

Humanitarianism, Development, and Security in the 21st Century: Lessons from the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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The term *humanitarianism* finds its roots in 19th-century Europe and is generally defined as the “impartial, neutral, and independent provision of relief to victims of conflict and natural disasters.”¹ Behind this definition lies a dynamic history. According to political scientists Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, this history can be divided into three phases. From the 19th century to World War II, humanitarianism was a reaction to the perceived breakdown of society and the emergence of moral ills caused by rapid industrialization within Europe. The era between World War II and the 1990s saw the emergence of many of today’s nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations. These organizations sought to address the suffering caused by World War I and World War II, but also turned their gaze toward the non-Western world, which was in the process of decolonization. The third phase began in the 1990s, after the end of the Cold War, and witnessed an expansion of humanitarianism. One characteristic of this expansion is the increasing prominence of states, regional organizations, and the United Nations in the field of humanitarian action. Their increased prominence has been paralleled by a growing linkage between humanitarian concerns and the issue of state, regional, and global security.² Is it possible that, in the 21st century, humanitarianism is entering a new (fourth) phase? And, if so, what role have events in the Middle East played in ushering it in? I seek to answer these questions by focusing on regional consultations that took place between June 2014 and July 2015 in preparation for the first ever World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), scheduled to take place in Istanbul in May 2016.

The WHS is a UN-led initiative that brings together “governments, humanitarian organizations, people affected by humanitarian crises, and new partners including the private sector,” in order to “reshape the global agenda for humanitarian action.”³ Regional organizations such as the the African Union, the Arab League, and the European Commission played an important role in facilitating the regional consultations.⁴ The results of the consultations were summarized in a Synthesis Report that identifies emerging action areas and lays the groundwork for a series of recommendations that are to be discussed during the WHS. It is clear from the report that events in the Middle East, especially the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, have influenced significantly the agenda of the upcoming summit. “Resilience” is one of five action areas that has emerged from the consultations, which have primarily linked it to responding effectively to refugee crises.⁵ The Synthesis Report notes that “with the number of people enduring protracted displacement steeply rising, a fundamental shift is needed in support of refugees and host countries and communities.”⁶ As part of this shift, it proposes awarding financial assistance packages to host countries and advocates the promotion of refugee self-reliance through livelihood opportunities. These objectives are themselves seen as crucial to supporting the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda, a recent UN global initiative that builds on the 2000 Millennium Development Goals. Thus, rather than addressing

refugee crises primarily through the language of emergency and the provision of relief, humanitarian actors are putting increasing emphasis on addressing both the long-term welfare of refugees and the impact of their protracted displacement on host-societies. *Resilience*, *sustainability*, and *self-reliance*, terms that are currently in vogue in the development world, are increasingly being associated with refugees.

One of the main recommendations of the regional consultations is that the response to refugee crises should focus simultaneously on humanitarian relief *and* development assistance. While, since the 1990s, it is not unusual for some humanitarian actors to switch from emergency humanitarian assistance to development assistance in the postconflict or postdisaster phase, or once relief is no longer a priority,⁷ what is being proposed here is that emergency humanitarian assistance be offered in conjunction with development assistance at the onset of refugee crises. The Syrian refugee crisis played a major role in sparking this proposed shift.⁸ In fact, it could be argued that the crisis served as a laboratory for experimenting with solutions, which have now become policy recommendations in the Synthesis Report of the regional consultations for the upcoming WHS. In this respect, it is probably not a coincidence that the summit will take place in Turkey, a country that is currently hosting close to half of the more than four million refugees who have fled Syria and that has become a major transit point for refugees and other migrants trying to reach Europe.

Several of the conclusions reached by the WHS regional consultations were foreseen in the UN-led response to the Syrian refugee crisis. This response is officially known as the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan. Launched in December 2014, it brings together 200 humanitarian and development partners, including governments, United Nations agencies, and national and international nongovernmental organizations.⁹ The initiative is led by the United Nations Development Program and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). According to the United Nations Development Program and UNHCR representatives, “traditional humanitarian assistance” is no longer enough to address the Syrian refugee crisis, “especially given that an end to the crisis is not imminent.”¹⁰ What is needed is a “scaling-up of *resilience and stabilization-based development* and humanitarian assistance” to cope with the impact of the Syrian crisis on regional host countries, namely, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt.¹¹ The 2015–16 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan explains that the response to the Syrian refugee crisis must address not only the needs of refugees fleeing Syria to other countries but also those of vulnerable people living in the areas to which refugees are fleeing. It emphasizes the importance of providing self-reliance opportunities through livelihood support for vulnerable people in these areas. Thus, both emergency relief and development are required, with the latter acting as a stabilizing tool to address “the adverse socio-economic effects” that the Syria crisis has on communities in neighboring host countries.¹² For António Guterres, the former head of UNHCR and a major figure in the crafting of the 2015–16 Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan, there is an obvious link between these adverse socioeconomic factors and global security. In a 20 November 2015 address to the United Nations General Assembly, he noted that a major rationale for prioritizing socioeconomic development in refugee host countries is that “refugee hosting countries which are also a first line of defense for all of us in regions troubled by conflict and terrorism must be a first priority in international development cooperation.”¹³

Humanitarianism and global security concerns have become increasingly linked in the 21st century. In the post 9/11 era, many countries, especially the United States, have viewed counterterrorism and humanitarianism as “crime-fighting partners.”¹⁴ However, recent events relating to the war in Syria gave rise to a shift in how refugees figure into the link between humanitarian crises and security concerns. Until this year’s 13 November Paris attacks, in which one of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) attackers was believed to have made his way to France by posing as a Syrian refugee, refugee crises were seen as a potential source of regional and global instability that could heighten security threats such as terrorism (this sentiment is reflected in Guterres’s comments above), but refugees, as a collective, retained the mantle of victimhood. In the aftermath of the Paris attacks, refugees themselves, at least those emanating from the Middle East, are now seen by some politicians, government officials, and members of the public in Europe and North America as embodying the threat of global terrorism.

The Syrian crisis has influenced ongoing global humanitarian debates in other ways as well: noting that two-thirds of the world’s population is projected to be living in urban centers by 2050, the Synthesis Report of the WHS’s regional consultations argues that “rapid and unplanned urbanization is putting enormous strain on infrastructure while increasing people’s risk and vulnerability to crisis.”¹⁵ The report goes on to note that refugees are increasingly settling in urban centers, a trend that is especially prominent in the Middle East and currently manifested in the Syrian refugee crisis. Indeed, while some camps have been built to house refugees from Syria (in Jordan and Turkey, for example), 80 percent of these refugees are living in urban areas, not camps.¹⁶ It is worth noting that even before the Syrian refugee crisis, alternatives to encampment were a significant feature of the response of some Middle Eastern governments to refugee crises. The roughly one million Iraqi refugees who fled to Syria in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 were not placed in camps. Neither were the thousands of Lebanese refugees who fled to Syria during the 2006 Israeli–Hizbullah war. Refugee studies scholar Dawn Chatty credits Iraqi refugees, who deliberately avoided camps and chose to settle in urban centers in various Middle Eastern countries, with precipitating a policy shift within UNHCR toward a “more rights-based approach” focused not on confining refugees to camps, but rather on helping them while working with local communities.¹⁷ This approach was later used in Libya and Tunisia during the Arab uprisings.¹⁸

While the Synthesis Report of the regional consultations for the WHS finds that mass migration to urban centers is contributing to rapid and unplanned urbanization, it does not discourage such migration. On the contrary, despite noting the need to address the vulnerability of the urban poor, it finds that urban centers offer opportunities for recovery to those displaced by conflict and disaster. In fact, the report recommends promoting employment and self-reliance among refugees rather than confining them to camps. Once again, the Syrian refugee crisis is mentioned: the report offers the example of Jordan and Turkey, both of which appear to be moving away from encampment and toward granting refugees from Syria the right to work and absorbing them into their educational system.¹⁹ Given the security concerns linked to refugees highlighted earlier in this article, the extent to which states will embrace a shift away from encampment remains to be seen. However, in light of the current emphasis on development as part of

the immediate response to humanitarian crises, it is not surprising that the benefits of this policy shift were underscored in the regional consultations.

It is important to note here that the response to the Syrian refugee crisis was itself pre-figured and influenced by the Palestinian refugee crisis, which dates back to 1948. Within the last decade, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has set in motion reforms that emphasize development in Palestinian refugee camps, and has done so through an urban development approach.²⁰ These reforms culminated in the establishment in 2006 of an Infrastructure and Camp Improvement Program within UNRWA's areas of operation.²¹ According to UNRWA officials I interviewed in Amman in spring 2015, the agency was a major interlocutor during the discussions that led to the establishment of the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in response to the Syrian refugee crisis. UNRWA's policies toward Palestinian refugees, especially those emphasizing development, served as a frame of reference for the response to the Syrian crisis.²²

On the one hand, the upcoming WHS and the preparations leading to it reveal a strengthening of earlier trends: states as well as UN and regional organizations have not only become normalized as shapers of humanitarian discourse and agents of humanitarian action, but they are becoming increasingly prominent in these arenas. In line with this trend, global security remains linked to the fate of the victims of humanitarian disasters. On the other hand, preparations for the upcoming WHS have yielded recommendations for new ways of addressing longstanding problems such as forced migration and have highlighted new areas of concern, such as urbanization. Events in the Middle East within the last few years have played a major role in efforts to devise new solutions to existing humanitarian problems and to identify new areas of humanitarian intervention. The Syrian refugee crisis in particular, which has rippled across the Middle East and Europe in the last few years, has acted both as a driving force and a laboratory for this global, United Nations-led attempt to redefine the meaning and objectives of humanitarianism in the 21st century. We must remember, however, that the response to the Syrian refugee crisis was itself shaped by prior—and ongoing—crises, including the mass displacement of Palestinians and Iraqis.

We must also acknowledge that while, for a long time, Palestinians stood out from other refugees due to their protracted exile, protracted refugee crises have now become a common feature of the global world that we inhabit. The Middle East is, therefore, but a microcosm of a changing world in which refugee crises are becoming part of the normal state of affairs.²³ Traditional humanitarian discourse in response to forced displacement, with its emphasis on emergency and short-term relief aid, is giving way to a new discourse. This is a discourse that not only emphasizes refugees' self-reliance and long-term resilience but also is engaged in re-evaluating encampment as a response to displacement and in recognizing refugees' right to the city.

NOTES

¹Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, "Humanitarianism: A Brief History of the Present," in *Humanitarianism in Question: Power, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008), 1–48.

²Ibid.

³World Humanitarian Summit (WHS), accessed 12 December 2015, <https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/>.

⁴WHS, "MENA Consultation Report," 3–5 March 2015, accessed 4 January 2016, <https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/node/493003>; WHS, "Regional Consultation for Eastern and Southern Africa," 27–29 October 2015, accessed 4 January 2016, <https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/bitcache/4120909833355d8e114cc5974256f5052d77248c?vid=515669&disposition=inline&op=view>; WHS, "Regional Consultations for Europe and Others," 3–4 February, accessed 4 January 2016, <https://www.worldhumanitariansummit.org/bitcache/0630a6f65e7655356108297dc0d02c7aad5e9a46?vid=536399&disposition=inline&op=view>.

⁵WHS, "Restoring Humanity: Global Voices Calling for Action. Synthesis of the Consultation Process for the World Humanitarian Summit," 5 October 2015, accessed 13 December 2015, <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-and-world-humanitarian-summit/news/whs-release-synthesis-report>.

⁶Ibid., 4.

⁷Michael Barnett *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011); Barnett and Weiss, "Humanitarianism."

⁸This is acknowledged in the WHS Synthesis Report. WHS, "Restoring Humanity."

⁹United Nations Development Programme and UNHCR, Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan 2015–2016, 28 July 2015, accessed 15 December 2015, <http://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/CPR/regional-strategic-overview/>.

¹⁰Ibid., 6.

¹¹Ibid. Emphasis added.

¹²Ibid., 7.

¹³UNHCR, "Statement by General Commissioner," 20 November 2015, accessed 20 December 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/564f4f609.html>.

¹⁴Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*; Barnett and Weiss, "Humanitarianism," 25.

¹⁵WHS, "Restoring Humanity," 3.

¹⁶UNHCR, "Statement by General Commissioner."

¹⁷Niamh Fleming-Farrel, "Benefits of Camps for Syrian Refugees Questionable," 2 November 2013, accessed 15 December 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/refdaily?pass=52fc6fbd5&id=5119e5415>.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹WHS, "Restoring Humanity."

²⁰Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal, and Lex Takkenberg, eds., *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²¹Ibid.

²²UNRWA staff, interviews with the author, Amman headquarters, March 2015.

²³Comments made by Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council, in a Huffington Post op-ed, echo this assessment. Egeland argues that emergency aid, by itself, is no longer an effective response to refugee crises. Jan Egeland, "This is the Worst Refugee Crisis Since World War II: It's Time for Us to Rethink Our Response," 15 September 2014, accessed 2 January 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jan-egeland/refugee-crisis-wwii-aid-_b_5791776.html.