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REFUGEE CRISIS

LOOKING BEYOND THE HEADLINES

REPORT



#CONVERSATIONWITH

HRH PRINCE EL HASSAN BIN TALAL

PRINCE OF JORDAN

INTRODUCTION

As the global refugee crisis continues, countries in the Levant and Muslim world need to work together with partners in the EU to create institutions and processes that place simple human dignity at the forefront, said **HRH Prince El Hassan bin Talal**, Prince of Jordan and Chairman of the WANA Institute.

Speaking at a Friends of Europe event in Brussels, he noted that the number of refugees in the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and the Palestinian territories, is now over seven million with Syrian refugees in Jordan alone numbering 1.4 million.

“The refugee crisis is not just an intellectual exercise,” he said. “It is about millions of real people who are facing a very uncertain future in different parts of the world.”

While the general public in Europe has been quite compassionate, the tide seems to be turning towards suspicion of refugees and migrants, noted moderator **Shada Islam**, Director for Europe and Geopolitics at Friends of Europe.

“The refugee crisis has become a very political issue in the EU,” she said. “Populists and the far right are rising and speaking about refugees in very derogatory terms.”

“The egos have landed,” HRH noted. “We must fight against leaving politics to iconic figures who profit from their popularity and populism. We must see through the stereotypes and deal with each other in real terms.”

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A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN THE LEVANT

“The Levant contains 38% of all global refugees and 80% of refugees in the world are Muslims,” HRH said, “yet there are no institutions comparable to the Bretton Woods institutions in the region. How can we discuss the consequences and solutions to the Syria crisis if we in the region are not taking the lead?”

Through decades of conflict, the region has yet to develop the intra-independence and mutual respect needed to create regional commons in terms of energy, food and nutrition, security, knowledge-sharing, and so on.

While there exist examples of regional solidarity, such as the humanitarian aid given by the United Arab Emirates to Yemen over the past years and cross-border shipments of food supplies from Jordan to neighbouring populations in southern Syria, these types of initiatives are being stretched to their limits, he said.

Changing the reality of the refugee crisis in the Levant means creating a process similar to the Helsinki Process that promoted human rights alongside security during the Cold War and that ultimately served to reduce tensions between the East and West.

This process was based in part on the Helsinki Citizens’ Assembly, an organisation dedicated to peace, democracy, and human rights. HRH stressed the need for the creation of a comparable ‘Middle East Citizens’ Assembly’ to address political, social, and economic issues in the Eastern Mediterranean.

“We have no institutions in our region, no economic and social council, no regional bank,” he said. “Why are Muslims not creating these institutions? Why are we not talking about the carrying capacity of the Levant?”

Speaking of opportunities for regional commons, he noted that the Levant is showing clear indications that it could rely on its own resources. The Levant Energy Basin, rich in natural gas, covers 23,000 square kilometres in the Eastern Mediterranean and could be a game changer for the region as a whole.

Humanitarian funding is another area that could benefit from a regional perspective. The Islamic notion of Zakat, or alms-giving, is already ingrained in many countries in the region.

The idea of a universal Zakat fund to support refugee populations, however, has yet to take hold in the region, which relies instead on humanitarian aid from a number of overlapping national and global organisations.

“Our region could depend on its own resources if they were made regional commons,” he stressed. “We could make ourselves less lonely by committing ourselves to a shared discourse. Instead, we see ourselves divided again and again.”

The lack of a shared discourse in the region was underscored during US President Donald Trump’s recent visit to Saudi Arabia as Iran and Syria were excluded from the resolution between Arab-Islamic countries and the US to work together to counter terrorism and enhance development in the region.

“The decision has basically been taken to make the Sunni-Shia divide in Islam official,” he said. “With significant Shia populations in countries throughout the region, the conclusion is that war is easier and more economical than peace and this is a tragedy.”

“These children suffer from PTSD, stunted growth, malnutrition and more. We are simply not doing enough to care for them and as time passes we risk losing an entire generation because we cannot work together”

PLACING HUMAN DIGNITY AT THE FOREFRONT OF THE REFUGEE CRISIS

As it stands, global responses to the refugee crisis are overwhelmingly concerned with hard security. In order to find real solutions, human dignity must take centre stage, defying the facile theory that security means weapons alone. Investments from the EU and international community in sustainability and development should be focussed on human capital and dignity.

Current programmes aimed at countering violent extremism which have been budgeted by Western and international development agencies such as USAID and DFID emphasise hard security to the detriment of many refugees, including the most vulnerable – unaccompanied children.

In Zaatari, Jordan’s largest refugee camp, 80% of the refugees are children, HRH said. “These children suffer from PTSD, stunted growth, malnutrition and more. We are simply not doing enough to care for them and as time passes we risk losing an entire generation because we cannot work together.”

Concerning malnutrition, HRH said that more effort and resources need to be dedicated to encouraging local farmers and food industries in the region to develop foods containing lipids – such as meat, dairy products and a wide range of vegetable oils – as these foods combat stunting.

As far as education is concerned, the Jordanian Ministry of Education, working in a second shift system, is already seriously overworked, though he added that UNICEF’s Makani (My Space) initiative has made great progress by opening and supporting over 200 schools for refugee children in Jordan.

“The people on the ground who are actually dealing with the refugee crisis in real terms deserve recognition,” he stressed. “These volunteers and workers are at the forefront of the moral initiative of ‘blue overalls’ as opposed to ‘blue helmets’, working to preserve human dignity in difficult times.”

In the Eastern Mediterranean, “nothing can be won by hard security alone”, he concluded. In tandem with efforts to promote soft security and human rights, it is essential to move beyond a daily focus on headlines in the media and social media outrage.

Addressing humanitarian crises requires in-depth analysis and knowledge-sharing between European partners and the people on the ground. Increased sharing and understanding of the issues, causes and solutions to the refugee crisis will improve security in the Levant as well as in a Europe beset by an increase of terrorist incidents.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES FOR THE EU

“One of the problems in the way that we in Europe talk about the refugee crisis is that it is framed as other regions’ crises coming our way,” noted **Giles Merritt**, Founder & Chairman of Friends of Europe and author of ‘Slippery Slope: Europe’s Troubled Future’. “We do not see this crisis as the opportunity that we need to keep Europe’s economy, population and society buoyant.”

The problem in Europe is in large part a disconnect between politics, policy and the actions undertaken. “We must react immediately and decisively to the refugee crisis, we cannot continue on this hand-to-mouth basis. We should develop a joint task force to address how to turn European political realities into policy and action,” HRH said.

The urgency to define policy regarding the refugee crisis is also being felt in terms of European investments in Jordan, he added. Following the signing of the EU-Jordan Compact last year, there have yet to be any investments in the agreed-upon industries, with the agreement being that 15% of workers in these industries should be Syrian refugees.

Referring to the recent Incirlik controversy – wherein the Turkish government refused entry of German policymakers to its territory on an inspection tour of German soldiers at the Incirlik air base – he said that “we hope that the eastern panhandle of Jordan would be considered for the development of a new base.”

While European policymakers are advancing in these areas – it was announced on 7 June 2017 that Germany would pull its troops out of Turkey and station them in Jordan in the next two to three months – the processes at work are lagging behind the crisis on the ground.

“I think that this crisis has to be understood as a European, and not only Jordanian, crisis,” he said. “If we combine the numbers of refugees to our part of the world and refugees going to Europe, economic alternatives must be sought, and quickly. The question is: do you want a stable Levant, or not? Because the alternative is the black market, politicised religion and the pathology of the sociopaths.”

“As far as the future is concerned, the only way forward is through getting to know each other,” HRH concluded. “We need to work together to build common ground on something other than the immediate security issues of the crisis.”



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