perpetuating logic of border externalisation in the region. While an end to the conflict in Syria is not in sight, and large numbers of Syrians continue to try to escape in search of safety in neighbouring countries, the border policies of viable alternative destinations, such as the EU, are tightening. Regional host governments and local elites, just like many EU member states, are not thrilled by the prospect of millions of Syrian refugees staying within their borders. There is, for example, fear that their large numbers will disturb the precarious demographic and sectarian balances within those countries, and that rising tensions over limited resources between refugees and host communities will reach boiling point. To stem the inflow of refugees, all countries in the Near East have now closed their borders or tightened their entry regulations for new refugees.[8] As a result, it has become virtually impossible for refugees to escape Syria's warzone. The effective implementation of

long-term humanitarian and development programmes for Syrians who have made their way to neighbouring countries is similarly problematic, as the regional governments tend to prioritise the prevention of long-term settlement within their borders. This inhibits the EU's core principle of promoting sustainable solutions to the prolonged refugee crisis in the region.

Marginalisation and 'social death'

Refugees staying in the Near East are experiencing daily marginalisation and are confronted with the increasing institutionalisation of inequality between themselves and the host community. Examples can be found throughout the region. For example, there has been a significant increase in the bureaucratic obstacles for refugees wishing to update their registration and to obtain or renew residency visas. A recent study by the Norwegian Refugee Council shows that 70 per cent of the refugee population in Lebanon has lost its right to legal stay, and that some 250,000 Syrian refugees in Jordan were unable to update their government registration.[9] As official registration is often necessary to access refugee support programmes, this suggests that a significant proportion, if not the majority, of refugees living in the region cannot access humanitarian and development assistance. Similarly, most host countries tend to maintain policies that prevent refugees entering the job market.[10]

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8   IRIN News (10 March 2016) 'No way out'.

9   Norwegian Refugee Council (2016) *Drivers of Despair. Refugee protection failures in Jordan and Lebanon*. Briefing Note.

10 Recent efforts by regional governments do tackle some domestic legislative obstacles standing between refugees and formal employment. In December 2015, for example, Turkey adopted a work permit option for registered Syrian refugees. In a similar vein, the Jordanian government launched new measures in April 2016 that temporarily waived fees for work permits as a means to regularise informal employment structures. However, such schemes are largely ineffective in practice. They rely on both the willingness of governments to create more durable solutions for refugees and on the willingness of employers to forego the exploitation of cheap labor sources.

These practices have had a detrimental impact on refugees' possibilities to access basic livelihoods. Five years into the Syrian conflict, many refugee families have depleted their savings and fallen into extreme poverty. In Lebanon, for example, seven out of ten refugees live in poverty.[11] To survive, refugees resort to negative coping strategies, which include taking children out of school, child labour, marrying off children, eating less, prostitution or 'survival sex', and spiralling debt.[12] Reportedly 60 to 70% of refugee children in Lebanon are working for less than the minimum wage and are often subjected to physical and sexual abuse.[13]

The refugee crisis is also pushing non-refugees into the margins of society, a trend that has led to further discrimination and violence against refugees who are blamed for the local community's woes.[14] Many members of the host communities are priced out of the labour market because refugees are providing cheap labour, and as a result are encountering all sorts of financial and social problems. Local sources also attest that children from host communities are receiving less education because of overburdened school systems. In addition, host communities report a sense of alienation from their indigenous society. A Lebanese charity tellingly accounted how Lebanese citizens feel increasingly that they are "in Syria" and blame refugees for their increased hardship. As we have witnessed in refugee settings as far apart as Kenya and Albania, the result is increasing social and political tensions, as well as outright

violations of human rights and humanitarian norms.[15]

From a conflict perspective, this is alarming because of the longer-term harmful consequence of marginalisation and institutionalised inequality. In conflict literature this is described as 'social death' – a dynamic that is also present among the Syrian refugee population. In the words of one Syrian refugee: "Syrians consider themselves dead. Maybe not physically, but psychologically and socially [a Syrian] is a destroyed human being. He's reached the point of death."[16]

Currently, the international response to the crisis is not responsive enough to these drivers that are likely to result in more conflict in the region. This is a fatal misjudgement, as 'social death' provokes feelings of alienation, which in turn fuel existing societal friction and invites enrolment into illicit activities, the empowerment of exploitative networks, and extremism as a survival strategy.[17]

Empowering exploitative and smuggling networks

Exploitative networks thrive in these contexts of hardship and vulnerability. They capitalise on the vulnerable status of refugees, the frustrations of host communities, and the desperation of people who have no other means to scrape together a living. In a protracted refugee setting, such as currently witnessed in the Near East, such networks increasingly take root in the local political economy. In the refugee camps on the

11 Verme, P et al. (2015) *The Welfare of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and Jordan*, UNHCR and World Bank Group report.
12 Oxfam et al. (2015) op.cit.
13 The Freedom Fund (2016) *Struggling to survive: Slavery and exploitation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.*
14 For an overview of local perception of the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on host communities, see for example: BBC News (24 August 2013) 'Viewpoints: Impact of Syrian refugees on host communities'.

15 Puerta Gomez, M. et al. (2010) 'The impact of refugees on neighboring countries: A development challenge', *World Development Report 2011*, Background Note.
16 Patrick Kingsley (2016) *The New Odyssey: The story of Europe's refugee crisis*, Guardian Faber Publishing p. 127.
17 For an excellent read on the relationship between 'social death' and drivers of conflict and instability, see: Adams, T.M. (2012) *Chronic violence and its reproduction: Perverse trends in social relations, citizenship and democracy in Latin America*. Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Washington, p. 22.

inhospitable Syrian border with Jordan, for example, the complete absence of any type of state or NGO presence has fed into the proliferation of these networks. For refugees staying in the camps, subjection to or participation in these networks is the only option in terms of livelihoods and protection.[18]

Human smuggling networks are also on the rise. Increasing hardship in the region, Europe's tighter entry policies and the closing of borders throughout the Middle East have reinvigorated the smuggling market and led to a proliferation of human smuggling activities,[19] not only in the Near East. Current reports indicate that obstruction of the EU-Turkey crossing has resulted in Syrian refugees making their way across Sudan and Libya with the help of human smuggling networks.[20] The criminalisation of cross-border movement makes refugees easy prey for criminal networks that often seek to increase their income through extortion and abuse.[21]

Exploitative networks and illicit operations have found opportunistic ways to profit from both EU and regional government refugee policies, and the longer the current situation continues, the more permanently entrenched in organised crime these networks will become. As research into links between human smuggling and organised crime from Africa has shown, the large amount of money passing through illicit human smuggling structures feeds the consolidation of entrenched organised criminal networks. As a consequence, "warning

bells [should be] ringing at the potential connection between terrorism, organised crime and armed and violent conflict actors profiting from the migration flows facilitated by smuggling and human trafficking."[22] This danger is particularly pressing because it fits within a larger dynamic seen throughout the world in which organised crime has filled local power vacuums and has expanded its activities to other business and state authority spheres – thereby adding an additional complex layer to conflict dynamics that will be difficult to address through political means.[23]

Extremist recruitment and pragmatic radicalisation

The structural conditions that fuel grievances are manifestly present in the situation of refugees, and to a lesser extent that of marginalised host communities, as discussed above. This may contribute to pushing individuals into the arms of violent groups.[24] As observed in comparative refugee settings – such as those in Somalia, Pakistan and Yemen, where overcrowding and the absence of basic livelihoods make the situation especially dire – dense concentrations of marginalised refugees are at risk of becoming incubators for violence and violent extremism. In addition, compromised gender norms add to the vulnerabilities of Syrian men, in particular, being recruited into violence: "For men (…) war has made it more difficult to achieve 'manhood' through other traditional means, such as becoming or a husband or a father, or being able to protect your loved ones. This can push men into seeking violent alternatives."[25]

18 IRIN News (9 June 2016) 'Syrians trapped in desert no-man's land', Special report. Also see Boustani M et al. (2016) *Beirut, a safe refuge? Urban refugees accessing security in a context of plural provision*, CRU Report Plural Security Insights, Clingendael Institute, The Hague.

19 See for example: *The Wall Street Journal* (28 October 2016) 'Inside the migrant smuggling trade'.

20 The *Guardian* (28 May 2016) 'Dozens feared dead as migrant boat capsizes in Mediterranean'.

21 Médicins sans Frontières (2016) 'Turning a Blind Eye. How Europe Ignores the Consequences of Outsourced Migration Management'.

22 Global Initiative (2016) *Trails of Insecurity – Illicit Migration as a source of threat financing and criminal resourcing in Africa*, Conference report, p. 2.

23 Briscoe, I. (2016) *The new criminal powers*, CRU Report, Clingendael Institute, The Hague.

24 See for example: Sude, B. et al. (2015) *Lessening the risk of refugee radicalisation*, RAND Corporation; or: Schmid, A. (2013) *Radicalisation, de-radicalisation, counter-radicalisation: A conceptual discussion and literature review*, ICCT Research paper, The Hague.

25 Khattab, L. (24 July 2016), 'Why most Syrian men are not joining IS', Open Democracy.

In short, circumstances are favourable for violent groups, particularly extremists, to seek new recruits among the refugee population and, to a lesser extent, the host communities. These groups can provide much that is otherwise lacking: money, protection, purpose and belonging. And as extremist groups are generally better funded and better equipped, they represent an attractive alternative to more moderate options for new recruits.[26] Refugees' highest priority in the immediate term is survival; joining an extremist group is not necessarily an act of ideological or religious conviction, but rather a pragmatic coping strategy.

Moreover, historical evidence shows that when receiving countries pursue punitive policies in dealing with refugees, and when they lack comprehensive programmes to address the drivers of conflict, extremist groups can exploit refugee situations.[27] The irony is that the fear that violent extremists are recruiting among the refugee population leads to even more restrictive and punitive policies towards refugees. These policies in turn may in some instances drive vulnerable individuals into the arms of precisely the groups that inspired those policies in the first place. Indeed, there are signs that organised radicalisation is taking place in refugee camps in Jordan and Lebanon. For example, an Islamic State (IS)-inspired terrorist attack was recently staged against Jordanian border personnel from the Zaatari refugee camp.[28] Such dynamics can lay the groundwork for decades of political instability in the Near East, which is already being torn apart by violent extremism.

Conclusion

The size of the Syrian refugee crisis is difficult to grasp and the human drama that lies behind it is almost inconceivable. The pressure on international policy makers to formulate a response that balances domestic political interests with a clear call to action has been immense. In this context, agreement on a European Agenda on Migration is a success in and of itself.

However, attempts to deal with the Syrian refugee crisis in the region of origin is likely to continue to be insufficient as long as the greater political and funding imperatives are geared mostly towards preventing irregular migration to Europe. This has created a situation in which critical refugee protection and resilience objectives are left to governments whose aim is to prevent long-term settlement of refugees in their countries. The resulting obstacles for refugees to establish a decent livelihood in a prolonged situation of displacement and the pressure their presence puts on resources for host communities may prompt both groups to resort to alternative or negative coping strategies, leaving them at risk of exploitation or recruitment by extremist groups.

In short, the combined policies and actions of the international community in general, and those of the EU and regional governments in particular, are inadvertently contributing to emerging drivers of conflict and violence in the near future. Our research is dedicated to contributing to a better understanding of these dynamics as a first step towards greater political motivation for a conflict-sensitive approach.

Ultimately, only an end to Syria's war can stop the refugee crisis in the Near East. However, the road to that solution will be long and complex, and will come at a high cost. In the meantime, to ensure that today's refugee crisis does not become tomorrow's civil war, the international community and regional governments need to make a concerted effort to bridge the period of protracted displacement without destroying human and social capital beyond repair. The temporary political and financial costs of doing so will ultimately be outweighed by the costs of dealing with a new conflict, driven by rapidly consolidating networks that are not responsive to traditional conflict resolution instruments. Such an objective is ambitious in the context of today's hardening political climate towards refugees. But that does not make it less urgent.

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26 The Al-Qaeda-affiliated Al-Nusra front, for example, is said to pay four times as much as the Free Syrian Army. Khattab (2016) op.cit.

27 Sude, B. et al. (2015) op.cit., p. 8.

28 Lousada, L. (2016) 'The rising threat of refugee radicalization in Jordan', *Diplomatic Courier*.

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