

IV. United Nations and regional responses to displacement crises

LINA GRIP

This section provides a brief overview of developments in 2016 as regards selected United Nations and regional responses to displacement crises.

United Nations responses

The case studies in section III of this chapter cover some of the work of UN programmes in ongoing displacement crises in the Middle East and Africa. They illustrate that without the work of the UN and its agencies (see box 7.2) displacement crises would undoubtedly be significantly worse. The invaluable work of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the World Food Programme (WFP) and others, however, often falls short of its full potential due to underfunding. For example, OCHA and its partners requested almost \$20 billion in 2015 to meet the humanitarian demands of over 80 million people in 37 countries; the total finances raised came to about half of that, and OCHA's budget was only \$233 million.¹

Motivated by the worsening of displacement crises in 2016 and the underfunding of relevant UN agencies, the UN General Assembly raised the issue of large movements of refugees and migrants at the highest political level. On 19 September the General Assembly hosted a high-level summit with the aim of bringing countries together in a more humane and coordinated approach. It was the first time the General Assembly had called for a summit at the level of Heads of State and Government to look at large movements of refugees and migrants. In the outcome document, the 'New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants', member states agreed to start negotiations leading to an international conference and the adoption of a global agreement for safe, orderly and regular migration in 2018; they further agreed to develop guidelines on the treatment of migrants in vulnerable situations and to seek more equitable burden sharing for hosting and supporting the world's refugees.²

¹ United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Annual Report 2015* (OCHA: Geneva, 2015), p. 9.

² United Nations General Assembly, Draft resolution referred to the high-level plenary meeting on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants by the General Assembly at its seventieth session New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, A/71/L.1, 13 Sep. 2016.

Box 7.2. An overview of United Nations agencies working with displacement crises

UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): the UN Refugee Agency assists refugees, forcibly displaced communities and stateless people.

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA): part of the UN Secretariat responsible for bringing together humanitarian actors to ensure a coherent response to emergencies, reaching approximately 80 million people.

UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA): provides assistance and protection for some 5 million registered Palestine refugees.

World Food Programme (WFP): delivers food assistance in emergencies and works with communities to improve nutrition and build resilience, reaching 80 million people annually.

Source: Adapted by the author from the websites of the listed agencies.

The UN Secretary-General also convened the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit on 23–24 May 2016, in Istanbul.³ In framing parts of the humanitarian agenda and key challenges in advance of the meeting, the Secretary-General was able to include some highly relevant commitments to preventing and coping with displacement crises. These included seeking political commitment to ending violent conflicts, protecting international humanitarian law and a call to ‘leave no one behind’, by reducing displacement and supporting refugees and migrants, among other things.⁴ However, the final summit outcome saw few actual commitments to the displaced.⁵

Middle Eastern responses

Since 2013, Middle Eastern responses to the Syrian and other regional refugee crises have been characterized by several key features. First, the large scale of the number of refugees hosted in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, and for the latter two, especially in reference to their size and population density.

Second, the unequal balance in the wider region, with the Gulf states welcoming virtually no Syrians as refugees. For example, prior to 2016 the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had not accepted any Syrian refugees on its territory. In 2016, however, it agreed to take 15 000 Syrians over the next five years.⁶

Third, reluctance by states in the region to adopt a general binding legal framework under the UN, and instead a preference for a more specific

³ For more information on the World Humanitarian Summit see chapter 6, section III, in this volume.

⁴ United Nations, General Assembly, ‘One humanity: shared responsibility’, Report of the Secretary-General for the World Humanitarian Summit’, A/70/709, 2 Feb. 2016.

⁵ Aly, H., ‘The World Humanitarian Summit: winners and losers’, IRIN, 26 May 2016.

⁶ Malek, C., ‘UAE to welcome 15 000 refugees from Syria’, *The National*, 22 Sep. 2016.

response plan. The protracted Palestinian issue is often cited as a reason for the continued refusal of many states in the Middle East to sign the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. Many countries in the region are anxious to ensure that Palestinian refugees retain their special status and are not subjected to the UNHCR norm of resettlement, which would include admitting Palestinian refugees with permanent residence status and with rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals.⁷ First asylum countries (those that permit refugees to enter their territory for the purpose of temporary asylum) also fear that refugees from, for example, Iraq and Syria will settle permanently.⁸

Fourth, the specific economic status of hosting states (a key aspect of the Middle Eastern regional response to the Syrian refugee crisis). Today, more than 80 per cent of refugees in middle-income countries are hosted in the Middle East or Turkey.⁹ This economic status has generated a targeted response towards refugee assistance in order to, for example, access funding from international financial institutions (see the Global Concessional Financing Facility below).

The Syria Response Plan and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)

From 2015 the UN has coordinated the Syria Response Plan and the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) aimed at providing region-wide assistance for Syrian refugees and the communities hosting them through a coordinated response including service provision and resource mobilization.¹⁰

The 3RP is comprised of country chapters developed under the leadership of national authorities, with support from the UN and non-governmental organizations in each country. The Lebanon Crisis Response Plan and the Jordan Response Plan are chapters for their respective countries, and there are country chapters for Turkey, Iraq and Egypt. The 2015 Syria Response Plan and the 3RP were only half funded, with \$3.86 billion secured.¹¹

A donor conference in London in February 2016, the Supporting Syria and the Region Conference, sought to close the funding gap and launch a programme for the next two years. The conference raised \$11.22 billion in

⁷ Janmyr, M., 'Precarity in exile: the legal status of Syrian refugees in Lebanon', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 4 (Dec. 2016), p. 62; and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Resettlement Handbook* (UNHCR: Geneva, 2011), p. 9.

⁸ Newland, K., and O'Donnell, K., *The Iraqi Refugee Crisis: The Need for Action* (Migration Policy Institute: Washington, DC, 2008), p. 2.

⁹ Global Concessional Financing Facility, 'About us', <<http://globalcff.org/about-us>>.

¹⁰ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), *Overview: 2016 Syria Humanitarian Response Plan and 2016–2017 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan* (UNRWA: London, 4 Feb. 2016); and *Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) 2016–2017 in Response to the Syrian Crisis, Mid-Year Report: June 2016* (3RP: June 2016).

¹¹ 'Supporting Syria and the region: London 2016', Event concept note, 4 Feb. 2016, <<https://2c8k-ktlykog8lj8k9p47oglb-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Supporting-Syria-and-the-Region-London-2016-Event-Concept-Note-final-20-01-16.pdf>>.

pledges for the Syrian crisis, the largest sum ever on a single day for a single crisis, and included multi-year funding for 2016–20 by 17 donors.¹² The new 2017–18 3RP, which was adopted in 2016 and follows on from the 2015–16 plan, brings together more than 240 partners in a coordinated, region-wide response to assist 9.1 million people in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq (4.7 million Syrian refugees and over 4.4 million members of the communities hosting them).¹³

The challenges are huge. For example, according to Amnesty International, refugees in Lebanon receive barely \$0.70 a day in assistance.¹⁴ Early results of the 3RP in response to the Syrian crisis included the issuing of 11 500 work permits to Syrians in Jordan between April and mid-June 2016, while a pilot project has been agreed for 4000 Syrian refugees in the garment and agriculture sectors. In Turkey, a regulation from January 2016 allows Syrian refugees to work and be paid a minimum wage.¹⁵

The Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF) for MENA

At the 2016 Supporting Syria and the Region Conference in London, the World Bank Group, the UN and the Islamic Development Bank Group announced a joint financing initiative to support refugee-hosting states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCFF) for the MENA region. The motivation behind the new financial instrument is that middle-income countries did not previously have access to multilateral development financing at the same levels of concessionality as lower-income countries.¹⁶ The impact of the Syrian crisis on Jordan and Lebanon—both middle-income countries—exposed this gap in the existing development assistance architecture. The new facility is designed to extend concessional financing arrangements to middle-income countries hosting large refugee populations, with an initial focus on helping Jordan and Lebanon address the impacts of Syrian refugees.¹⁷ By July 2016 the initiative had raised over \$140 million in initial grant contributions with \$1 billion pledged in loans, which will generate further grant contributions.¹⁸

¹² Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (note 10), p. 5.

¹³ The Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) in Response to the Syrian crisis, 'New appeal seeks continued support for Syrian refugees and countries hosting them', Press release, 5 Dec. 2016.

¹⁴ Amnesty International, 'Lebanon: refugee women from Syria face heightened risk of exploitation and sexual harassment', 2 Feb. 2016.

¹⁵ Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (note 10).

¹⁶ Concessional is a measure of the 'softness' of a credit, reflecting the benefit to the borrower compared to a loan at market rate.

¹⁷ See the Global Concessional Financing Facility website, <<http://cff.menafinancing.org/>>.

¹⁸ The World Bank, 'Concessional financing facility funds projects to support refugees and host communities impacted by the Syrian crisis', Press release, 28 July 2016.

European Union responses

Although Europeans have often portrayed the Syrian refugee crisis as also being a ‘European refugee crisis’, especially during 2015, the approach taken in this chapter on ‘forced displacement in fragile contexts’ largely excludes the European Union (EU). EU member states in general are neither fragile nor experiencing massive forced displacement in terms of scale, resources or population density. Specific locations, however, such as the easterly Greek islands bordering Turkey, would possibly fall within that scope. Nonetheless, the EU was involved in two important bilateral political arrangements, with Turkey and Afghanistan, on refugee and asylum matters in 2016.

The EU–Turkey statement

During 2015 the EU experienced a large upswing in the number of refugees seeking asylum in its member states. The vast majority of refugees fleeing to the EU came via Turkey to Greece. The situation on some of the Greek islands was unsustainable and thousands of people were dying as they tried to escape to Europe.¹⁹ In the first three months of 2016 almost 170 000 people were estimated to have crossed the Mediterranean, with over 151 000 using the Eastern Mediterranean route. This was significantly higher than the 20 700 estimated to have made the journey in the first three months of 2015.²⁰

In March 2016 the EU and Turkey agreed on a common statement that included the right of the Greek authorities to send refugees and other migrants arriving in Greece after 20 March back to Turkey, obliging them to apply for asylum in Turkey as the ‘first country of asylum’. Further, it was agreed that Turkey would take any necessary measures to prevent new sea or land routes for ‘irregular migration’ opening from Turkey to the EU. In return—aside from a multibillion-euro aid package and the promise of visa liberalization—EU member states agreed to resettle Syrian refugees directly from Turkey and accept one Syrian from Turkey for every Syrian received by Turkey from Greece. As of 15 June 2016, only 511 Syrian refugees had been resettled from Turkey to the EU.²¹ This effectively means that asylum seekers are being stopped and kept in Turkey and prevented from travelling to the EU, rather than actually being returned.

According to the EU, the number of migrants crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek islands dropped by 95 per cent between March

¹⁹ See Grip, L. ‘The global refugee crisis and its impact in Europe’, *SIPRI Yearbook 2016*, pp. 439–52.

²⁰ International Organization for Migration, ‘Mediterranean migrant arrivals in 2016: 169 846; Deaths: 620’, Press release, 1 Apr. 2016.

²¹ European Commission, ‘Implementing the EU–Turkey Statement—questions and answers’, Fact sheet, 15 June 2016.

and May 2016.²² In total, UNHCR estimates that just under 362 000 people crossed the Mediterranean to Europe during 2016, which is about one-third of the number for the previous year.²³ However, even though the number of people attempting to cross was less, the death toll in 2016 increased to 5022—a new high and a significant increase compared to 3771 in 2015.²⁴ This upsurge in drownings is believed to be a direct consequence of the closure of the Eastern Mediterranean route and of refugees and migrants turning to the more dangerous Central Mediterranean route.²⁵

The EU–Afghanistan settlement

Following the EU–Turkey statement, the EU reached a political settlement with the Afghan Government on returning asylum seekers to Afghanistan. In 2015 Afghanistan was the second-largest country of origin of first-time asylum requests in EU member states—with 178 000 requests. This was significantly more than the 38 000 requests filed by Afghans in the EU during 2014.²⁶ Many Afghans have moved to Europe from either Pakistan or Iran and nearly 20 per cent of those arriving at the Greek islands in January 2016 had never lived in Afghanistan.²⁷ In an attempt to reduce the number of Afghan asylum requests in the EU—and possibly fearing the consequences of Pakistan’s new policy towards remaining Afghans (and a likely increase in internal displacement, insecurity and violence)—the EU pushed the Afghan Government to agree to allow EU member states to deport an unlimited number of Afghan asylum seekers, obliging Afghanistan to receive them.²⁸ An earlier version of the agreement, which was leaked in March 2016, included a proposed limit of 80 000 asylum seekers. The final agreement signed on 2 October, however, included no such limit.²⁹ Subsequently, half of all asylum requests by Afghans to EU member states were rejected in the third quarter of 2016, compared to 63 per cent recognition rates on average for all requests in the same period and 70 per cent recognition rates

²² European Commission (note 21).

²³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), ‘Mediterranean situation’, accessed 4 Jan. 2017.

²⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), ‘Mediterranean Sea: 100 people reported dead yesterday, bringing year total to 5 000’, 23 Dec. 2016.

²⁵ On the impact of policy changes on the route taken see Katsiaficas, C., ‘Asylum seeker and migrant flows in the Mediterranean adapt rapidly to changing conditions’, Migration Policy Institute, 22 June 2016.

²⁶ Eurostat, ‘Figure 2: Countries of origin of (non-EU) asylum seekers in the EU–28 member states, 2014 and 2015’, Asylum Statistics, accessed 4 Jan. 2017.

²⁷ Bowden, M., ‘Commentary’, United Nations in Afghanistan, Population Movement Bulletin, no. 1, 22 Mar. 2016, p. 1.

²⁸ European External Action Service, ‘Joint way forward on migration issues between Afghanistan and the EU’, 2 Oct. 2016.

²⁹ Rasmussen, S. E., ‘EU’s secret ultimatum to Afghanistan: accept 80 000 deportees or lose aid’, *The Guardian*, 28 Sep. 2016; and European External Action Service (note 28).

for Afghan asylum applications to the EU in the third quarter of 2015.³⁰ In addition, many Afghans were deported from several EU member states during 2016.³¹ These included homosexual Afghan men who were deported to Afghanistan, where homosexuality is illegal, allegedly with instructions to hide their sexual identity from the authorities and from insurgents.³²

The EU and the Government of Afghanistan also co-hosted a conference on Afghanistan in Brussels in October 2016, where the participants endorsed a reform agenda presented by the Afghan Government.³³ A similar conference had been hosted in London in January 2010.³⁴ The 2010 conference communiqué outlined, among other things, a commitment to the return and reintegration of Afghan refugees, including increasing national absorption capacity to better plan and manage sustainable reintegration.³⁵ This alludes to the discrepancy between, on the one hand, the long-held awareness among decision makers of what the challenges and risks of return are, and, on the other hand, insufficient subsequent political action.

³⁰ Eurostat, 'First time asylum applicants and first instance decisions on asylum applications: fourth quarter 2016', *Asylum Quarterly Report* (Eurostat: Dec. 2016), <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report#Decisions_on_asylum_applications>; and Eurostat, *Asylum Quarterly Report* (Eurostat: Dec. 2015), <<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/6049358/7005580/Asylum-Quarterly-Report-Q2-2015.pdf/1cb26b1c-69ef-4f39-889f-da07862b414d>>, p. 13.

³¹ See e.g. Gossman, P., 'Why the European Union shouldn't deport Afghans', *Human Rights Watch*, 24 Jan. 2014; and Rasmussen, S., 'First wave of Afghans expelled from EU states under contentious migration deal', *The Guardian*, 15 Dec. 2016.

³² Graham-Harrisson, E., 'Deported gay Afghans told to "pretend to be straight"', *The Guardian*, 26 Feb. 2017.

³³ European Union, 'Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, partnership for prosperity and peace: communiqué of the participants', Press release, 5 Oct. 2016.

³⁴ Noormal, A. N., 'Conflict analysis: Afghanistan since 2001', *Beyond Intractability*, Sep. 2015.

³⁵ Afghanistan: The London Conference, 'Communiqué', 28 Jan. 2010, p. 43.