

Syrian Displacement Crisis, the GCR, and Challenges to “Host Community and Refugee Representation”

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In the March of this year, the crisis in Syria entered its eighth year. That milestone coincided with the release of the “zero draft” of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR).¹ The GCR is designed to improve responses to displacement worldwide, and is expected to be adopted in September when world leaders convene at the UN in New York. The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) is a key component of the GCR and aims at easing pressures on refugee-hosting countries, building refugee self-reliance, expanding access to resettlement, and supporting conditions for refugees to return home voluntarily. The will to take a “whole of society” approach has also opened the possibility of broadening the base of stakeholders to include representations from the civil societies of host and refugee communities. Fortunately, the GCR acknowledges the role of urban leaders – that’s important, since a large proportion of world’s refugees live in urban centers.² Syrian refugees are primarily hosted by the front line countries of Egypt, Jordan,

Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey. Their numbers amount to more than a quarter of the world refugee population.³ As most of them are living in urban centers, the GCR should establish a mechanism that can ensure their inclusion in various policy discussions in an ongoing manner and better represent their “voice” and experience in the CRRF.⁴

This brief, however, will highlight the fact that as positive and welcome as these developments are, the implementation of the GCR will likely face challenges with respect to ensuring the expanded representation. These challenges result from the tension between differing perspectives adopted by national as opposed to municipal authorities in managing refugee communities and from restrictive government practices towards civil society, both local and international. The below discussion will be informed by the Turkish case based on field research and interviews, but is likely to be applicable to other cases as well.

¹ UNHCR. (2018). The global compact on refugees: zero draft. Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/Zero-Draft.pdf>

² Brandt, J. & Earle, L. (2018) . The Global Compact for Refugees. Bringing Mayors to the Table: Why and How. The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/fp_20180125_global_compact_refugees-final.pdf

³ UNHCR. (2017). Mid-year trends. Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/5aaa4fd27/mid-year-trends-june-2017.html>. As of March 2018, there are more than 5.6 million Syrian refugees hosted by front line countries of Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and Turkey; see <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>. There is an additional population of approximately one million Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Europe. See Connor, P. (2018). Most displaced Syrians are in the Middle East, and about a million are in Europe. Pew Research Center. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/01/29/where-displaced-syrians-have-resettled/>

⁴ UNHCR, The Zolberg Institute on Migration and Mobility at the New School, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights and Humanitarian Law, and the Migration Research Centre at Koç University. (2018). A Concluding Note from the Experts’ Workshop in Istanbul: “What does the Global Impact on Refugees mean for the MENA region?” Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/events/conferences/5abb949c7/concluding-note-experts-workshop-istanbul-global-compact-refugees-mean.html> and Brandt, J. & Kirisci, K. (2018). In rethinking refuge, draw lessons from Turkey. The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/25/in-rethinking-refuge-draw-lessons-from-turkey/>



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The GCR and a Multi-Stakeholder Approach: Civil Society

Section 5 of the “Programme of action” of the GCR highlights the need to “enable refugees and host communities to assess their own needs and help to design appropriate responses” and goes on to flag the importance of “networks of cities and municipalities hosting refugees” to share experiences. Similarly, the role of civil society especially at the local and national levels in addressing refugee needs is highlighted. This interest in strengthening the role of host and refugee community stakeholders is important because more often than not these parties “have been underrepresented in policy making discussions and negotiations. For example, only 4% of the organizations which participated in the High Level Meeting on Refugees and Migrants in September 2016 came from the top 5 refugee-hosting countries.”⁵

Overcoming the obstacles to participation in policy formation processes is indeed very important; but refugee and host community

civil society organizations will also face challenges on home ground. This aspect of the issue will need to be addressed if more effective policies to increase refugee and host community resilience are to be developed. Turkey, with 4 million refugees, is currently the country that hosts the largest number of refugees on its territory, a population composed mostly of Syrians but which also includes nationals of other countries.⁶ The country is recognized and frequently praised for the generous humanitarian support that it has extended to refugees.⁷ Indeed, Turkey has a rich civil society with considerable experience in the area of assisting refugees and asylum seekers, which became extensively mobilized with the Syrian displacement crisis.⁸ The crisis also attracted large number of leading INGOs. More recently, however, the deteriorating security conditions, the rise of authoritarianism, and the erosion of the rule of law have adversely affected Turkish civil society as well as INGO operations in the country. One manifestation of this situation has been the way in which the permits to operate in Turkey of an increasing number of INGOs working with refugees have not been renewed.

⁵ International Refugee Congress. (2018) . Consultation Report, p. 3. Retrieved from: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ADCDDeJyIfiETtL_7Gh2AKw_IM5nc1pTa/view

⁶ Sario lu, B. (2018). Turkey hosts largest refugee population in the world. *Hürriyet Daily News*. Retrieved from: <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-hosts-largest-refugee-population-in-world-125979>. UNHCR figures are slightly lower at 3.7 million. See UNHCR Turkey stats offered at <http://www.unhcr.org/tr/en/unhcr-turkey-stats>.

⁷ Dunmore, C. (2018). Grandi urges more aid for Turkey’s refugee hosting effort. UNHCR. Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2018/2/5a85a5534/grandi-urges-aid-turkeys-refugee-hosting-effort.html>

⁸ For a discussion of civil society in general see Heper, C. & Yıldırım, S. (2011) . Revisiting civil society in Turkey. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 11:1. pp. 1-18 and Kubicek, P. (2007). The European Union and grassroots democratization in Turkey. *Turkish Studies*, Vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 61-377. For refugee focused civil society see Mackreath, H. & Sa niç, S.G. (2017). *Civil Society and Syrian Refugees in Turkey*. Citizens’ Assembly-Turkey. Retrieved from: <http://www.hyd.org.tr/attachments/article/214/civil-society-and-syrian-refugees-in-turkey.pdf> and Kirisci, K. & Ferris, E. (2015). *Not Likely To Go Home: Syrian Refugees and the Challenges to Turkey –and the International Community*. The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Turkey-Policy-Paper-web.pdf>



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Some of these organizations have faced arbitrary fines while others have seen their activities restricted.⁹ In addition, there are reports that local, national and Syrian refugee-led NGOs have also been suffering lately, especially those receiving funds from or cooperating with Western donors and INGOs. The government entertains considerable distrust towards such NGOs and prefers to work with faith-based organizations ideologically close to itself.¹⁰ This leads to the loss or underutilization of experienced civil society capacity, and undermines the prospects of creating synergy between the government, the international community, and local/national civil society towards improving the welfare of refugees as well as of host communities.

National vs. Municipal

Section 5 of the “Programme of action” of the GCR also acknowledges the role of cities and municipalities in hosting refugees. It encourages them to share “good practices and innovative approaches”. This is not

surprising considering that some 60 % of all refugees live in urban areas, according to the most recent UNHCR *Global Trends* report.¹¹ This percentage is dramatically higher in front line countries and is more than 90% in Turkey.¹² The growing reality that the Syrian refugee crisis has become a protracted one has propelled municipalities to play a growing role in the provision of services beyond just humanitarian ones. Many municipal authorities have had to adopt to the growing reality of Syrian refugees in their midst at a time when their integration in the durable solution sense of the word remain unresolved and in limbo. They have found themselves having to entertain imaginative methods to finance the extension of public services they offer to refugees and projects they undertake to enhance local social cohesion.¹³ In an effort to offer livelihood opportunities for refugees without generating resentment among members of the host communities, they have been more willing to cooperate with civil society actors, both local and international, as well as to develop trust in them.¹⁴

⁹ Mellen, R. & Lynch, C. (2017). Inside Turkey’s NGO Purge. *Foreign Policy*. Retrieved from: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/03/inside-turkeys-ngo-purge/> and Cupolo, D. (2017). Turkey steps up crackdown on humanitarian aid groups. *IRIN*. Retrieved from: <https://www.irinnews.org/news/2017/04/27/turkey-steps-crackdown-humanitarian-aid-groups>

¹⁰ H. Mackreath & S.G. Sagnic. (2017). *Civil Society and Syrian Refugees in Turkey*. Citizens’ Assembly-Turkey. <http://www.hyd.org.tr/attachments/article/214/civil-society-and-syrian-refugees-in-turkey.pdf>

¹¹ *Global Trends: Forced Displacement 2016*, p. 55. Retrieved from: <http://www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34.pdf>

¹² Brandt, J. & Kirisci, K. (2018) . In rethinking refuge, draw lessons from Turkey. The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/01/25/in-rethinking-refuge-draw-lessons-from-turkey/>. See also the Turkish government’s Temporary Protection Statistics: http://www.goc.gov.tr/icerik3/gecici-koruma_363_378_4713

¹³ For a brief discussion of the case of municipalities in Istanbul with a special focus on challenges resulting from legal definitions concerning budgetary issues, and which includes references to detailed reports, see Erdogan, M. (2017) . Thinking Outside the Camp: Syrian Refugees in Istanbul. Migration Policy Institute: Retrieved from: <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/thinking-outside-camp-syrian-refugees-istanbul>

¹⁴ For a detailed example of such cooperation between an INGO and a municipality in Lebanon see <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/916/findingeconomicopportunityinthecityircweb.pdf>



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However, more often than not there is a tension between national and municipal authorities: National authorities, in contrast with municipalities’ emphasis on pragmatism and “integration,” tend to focus on political and legal issues with a preference towards seeing refugees “going back.”¹⁵ The channeling of nationally allocated funds to municipalities can also become problematic as the government will often support municipalities run by the political party in power and deny assistance to municipalities run by opposition parties. Indeed, the International Crisis Group notes how in some localities in Turkey there is little dialogue between national authorities and local elected officials as well as civil society ones.¹⁶ Finally, the government, depending on its political agenda, will oscillate between, as has been the case in Turkey, supporting the idea of extending citizenship and emphasizing the return of refugees to Syria. These tensions running between municipal and national authorities inevitably are going to complicate the prospects of meeting the objectives of the GCR and engaging municipalities to improve the resilience of refugee communities.

Conclusion

The GCR’s emphasis on a “multi stakeholder approach” and host and refugee resilience, as well as its call for enhanced responsibility sharing, are welcome developments. The inclusion of the “voices” of municipalities and civil society actors (local, national, refugee-led and international) in policy debates and formulation is going to be critical to a successful implementation of the Compact.

Moving forward, however, it will be important to bear in mind the need to find innovative ways of mediating the tension between national and local authorities. Similarly, finding ways to nurture ad support environments that allow, within the bounds of the rule of law, diverse civil society actors to channel their experiences and expertise to improve resilience of both refugee and host communities will be crucial for success. A step in this direction could be achieved by developing practices that connect manifestations of “responsibility sharing,” such as the dispersing of funds and resettlement programs, to a willingness by central governments to cooperate more closely with municipalities and civil society. The UN family by its very nature is very state-centric. The space opened in the GCR for sub-national actors in policy consultations, however, may help to overcome constrains of this mold. Once the GCR is adopted, the key test will be whether this new perspective can be extended to the Compact’s implementation, and to ensure that addressing these “representation” related challenges is covered by the “set of key indicators to monitor and evaluate progress and outcomes of the global compact” that the UNHCR has been tasked with. It is only then that something good from the Syrian crisis as “an engine of vast human suffering”¹⁷ will have come about.

¹⁵ Ibid p. 15 and p. 21.

¹⁶ International Crisis Group. (2018) . *Turkey’s Syrian Refugees: Defusing Metropolitan Tensions*. Retrieved from: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/248-turkeys-syrian-refugees-defusing-metropolitan-tensions>.

¹⁷ Brandt, J. & Earle, L. (2018). *The Global Compact for Refugees. Bringing Mayors to the Table: Why and How?* The Brookings Institution. Retrieved from: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/fp_20180125_global_compact_refugees-final.pdf, p.2



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