10

The Syrian Emergency and Its Impact on the Evolution of Global Refugee Policy

Jeff Crisp

Introduction

The word 'unprecedented' is one of the most familiar in the humanitarian vocabulary. When a new emergency breaks out, when a famine looms or when significant numbers of refugees begin to leave their own country to escape from a crisis, it can almost be guaranteed that a succession of aid agencies and media commentators will suggest that the situation is 'unprecedented', that the new disaster is 'the worst in the world' and that the humanitarian operation launched in response is 'the most complex' ever witnessed.

Such observations have become tediously familiar, often betraying a very limited knowledge of humanitarian history. They also appear to be driven by a desire more to attract international attention and raise funds than to promote a better understanding of emergency situations in which many lives are at risk. As such, they should generally be avoided. In the case of Syria, however, there is indeed some justification for describing the country's decade-long refugee and displacement emergency as being unprecedented, the worst in the world and one of the most complex of recent years.

First, the Syrian crisis was unusual in terms of the speed with which it erupted and the number of people it affected. In the first few months of the nonviolent uprising against the Assad regime, very few Syrians felt the need to abandon their homeland. But as the Syrian military sought to suppress

the protests and armed resistance to the regime began, refugee numbers skyrocketed. By early 2015, some four million people had fled the country.

While the speed of refugee departures subsequently fell, in large part because neighbouring and nearby states closed their borders to Syrians who were trying to escape the turmoil, the overall number has continued to climb. By the time of completing this article (August 2022), at least 6.6 million Syrians were living abroad, with a similar number displaced within the borders of the country. Another five million people in Syria remained in their usual place of residence, but were in need of humanitarian assistance in order to survive.

Second, the Syrian refugee emergency has been characterized by its broad geographic scope. In the early days of the armed conflict, the majority of refugees fled to the neighbouring and nearby states of Egypt, Iraq (including the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in the north of the country), Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Those who had the skills, resources or connections to do so also took up residence in more distant places such as Armenia, the Gulf states and Sudan, although they were often not recognized or registered as refugees in those locations.

The scope of the situation expanded substantially in 2015–16, when large numbers of Syrian refugees who had initially fled to Turkey began to move into the European Union, usually via the Aegean Sea, the Mediterranean Sea and by land through the Balkans. Their purposes in doing so varied: to find better employment and educational prospects than were available in Turkey; to benefit from the greater freedoms, security and social support systems that existed in Europe; and to reunite with family and community members who were already to be found there.

Taking most of the world (and particularly the EU) by surprise, the westward and northward movement of exiled Syrians triggered another large-scale refugee and migrant movement, involving people from fragile, war-torn and authoritarian states in West Africa, the Horn of Africa, the Middle East and South-West Asia. This 'mixed migratory movement', as it became known, involved well over a million people in total and affected countries throughout the Mediterranean rim, including Cyprus, Italy, Libya, Malta, Morocco and Spain.

A third important characteristic of the Syrian emergency is to be found in the serious consequences it has had for the three host countries admitting the largest number of refugees. Lebanon, for example, a country with a fragile economy and political system, and still recovering from its own protracted conflict, has a Syrian refugee population of well over a million, and has one of the highest ratios of refugees to citizens anywhere in the world.

While the number of Syrian refugees in Jordan is somewhat smaller, at around 650,000, one must also take account of the fact that this resource-scarce country also has a Palestinian refugee population of some two million.

While Turkey has a more robust economy and infrastructure than either of these two countries, it has also admitted the largest number of Syrians – over 3.5 million – the world's largest refugee population.

Fourth, and in large part because of its unusual speed, size and scope, the Syrian refugee emergency has demanded an exceptional response from the international community. While it is impossible to calculate the full cost of that response, given the number of different actors contributing to it and their inconsistent reporting methods, there is no doubt that the level of funding required for Syria has been, in a word, unprecedented. It has also been growing. Looking at the UN alone, the organization appealed for USD 5 billion in 2013, a record figure at the time. By 2017 that figure had increased to USD 7 billion, and in April 2021, the UN informed the international community that it required USD 10 billion for its Syria operation.

Finally, the Syrian refugee situation has been characterized by its long duration and intractable nature, often to the surprise of the refugees themselves. Interviewing Syrians throughout the Middle East in early 2013, the author of this article heard that many had left their homeland in the expectation that the Assad regime would be quickly overthrown and that they would then be able to go home (Crisp et al. 2013). But on a second visit the following year, such optimism had diminished, and many refugees were resigning themselves to a lengthy period in exile (Grisgraber and Crisp 2014). Indeed, it was this realization that prompted so many to move on to Europe, where their longer-term opportunities in life appeared to be so much better.

There is, however, nothing exceptional about this. Refugees often flee to other countries with a limited understanding of what the future might hold for them. And as demonstrated by the experience of refugees such as the Afghans, Palestinians, Sahrawis and Somalis, it is by no means unusual for refugee situations to persist for decades without being resolved.

Given the geopolitical forces at play in Syria, the level of destruction and human rights violations that the country has experienced and the reluctance of other states to grant displaced Syrians any kind of permanent residence, none of the traditional solutions to refugee situations – voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement – currently appear to be viable. The most recent surveys indicate that some 90 per cent of Syrian refugees in the Middle East are unable to meet their basic needs. And while they hope to return home eventually, they have no immediate plans to repatriate (UNHCR 2021).

The Syrian refugee situation has, therefore, been an exceptional and even unprecedented one in the ways set out above. It has also been an extremely important one in terms of its implications for the international refugee regime as a whole, as well as the way in which states, the UN and other stakeholders perceive and respond to mass movements of people. The following sections of this chapter examine those consequences in more detail.

The Global Policy Agenda

Refugee issues have featured prominently in international affairs since the days of the League of Nations, when Norwegian diplomat and explorer Fridtjof Nansen was appointed as the body's High Commissioner for Refugees. It is not difficult to explain why such an appointment was considered necessary. Large-scale and cross-border movements of people are by definition the concern of more than one state. They often represent a threat to national and regional security, and can be exploited by states in the pursuit of their foreign policy objectives. While the League of Nations is generally thought to have been a failure, most notably in its inability to prevent the rise of fascism and the outbreak of the Second World War, the organization actually did a great deal to lay the foundations for the modern international refugee protection regime.

Following the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, the international community became preoccupied with a new succession of refugee crises: Palestine and the Indian subcontinent in the late 1940s; Hungary in the 1950s; Bangladesh and Pakistan in the 1970s; Afghanistan and Indo-China in the 1980s; Iraqi Kurdistan and the Balkans in the 1990s; and an almost uninterrupted sequence of refugee emergencies throughout the African continent.

By the standards of previous decades, the years 2000–10 were relatively uneventful in terms of major refugee movements, the main exception being the exodus from Iraq following the US-led invasion of the country and collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime. Indeed, with a limited number of cross-border emergencies to deal with, the UNHCR was able to expand its engagement with other humanitarian issues during this period, such as the plight of internally displaced people, the situation of migrants who did not meet the criteria for refugee status but who were nevertheless in need of protection, and the issue of population movements prompted by the process of climate change.

The outbreak of the Syrian refugee emergency in 2012, the rapid speed and massive scale with which it subsequently developed and the simultaneous movement of asylum seekers to Europe from other parts of the world came as a shock to the international system. States, the UN and other stakeholders were all convinced that the world was confronted with what was often described as a 'global refugee crisis'. The issue of mass movements of people was catapulted to the very top of the global policy agenda, and a rapid succession of initiatives were taken in an attempt to address the issue more effectively.

In September 2016, the UN General Assembly hosted a high-level summit to address the question of large-scale refugee and migratory movements, which led to the establishment of the New York Declaration on this issue.

At the same time, and after many years of inconclusive discussion, the International Organization for Migration, an intergovernmental agency, finally became a member of the UN system.

After two years of consultation and negotiation, in December 2018, the UN established two Global Compacts, one on refugees and the other on 'safe, orderly and managed migration', both of which set out key objectives and principles for future responses to the cross-border movement of people. A year later, the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) was held in Geneva, a multistakeholder gathering of some two thousand people, intended to support the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees and its accompanying plan of action, the CRRF or Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (Minski 2021).

The UNHCR, which played a central role in these initiatives, has been particularly (and predictably) enthusiastic about them. According to statements made by the organization, the Global Compact on Refugees and CRRF constituted 'a gamechanger', 'a paradigm shift', 'a milestone for global solidarity and refugee protection' and even 'a minor miracle'. As for the Global Refugee Forum, it was said to be 'a unique opportunity to put in place the elements needed to accelerate our transformation of the global response to refugee flows' (Crisp 2020: 365).

There is a degree of validity in such statements. The Syrian refugee emergency, both in the Middle East and Europe, had stretched the international humanitarian system to the limit and revealed the need for states and other stakeholders to give more thought and attention to the issue of forced displacement. And it was undoubtedly an achievement for the UN to build a broad international consensus around the Global Compacts and to reaffirm the importance of the 1951 Convention, at a time when the refugee and migration issue had become a highly toxic one, both between and within states.

While there is nothing very new in the CRRF, which is essentially a restatement of the objectives that the UNHCR has pursued throughout its seventy-year history, one could legitimately argue that it provides a valuable opportunity to mobilize a new degree of political and material support for those outcomes.

At the same time, recent efforts to revitalize the international community's approach to the refugee issue have some important constraints and limitations. The Global Compact on Refugees, for example, is a non-binding and aspirational document that lacks specific targets and measurable objectives. It does not address the issue of internal displacement, despite the fact that some fifty million people now fall into this category, twice as many as the number of refugees under the UNHCR's mandate.

While it has much to say about the material support that refugees and host communities should receive, the Global Compact is a lot more reticent

on key protection issues such as the right to seek asylum and the principle of non-refoulement, which prevents refugees from being returned to countries where they and their liberty would be at risk.

More seriously, there is a substantial and growing gap between the principles that states endorsed by signing up to the Global Compact and the way that they act in practice. Despite the lofty sentiments expressed in New York and Geneva, governments throughout the world are building new fences and barriers on their borders, with the explicit aim of obstructing the arrival of asylum seekers. They are also pushing refugee boats away from their shores, holding refugees in detention and using intimidatory tactics to promote the premature and unsafe repatriation of exiled populations.

In the Global North, the Global Compact has not stopped the world's most prosperous states from pursuing a systematic strategy of externalization, whereby the governments of poorer countries are provided with financial and other incentives to block the onward movement of refugees (Crisp 2019). And while many countries in the Global South have volunteered to act as 'pilot countries' for the implementation of the CRRF, there is a strong suspicion that some have done so primarily as a means of leveraging additional humanitarian and development aid from the international community. Will their commitment to the initiative be maintained if such expectations are not met? Tanzania, for example, withdrew from the CRRF once it became clear that the country's involvement in it would require it to accept loans, rather than grants, for refugee-related projects.

Similar observations could be made with respect to the Global Compact on Migration, which was less widely endorsed than its refugee counterpart. It contains, for example, very specific principles with respect to the reception facilities that should be provided when refugees and migrants first arrive in a country. And it commits states to cooperate in the establishment of search-and-rescue operations that can minimize the loss of refugee and migrant lives at sea. But these components of the Compact have been systematically ignored by the EU in its response to new arrivals in the Mediterranean region.

Although it could not have been foreseen at the time when the Global Compact, CRRF and GRF were conceived, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed a very significant threat to these initiatives. The coronavirus provided a perfect alibi for states that wish to close their borders to refugees or repatriate those they have already admitted. It has reduced the level of overseas aid available and diverted it to new priorities. In the words of the High Commissioner for Refugees, 'with the world mobilizing to combat the spread of COVID-19, many countries are rightly adopting exceptional measures, limiting air travel and cross-border movements. I am increasingly worried by measures adopted by some countries that could block altogether the right to seek asylum' (Grandi 2020).

Three years after the establishment of the Global Compact on Refugees, the outcomes of this initiative appear to be somewhat modest in nature, and certainly not as 'game-changing' as the UNHCR suggested that they would be in 2018. In the words of the first comprehensive evaluation of the Compact's implementation, a 'lack of political will and leadership is challenging the achievement of more equitable and predictable responses to forced displacement . . . Efforts to bring more diverse donors and governments to the table have yet to produce tangible results. It remains unclear if refugees, their host communities and host countries can count on increased or more predictable support' (Norwegian Refugee Council 2021).

Urban Settlement and Support Strategies

As well as pushing the refugee issue to the top of the global policy agenda and promoting the introduction of a developmental approach to displacement, the Syrian emergency has acted as an important catalyst to the settlement and support strategies employed to meet the needs of refugees.

Large-scale refugee assistance programmes in the Global South began in the 1960s, when large numbers of people in Africa and Asia were displaced by wars of national liberation and postcolonial political violence. At that time and for the next four decades, those programmes conformed to a common model.

When refugees arrived in a country of asylum, they were accommodated in camps and discouraged or even forbidden from leaving them. The UNHCR raised funding from donor states to pay for the establishment of those camps and, with its humanitarian partners, to provide the refugees with dedicated services in areas such as shelter, food supply, education and healthcare. As already stated, such 'care-and-maintenance' programmes served the purpose of providing refugees with minimal levels of support, but did not allow them to establish independent and sustainable livelihoods.

Relieved of much of the financial burden of supporting the refugees on their territory, host states generally agreed to allow them to remain until such time as it was possible for them to repatriate on a voluntary basis. As a quid pro quo for such tolerance, the UNHCR refrained from advocating for refugees to exercise basic rights such as freedom of movement or the ability to access land or join the labour market. Nor did it press those states to give refugees the option of naturalization, thereby allowing them to benefit from the solution of local integration.

This approach to refugee settlement and support became increasingly unsustainable in the early years of the twenty-first century. First, the persistence of armed conflict and human rights violations in countries of origin made it increasingly difficult for refugees to return to their own countries.

In the 1990s, dubbed by the UNHCR 'the decade of repatriation', around a million refugees were able to go back to their homes each year. By the 2010s, that figure had dropped by some 80 per cent.

Second, refugees who found themselves in what became known as 'protracted refugee situations' experienced increasingly difficult conditions of life. Once the emergency phase of a refugee operation was over, donor interest waned and moved to the next new crisis. As a result, the quality of the services provided to refugees actually deteriorated over time, rather than improving.

Third, in such circumstances, refugees had little incentive to take up residence and remain in camps. Increasingly, and despite the official restrictions placed on their mobility, they began to move to urban areas, where income-generating opportunities could be found in the informal sector of the economy, and where the lifestyle, although usually hard, was more normal and natural than that of a camp.

Kenya, for example, pursued an official policy of 'strict encampment', but by the mid-2000s, some seventy-five thousand refugees had made their way to Nairobi. For some, moreover, that was just the beginning of a much longer journey, involving irregular migration to South Africa, where the job prospects and wages were better, or moving to the Global North by means of the UNHCR's refugee resettlement programme.

At the same time, countries in the Middle East, wanting to avoid the many problems that had arisen in relation to Palestinian refugee camps in the region, now adopted alternative approaches to other groups of refugees. Thus Lebanon and Syria, which admitted large numbers of Iraqi refugees in the mid-2000s, allowed the new arrivals to take up residence in the place of their choice rather than obliging them to live in camps, as did Egypt, a country with a growing population of refugees, both from Iraq and from the Horn of Africa.

In the early 2000s, these developments encouraged the UNHCR to re-examine its long-standing settlement policy, which had been essentially designed to keep refugees in camps and dissuade them from moving to capital cities and other urban areas. This proved to be a highly contentious issue within the organization, with some staff members arguing that no change of approach was needed, as it was logistically easier to support refugees if they were concentrated in specific locations, and suggesting that refugees who were allowed to gather in urban areas might well constitute a security threat (Crisp 2017).

While the UNHCR remained deadlocked on this issue for several years, it was resolved in the second half of the 2000s, when a new High Commissioner, Antonio Guterres, insisted that the UNHCR could not pursue a strategy that denied refugees one of their basic rights, namely freedom of

movement. Urbanization, he also pointed out, was a 'global mega-trend', and the organization could not expect refugees to be excluded from it.

Guterres consequently convened a multistakeholder meeting to examine the issue of urban refugees, ensuring that a new UNHCR policy statement was released at the time of the gathering. The new policy, launched at the end of 2009, stood in stark contrast to the one it replaced, asserting (rather bravely for a UN document) that refugees had the right to live outside of camps, even if that was not consistent with the position of the host government (UNHCR 2009).

The relevance and timeliness of the new policy was demonstrated very clearly less than three years later, when refugees began to leave Syria in substantial numbers. Significantly, none of the countries to which they fled (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraqi Kurdistan and Turkey) insisted on confining refugees to camps, while the government in Beirut pursued a systematic 'no camp' policy that required the new arrivals to take up residence in urban areas or in small and self-established 'informal settlements' in peri-urban and rural settings. At least 80 per cent of the Syrian refugee population in the Middle East now live outside of camps.

This experience with Syrian refugees encouraged the UNHCR to go even further in its settlement thinking, introducing, in 2014, a 'policy on alternatives to camps', which stated that the organization would 'avoid the establishment of refugee camps, wherever possible, while pursuing alternatives to camps that ensure refugees are protected and assisted effectively and enabled to achieve solutions'. It also committed the UNHCR 'to work decisively toward the removal of obstacles to the exercise of rights and achieving self-reliance, with a view to making what UNHCR had historically called "care-and-maintenance" programmes increasingly rare exceptions' (UNHCR 2014: 6).

As that quotation suggests, the UNHCR's new approach to refugee settlement is intimately connected to a change in the way that the organization seeks to support refugees in material terms. While recognizing that in the early days of a refugee influx it might sometimes be necessary to provide refugees with emergency shelter and other relief items, the organization now functions on the principle that it is more effective, efficient and dignified for displaced people to be assisted with cash or vouchers, and even better if they can support themselves by means of wage labour and other income-generating activities. Needless to say, with humanitarian budgets under enormous and growing pressure, donor states have been fully supportive of this new orientation.

The movement from relief items to cash and from aid to livelihoods predates the Syrian emergency. Cash transfer programmes for refugees began to make an appearance in the 1990s, most often in the context of voluntary

repatriation programmes when refugees needed access to funds to pay for their transport and themselves at home.

In the 2000s, such programmes gained a broader acceptance in the humanitarian community, in part because of a successful pilot programme for Iraqi refugees in Jordan, facilitated by the fact that the new arrivals were perceived to be financially literate and that the country could offer a relatively sophisticated banking system that allowed eligible refugees to withdraw cash assistance securely with the use of ATM cards and iris-recognition technology. Since that time, cash transfers have become an increasingly common feature of humanitarian assistance programmes, with the Syrian refugee emergency response playing a particularly important role in that respect.

Unfortunately, the multiplicity of countries and aid agencies involved in that response make it impossible to calculate the total amount of cash that has been distributed to Syrian refugees since the beginning of the emergency in 2012. To give just one example, the UNHCR's current 'multi-purpose cash assistance programme' (MCAP) helps around thirty-three thousand of the most vulnerable Syrian refugee families in Lebanon to meet their basic needs. Recipients have access to cash by means of an ATM card and PIN number that can be used at almost any bank across the country.

Each month, the families receive a text message from the UNHCR, informing them that their card has been loaded with an amount equivalent to USD 175. In 2018, the MCAP programme injected around USD 65 million into the Lebanese economy, a significant amount in a country whose economy has been seriously disrupted by the conflict within the borders of its eastern neighbour.

On the basis of its experience in Lebanon and other countries hosting Syrian refugees, the UNHCR has introduced cash transfer programmes for refugees in some sixty countries around the world, and now provides more assistance in this way than it does through the provision of relief items.

With respect to refugee livelihoods, many host states in the Global South have been reluctant to give refugees the right to work, believing that they would compete with citizens in the labour market, undercut their pay and drive up national unemployment rates. At the same time, such states have acted on the assumption that refugees who are allowed to work, earn an income and enjoy a reasonable standard of living would be more likely to remain on an indefinite basis and less willing to return to their own country, even if it was safe for them to do so.

In recent years, however, the neglected issue of refugee work rights and employment has found a much more prominent place on the international humanitarian agenda, a trend reflected in the growing number of organizations, studies and advocacy activities dedicated to this issue. As one commentary on this issue explains, 'the more recent efforts towards enabling refugees to contribute to the economy of host countries and to achieve

greater self-reliance have been triggered by the response towards the Syrian crisis. . . . Receiving significant support from the international community, countries like Jordan have shifted their policy towards refugees, opening up access to employment by providing a quota of work permits' (Zetter and Ruaudel 2018: 6).

The settlement and support strategies that have been reinforced by the international community's experience with Syrian refugees are clearly progressive in nature, providing them with greater dignity, freedom of choice and an ability to develop their human potential in ways that were simply not possible in the days of camp-based care-and-maintenance programmes. The question is whether they can be adopted on a global scale and to what extent they will achieve their intended objectives.

Some caution is required with respect to three specific issues. First, some refugee-hosting states continue to have a preference for camps, believing that refugees can be more easily monitored, assisted and repatriated if they are kept in a controlled environment. Thus, Bangladesh has insisted on the establishment of large camps (unfortunately surrounded by barbed wire) to accommodate the eight hundred thousand Rohingya refugees who arrived from Myanmar in 2017.

In similar vein, in April 2021, the government of Malawi issued a decree stating that all refugees who had left the country's single (and overcrowded) refugee camp in Dzaleka should return to it within fourteen days, as they represented a threat to national security and to local businesses. Such considerations will undoubtedly serve to constrain the implementation of the UNHCR's policy on alternatives to camps.

Second, the attempt to provide refugees with formal job opportunities also seems likely to run into resistance from some host states and may not prove as successful as expected even in countries that are amenable to this approach. In Jordan, for example, an agreement has been established whereby Syrian refugees are provided with job opportunities in a number of special economic zones (SEZs), in exchange for which the companies concerned are granted preferential access to EU markets and concessional loans from the World Bank.

But as the author of this article has written elsewhere, this arrangement, known as the Jordan Compact, 'has attracted a great deal of international attention and a high degree of enthusiasm, with its proponents suggesting that the SEZs could provide hundreds of thousands of jobs for Jordanians and Syrian refugees. In practice, however, its achievements have been modest' (Crisp 2020).

While the Jordanian government, the EU and the World Bank have all delivered the commitments they made under the terms of the Compact, by March 2019, the thirteen companies approved to participate in the programme were employing just one thousand people, only 28 per cent of them

Syrians. Rather than rushing for jobs in the SEZs, the refugees, most of them from rural areas, have lacked the skills, experience and motivation to work in factories, especially as they can earn at least as much money (if not more) in a shorter period of time by means of casual work in the construction and hospitality sectors.

While a similar initiative has been mooted for Ethiopia, its chances of success are also limited, not only by the violence that has flared up in the country, but also because Ethiopia has very low labour standards, offering pay and conditions that provide a weak incentive for refugees and locals alike to pursue the option of wage labour.

Finally, while cash-based assistance has a multitude of advantages over large-scale relief programmes, it might not be a globally viable approach. Does every refugee-hosting country, for example, have the infrastructure to distribute currency in a secure and reliable manner? Will local markets always respond effectively to the purchasing requirements of refugees, supplying them with goods at the volume required and at the right price and quality?

In addition, one might ask whether aid agencies can be persuaded to dispense with all the airplanes, fork-lift trucks, lorries and food distribution points that are emblematic of emergency operations and are employed so extensively to market and brand their relief programmes to donors and the public. That might not prove easy. As a senior humanitarian worker was heard to remark during an emergency in Afghanistan, 'let's fly in a plane load of food. It will be complicated and incredibly expensive. But it will look great on TV.'

Developmental Approaches

> There is a need to ensure coordination between the assistance provided by UNHCR and the development programmes which other United Nations organs are able to provide. UNHCR cannot take on a task which is not within its purview and involve itself in development matters that involve not only refugees, but also the indigenous population of the countries where our programmes exist. It is imperative that development agencies grant top priority to requests from countries and regions in which there are refugees. (Aga Khan 1967)

Those were the words of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in 1967, pointing out the limitations of a strictly humanitarian approach to the refugee issue and calling for more attention to be given to the developmental dimensions of human displacement. For the next fifty years, the UNHCR made repeated efforts to put these principles into practice.

In the 1960s and 1970s, for example, the organization formulated the notion of 'integrated zonal development', a concept used to describe area-based programmes intended to support both the emergency and longer-term needs of the residents (both refugees and local people) of areas affected by mass influxes. In the 1980s, similar principles were adopted in a joint venture between the UNHCR and UNDP known as 'refugee aid and development' (Crisp 2001).

In the late 1990s the UNHCR prioritized the issue of humanitarian–development linkages again, cooperating this time with the World Bank in an initiative known as the Brookings Process. And with a new High Commissioner in place, in the early 2000s, the organization launched the concept of Development Assistance to Refugees, 'a holistic approach to linking development to relief assistance and addressing both the needs of refugees and the host population' (UNHCR 2002).

While these successive initiatives had some limited and sporadic achievements to their credit, their outcomes generally failed to meet the UNHCR's hopes and expectations. The kind of partnerships the High Commissioner in 1967 dreamt of failed to materialize, and refugees continued to be supported by humanitarian assistance programmes. Such programmes barely enabled exiled populations to survive in their country of asylum, let alone to thrive and to contribute to that state's development.

There were several reasons why the developmental approach to refugee programming failed to take off during this five-decade-long period of experimentation. First, humanitarian and development actors tended to function in very different ways. Refugee agencies such as the UNHCR generally worked in emergency mode and without a great deal of planning. Their primary concern was protection, an issue that often resulted in a problematic relationship with host governments, while their preferred operational partners were large international NGOs.

By way of contrast, development organizations such as UNDP worked closely with the government and ministries of the state in which they worked, adopting long-term and area-based approaches in which programme and project implementation was relatively slow. Such agencies were not generally experienced in (or comfortable with) human rights issues and were not accustomed to working with NGOs.

Second, there was often a degree of suspicion between the two groups of agencies. Humanitarian actors felt that their development counterparts lacked urgency and were too eager to maintain a harmonious relationship with governments. For their part, development organizations considered the UNHCR to be too possessive of refugees and of refugee issues generally.

Rather than involving them from the very beginning of refugee operations, they felt that the UNHCR only turned to development actors when

they became trapped in protracted refugee situations and were looking for an exit strategy. In the World Bank particularly, the UNHCR's interest in cooperation was often thought to be based on the financial resources that the former organization could bring to the partnership. All of these issues were compounded by the fact that the staff of humanitarian and development organizations tended to have different skill sets, contrasting organizational cultures and little opportunity to switch between one sector and the other.

Third, and most fundamentally, the implementation of the 'relief-to-development' approach was obstructed by a conflict of interest between host and donor states. Host countries were eager to mobilize additional support from the donor community, an objective that could be facilitated by engaging development actors in programmes targeted at areas accommodating significant numbers of refugees. But they did not want refugees to remain on their territory for longer than necessary, and certainly did not want them to become citizens of their state.

By way of contrast, donors regarded the developmental approach as an investment in long-term solutions, and as a means to avert the need for them to support expensive and unproductive care-and-maintenance programmes that went on for years or even decades on end. If refugees were unable to return to their country of origin because of continued armed conflict or human rights violations there, then they should have the opportunity to settle in their country of asylum, integrating there and contributing to its economy.

Because of its speed and scale, its impact on geopolitically important but fragile host states such as Jordan and Lebanon and its heavy demands on humanitarian funding, the Syrian refugee emergency put the issue of developmental approaches to refugee support back on the international agenda in a very emphatic manner. In the words of an evaluation prepared by the author of this article in 2013, 'there is a growing recognition that traditional humanitarian responses will not be sufficient to address this crisis. This will require the immediate engagement of development actors' (Crisp et al. 2013).

Echoing that recommendation, in 2017 the World Bank acknowledged that 'the Syrian refugee crisis has galvanized attention to one of the world's foremost challenges: forced displacement', and underscored 'the importance of humanitarian and development communities working together in complementary ways to support countries throughout the crisis' (World Bank 2017). More generally, as pointed out in a 2021 report produced by the Migration Policy Institute, 'initially sparked by the Syrian crisis, partnerships between host and donor countries, international institutions, civil society, and the private sector have brought about innovative strategies to meet the needs of both refugees and host communities' (Migration Policy Institute 2018).

After decades of discussion and experimentation, therefore, the Syrian emergency appears to have finally convinced the international community of the need to pursue a developmental approach to refugee situations. The World Bank has played a particularly important role in this effort, creating dedicated funding channels for countries with large numbers of refugees, and establishing a joint data centre with the UNHCR in order to gain a better understanding of the socio-economic dimensions of displacement.

While significant progress has been made, some questions remain to be answered. First, will the additional support now available to host countries be sufficient to mitigate the substantial pressures that large refugee populations exert on their economy, society and infrastructure?

Lebanon, for example, does not seem to think so and has made no secret of its determination to have its Syrian refugee population repatriated as quickly as possible, despite the fact that conditions in that country are by no means amenable to safe and voluntary return. Similarly, Bangladesh has been reluctant to accept development funding in relation to the one million refugees from Myanmar living on its territory, believing that to do so would be to acknowledge that the refugees are there to stay indefinitely.

Second, will the new approach prove to be a viable one in countries such as the Central African Republic or Chad, where refugees are to be found in areas that are seriously lacking in developmental potential, or a state such as Ethiopia, where armed conflict is leading to large-scale destruction? Until the end of 2020, Ethiopia had been seen as a prime candidate for the developmental approach, with an ambitious plan to establish special economic zones where refugees and local people would be able to find work and learn new skills. But that initiative has been seriously set back by the civil war in which Ethiopia has now been engulfed.

Third, despite all the talk of cooperation, humanitarian and development actors may well find it difficult to work smoothly with each other, given that they continue to function with different priorities, time frames and partners. The UNHCR, for example, has taken steps to revise its planning and programming process so as to facilitate the longer-term approach required if it is to pursue developmental objectives. But at heart, the organization remains one that is oriented towards emergencies, the protection of a specific group of people and the provision of humanitarian assistance.

In terms of policy, therefore, the Syrian emergency has had an important impact on the international community's approach to the refugee issue, bringing the World Bank into the displacement discourse and forging a broad consensus around the need to complement immediate humanitarian relief with programmes that provide sustainable support to refugee-populated areas. In terms of operational practice, however, considerable progress remains to be made. In the words of the 2021 Global Refugee Compact evaluation cited earlier, 'based on currently available data, it is still impossible

to know if refugees, their host communities and host countries can rely on more medium to long-term development financing rather than just short-term humanitarian assistance' (Norwegian Refugee Council 2021).

Conclusion

Almost a decade since the eruption of the Syrian refugee emergency, the prospects for its resolution remain bleak. Very few of the exiled Syrians in host states such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have the opportunity of being resettled to third countries such as Australia, Canada, the USA or member states of the EU. And the governments of those host states are unwilling to contemplate the indefinite presence and eventual integration of those refugees. Some of the Syrians have been able to find their own solutions by moving in an irregular manner to Europe, but increasingly restrictive border controls have made such movements extremely difficult, a trend exacerbated in 2021 by the Taliban takeover in Kabul and the EU's fear that the bloc will be confronted with a massive new influx of Afghan refugees.

As a result of this impasse, the international community has been confronted with another major policy issue, namely the circumstances under which the return of a refugee population to their country of origin can be actively facilitated or promoted. In the Syrian context, repatriation is a solution that appeals to a number of different stakeholders.

It would satisfy host states that are concerned about the impact that the refugees are having on their economy, infrastructure and security. It would be welcomed by donor states who have grown weary of funding such a large and long-standing refugee situation. It would be of enormous interest to the Syrian government and its allies, Russia and Iran, as the return of the refugees would legitimize the Assad regime. And for the UNHCR, it would confirm the organization's ability to provide solutions for refugees, thereby strengthening its international reputation and ability to compete in the international humanitarian marketplace.

At the time of writing, however, large-scale refugee returns to Syria do not appear to be imminent. While conditions in countries of asylum have become progressively more difficult, especially in Lebanon, a country that is in crisis itself, very few Syrian refugees have been willing to take the risk of returning to a country where human rights violations are still rampant, where the livelihood opportunities are so scarce and where so much property has been either destroyed or seized by the state.

After some initial interest in supporting repatriation, donor states, led by the USA under President Biden, have become more cautious in doing anything that would support the political objectives of the administration in Damascus and its supporters in Moscow and Tehran (Human Rights Watch

2021). And while the UNHCR has sought to cultivate good relations with Assad and to increase the scale of its activities in Syria, the organization has stuck to its traditional position that if refugee returns are to take place, they must be safe, voluntary and dignified in nature.

Such principles are, however, under substantial strain, not only in the Syrian context, but also with respect to Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh, Somali refugees in Kenya and Afghan refugees in Pakistan, all of whom are under pressure to repatriate. Increasingly, when refugees return to their country of origin, they do so because life no longer seems to be viable in their countries of asylum, rather than as a result of direct physical coercion.

Looking to the future, it seems most likely that most Syrian refugees will remain within the Middle East region, the vast majority of them living in urban areas and alongside host populations, eking out an existence by means of the assistance they receive from humanitarian organizations, coupled with whatever livelihood opportunities they are able to find. As their time in exile becomes more prolonged, and with a growing number of their children having been born and brought up in countries of asylum, their presence may begin to assume an air of permanence, especially if the Assad regime maintains its grip on power. But true integration in its legal, economic and social sense is likely to prove elusive.

Jeff Crisp is a specialist in global refugee policy, affiliated to the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford and the Royal Institute for International Affairs, Chatham House. He was previously Head of Policy Development and Evaluation at the UNHCR. He has a PhD in African Studies and Political Science from the University of Birmingham in the UK.

References

Aga Khan, S. 1967. 'Statement by Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, to the Third Committee of the United Nations General Assembly at its 1519th meeting, 20 November 1967', UNHCR. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.unhcr.org/admin/hcspeeches/3ae68fb510/statement-prince-sadruddin-aga-khan-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees.html.

Crisp, J. 2001. 'Mind the Gap! UNHCR, Humanitarian Assistance and the Development Process', *New Issues in Refugee Research*, Working Paper no. 43.

———. 2017. 'Finding Space for Protection: An Inside Account of the Evolution of UNHCR's Urban Refugee Policy', *Refuge* 33(1): 87–96. https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40451.

———. 2019. 'Externalization and the Erosion of Refugee Protection', *Comparative Network on Refugee Externalization Policy*, 25 November. Retrieved 24 August

2023 from https://arts.unimelb.edu.au/school-of-social-and-political-sciences/our-research/comparative-network-on-refugee-externalisation-policies/blog/externalization-and-the-erosion-of-refugee-protection.

——. 2020. 'UNHCR at 70: An Uncertain Future for the International Refugee Regime', *Global Governance* 26(2): 359–68. https://doi.org/10.1163/19426720-02603004.

——. 2021. 'The Syrian Emergency: A Catalyst for Change in the International Refugee Regime', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34(2): 1441–53. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feab009.

Crisp, J., G. Garras, J. McAvoy, E. Schenkenberg, P. Spiegel and F. Voon. 2013. 'From Slow Boil to Breaking Point: A Real-Time Evaluation of UNHCR's Response to the Syrian Refugee Emergency', UNHCR. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.unhcr.org/uk/research/evalreports/52b83e539/slow-boil-breaking-point-real-time-evaluation-unhcrs-response-syrian-refugee.html.

Crisp, J., and K. Long. 2016. 'Safe and Voluntary Refugee Repatriation: From Principle to Practice', *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 4(3): 141–47. https://doi.org/10.1177/233150241600400305.

Norwegian Refugee Council. 2021. 'NGOs Call for Better Responsibility-Sharing Three Years after the Global Compact on Refugees', November. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.nrc.no/news/2021/november/ngos-call-for-better-responsibility-sharing--three-years-after-the-global-compact-on-refugees.

Grandi, F. 2020. 'Statement by Filippo Grandi, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, on the COVID-19 Crisis', UNHCR, 19 March. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2020/3/5e7395f84/statement-filippo-grandi-un-high-commissioner-refugees-covid-19-crisis.html.

Grisgraber, D., and J. Crisp. 2014. 'Beyond Emergency Assistance: Syrian Refugees in Northern Iraq and Jordan', Refugees International, 4 February. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2015/10/14/beyond-emergency-assistance-syrian-refugees-in-northern-iraq-and-jordan.

Human Rights Watch. 2021. 'Syria: Returning Refugees Face Grave Abuse; Struggle to Survive amid Devastation, Property Destruction', 20 October. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/10/20/syria-returning-refugees-face-grave-abuse.

Migration Policy Institute. 2021. 'A Bridge to Firmer Ground: Learning from International Experiences to Support Pathways to Solutions in the Syrian Refugee Context', March. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/learning-international-experiences-syrian-refugee-context.

Minski, N. 2021. *UN Global Compacts Governing Migrants and Refugees*. London: Routledge.

UNHCR. 2002. 'Refugees to Help Local Development in Zambia Project', 7 May. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2002/5/3cd803f52b/refugees-help-local-development-zambia-project.html.

——. 2009. 'Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas', September. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.unhcr.org/protection/hcdialogue%20/4ab356ab6/unhcr-policy-refugee-protection-solutions-urban-areas.html.

——. 2014. 'Policy on Alternatives to Camps', 22 July. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.refworld.org/docid/5423ded84.html.

———. 2021. 'Sixth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions & Intentions on Return to Syria: Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan', 26 March. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/85739.

World Bank. 2017. 'Forcibly Displaced: Toward a Development Approach to Supporting Refugees, the Internally Displaced and Their Hosts'. June. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/25016?locale-attribute=en.

Zetter, R., and H. Ruaudel. 2018. 'Refugees' Right to Work and Access to Labour Markets: Constraints, Challenges and Ways Forward', *Forced Migration Review* 58(June): 4–7. Retrieved 24 August 2023 from https://www.fmreview.org/economies/zetter-ruaudel.