The Syrian refugee crisis and the role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)


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Global Perspectives on Human Migration, Asylum, and Security

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The Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

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ABSTRACT

Following the Arab Spring, the Middle East is in chaos with ongoing wars in Yemen and Syria. There are millions of Syrians seeking refuge in neighboring countries like Turkey and Lebanon, and in European countries like Greece, Hungary, and Germany. Nonetheless, the largest proportion of Syrian refugees is hosted by neighboring countries needing continuous support of the international community. As the issue of Syrian refugees is transnational, there is a need to look for multilateral options for dealing with the crisis. Thus, the role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) becomes crucial. Irrespective of being labelled as a ‘talk fest’, there is no denying of the fact that OIC has significant potential for tackling grave challenges facing the Muslim world. The problems range from extremism and radicalization to poverty and illiteracy. Now there is the emergent challenge of refugees from the Middle Eastern crisis. This paper evaluates the role of OIC with reference to the Syrian refugee crisis in the Middle East and beyond.

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INTRODUCTION

The present situation of the Middle East can be best understood in the context of the Arab Spring. In 2010, a Tunisian street vendor, Mohammed Bouazizi, self-immolated himself as a protest against the Tunisian authorities. This personal act triggered a mass movement ultimately leading to the resignation of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. From Tunisia, this generated spill over effects in other parts of the Muslim world. This phenomenon of resistance against authoritarianism has already toppled regimes in Yemen and Egypt. In addition, popular uprisings have been seen in Syria and Bahrain. Some small scale troubles were also witnessed in Jordan and the UAE (Notten, 2014).

With the Arab Spring stretching to the Middle East, the sectarian nature of conflicts has been very visible. In Bahrain, Shia majority protested against the Sunni government, but the Sunni-dominated GCC helped to crush the resistance. There is a strong sectarian dimension in the Syrian conflict where Iran and Hezbollah are aiding the minority Shia regime of Assad while Qatar and Saudi Arabia are backing the Sunni opposition (rebels) (Notten, 2014). Yemen has become another regional conflict hotspot after removal of President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi due to the fight between the Zaidi Shia rebels (Houthis) and the government forces. Saudi Arabia and Iran support different factions in the civil wars in Syria and Yemen. Thus, civil wars have become proxy battlegrounds for Saudi Arabia and Iran’s power struggle in the Middle East (Soloway, 2016).

OIC was established as a response to a common external threat – Israel. In the aftermath of the attack on Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem in 1969, Muslim leaders from around the world united to launch a struggle for the control of the Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem. However, the Organization has fallen short of playing its essential role via-a-vis issues of peace and security in the Muslim world. Irrespective of being labelled as a ‘talk fest’, there is no denying of the fact that OIC has significant potential for tackling grave challenges facing the Muslim world. The problems range from extremism and radicalization to poverty and illiteracy. Now there is the emergent challenge of refugees from the Middle Eastern crisis. This paper evaluates the role of OIC with reference to the Syrian refugee crisis in the Middle East and beyond. However, before we do that, it is important to be aware of the OIC’s role with reference to the issue of refugees.

THE SYRIAN REFUGEES

The Syrian Civil War is a multi-party armed conflict that was triggered by the turmoil of the 2011 Arab Spring. In this multi-party conflict, Iran, Russia, and Lebanon’s
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Hezbollah support the government of Bashar al-Assad. On the other side, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, France, Qatar, and the US support the opposition to the government. With the involvement of multiple stakeholders, it is natural for a conflict to grow out of proportion. This has been the case of the Syrian Civil War because, by the end of 2014, around 7.6 million Syrians were internally displaced and additional 3.7 million took refuge in other countries (Ostrand, 2015, p. 255). In October 2016, UNHCR reported more than 4.7 million Syrian refugees, including 2.9 million in neighbouring Muslim countries (UNHCR, 2016). This is in addition to a massive loss of human lives that keep on rising due to the increasing intensity of war. According to an estimate, 470,000 Syrians had died by February 2016 (Barnard, 2016). The sudden influx of Syrian refugees has placed enormous stress of resources in neighbouring Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, and Turkey. Since 2013, there has been a rapid escalation in number of Syrians refugees, especially in neighbouring countries (See Table 1).

Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria in 2011, Syrian refugees have been opting for a dangerous journey across the Mediterranean Sea for refuge in Europe. In 2015, 3,770 migrants died crossing the Mediterranean into Europe (BBC, 2016). There are a range of reasons for moving beyond initial ports of entries, for instance secure and sustainable livelihood in Europe. Initial ports of entries are Turkey, Greece and Italy with Turkey being home to the world’s largest refugee population – over 2.7 million (UNHCR, 2016). From Turkey, Syrians refugees have been trying to get to Europe, especially Germany, Sweden, and the UK. During 2012-14, asylum was granted by Germany to 39,965, Sweden to 31,771, and the UK to 3,548 Syrians (Ostrand, 2015, p. 270). According to estimate, more than one million refugees, mainly Syrians, reached Europe in 2015 creating a crisis and fissures within the EU. In 2015, 292,540 asylum applications were approved within the EU to applicants from Syria, Eritrea, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran (BBC, 2016).

Other than the cultural differences, often refugees have been seen through a traditional security lens. Specifically, with regard to Syrian refugees, concerns

Table 1. Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No. of Refugees</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>2,733,655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1,033,513</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>225,455</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>656,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>116,175</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (UNHCR, 2016)
have been expressed by host countries about the possible infiltration of ‘terrorists’ or ‘armed persons’ under the guise of refugees. A study done in Turkey found that, members of hosting communities “have stated that most of the Syrians are not innocent refugees or victims of war, but rather they are Islamic militants and Jihadists” (Ozden, 2013, p. 11). In a survey conducted by Pew Research Centre, half of the population in eight out of ten countries stated, “incoming refugees increase the likelihood of terrorism in our country” (Wike, Stokes, & Simmons, 2016). The opinion of the public in Europe is not any different from their leaders. Recently, German Chancellor Angela Merkel said, “in part, the refugee flow was even used to smuggle terrorists” (Barkin & Carrel, 2016). There is some evidence suggesting that attackers of Paris attacks in November 2015 had entered Europe “posing as refugees” using fake Syrian documents (Gordon, 2016). However, there is still no credible evidence that would justify blanket ban on all refugees seeking protection.

While refugees are increasingly seen as threats to cultures and security of host countries, local communities view refugees as taking their jobs and social benefits. A study conducted in Europe found that people associate the risk of fewer jobs with refugees (Wike et al., 2016). The bigger challenges of hosting refugees are more social and political than economic as “the impact on the economy as a whole is usually not very large” (Cassidy, 2015). There is lack of research on economic consequences, both positive and negative, on host countries.

The above-mentioned factors in the EU and Turkey paved the way for a controversial deal between the two parties in 2016. The main idea of the agreement is to discourage refugees from reaching Europe with Turkey being the key actor. As per the deal, “one Syrian refugee on the Greek islands will be returned to Turkey and, in exchange, a Syrian asylum seeker in Turkey will” be settled in Europe (Kingsley, 2016). Turkey is promised aid of $6.6 billion for dealing with refugees in addition to visa relaxations for its citizens into the EU region (Kanter, 2016). There continues to be a criticism of the EU’s this deal because it contradicts its institutional values and the 1951 Refugee Convention. There is another challenge of many Syrian refugees joining their families already settled in Europe, and the EU regulations have provisions for additional valid family members (Collett, 2016). So far, the deal is in serious crisis because it because only 3,000 Syrian refugees were settled by September 2016 – far short of the target of 160,000. Also following the failed coup attempt in Turkey, Ankara pulled back its officers in Greece (Somaskanda, 2016). This further slowed the process that had led to the return of less than 500 Syrian refugees to Turkey from Greece (Somaskanda, 2016). This policy of ‘one in, one out’ is not only time consuming but is not sustainable because it just focuses on diverting problem, in this case refugees, elsewhere.
THE ROLE OF OIC

Issues of peace and security within the Muslim world are among the top areas of cooperation for the OIC. In 2011, the organization’s name was changed from Organization of Islamic Conference to “Organization of Islamic Cooperation”. The Organization was established as a response to a common external threat – Israel. Prior to this juncture, the desire for a unified voice of the Muslim ummah was represented in localized pan-Islamic political movements, for example the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt. With 57 member states representing 1.6 billion Muslims, OIC is the second largest multilateral/inter-governmental organization after the UN – well placed to play a much-needed role in dealing with issues of peace and security (Sharqieh, 2012, 162). However, due to differences among its member states, mainly between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the OIC is failing to deal with the ongoing crises in the Middle East. Similar is the criticism on the UN and the EU for failing to deal with the Syrian refugee crisis (MacEoin, 2015).

The OIC, as the umbrella organization of the Muslim world, has been monitoring and reacting to situations affecting Muslims in Muslim majority and non-Muslim countries. Ever since its creation, the issues of Palestine and Kashmir have been central to its work. The Organization has also been able to expand its agenda to deal with emergent challenges to Muslims in the world, for example Muslim refugees, and Islamophobia in the West. It in the post 9/11 context that the OIC decided to address the issue of Islamophobia and regularly publishes in this area. In the aftermath of the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, the OIC has also observed a rise in Islamophobia in Europe and aims to address it (OIC, 2015b, p. 38). In Europe, cultural differences between the host communities and Muslim refugees have been referred to as reasons for Europe resistance to Muslim migrants. In 2015, the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, was criticized for refusing to host Muslim refugees for keeping “Europe Christian” (Mackey, 2015).

This reaction in Europe is also influenced by erstwhile experience of some states finding it difficult to assimilate migrants from Muslim countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Somalia (MacEoin, 2015). However, similar has been the case of Muslim countries hosting Syrian refugees, for example in Turkey, “many accused Syrians of not having manners, speaking and laughing very loudly, being uneducated, having too many children, and harassing women in streets” (Ozden, 2013, p. 10). While, there is evidence to a sudden influx of refugees escalating Islamophobia in Europe, it is important for the OIC is to also address challenges faced by Muslim refugees in Muslim countries. So far, the Organization’s work has been limited to statements, for example in OIC Journal, it was states that, “the mass migration has, along with Hungary’s closing its borders with Croatia, caused many challenges in
recent times on account of the failure of the European leaders to reach an agreement limiting the flow of asylum seekers” (OIC, 2015b, p. 38).

Although largely ineffective, the OIC is an important institution for tackling the refugee crises. Being the umbrella organization of the Muslim majority countries, the OIC role in tackling issues of peace and security is crucial because most of the refugees are from Muslim states and hosted by Muslim states. The issue of refugees has been on the OIC agenda for nearly a decade and there has been a direct cooperation between the OIC and the UN. It was in 2006 when the issue of refugees was discussed in an OIC ministerial conference. At the meeting, it was emphasized that OIC members hosting large numbers of refugees need more support from the international community. In addition, it was reported that, “there is a growing perception among OIC Member States that refugees burdens are disproportionately spread … They [members] believe that the international community is not supportive enough in helping them cope with the burden resulting from the presence of refugees and not active enough in seeking political settlements to resolve the refugee-producing crises” (OIC, 2006, p. 13). Similarly, a report mentioned that ten countries accounting for 2.5 percent of the world’s GDP are hosting 56 percent of the world’s refugees (Daily Mail, 4 October 2016); therefore, the sharing of the burden of the refugees is disproportionately spread across the world.

The issue of cooperation with UN agencies, like UNHCR, was the key point of the OIC ministerial meeting held in Turkmenistan in 2012. It was time when OIC members were hosting nearly 11 million refugees – around 50 percent of the world’s total (AI, 2015; OIC, 2012, p. 2). At a 2014 meeting between the OIC and the UN, the OIC side emphasized on ‘conflict prevention’ being a priority area for the Organization. Earlier in 2013, the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA) had helped in establishing the OIC’s Peace, Security and Mediation Unit (Shaikh, 2013). The Unit has been operational for nearly three years but its presence is invisible because, so far, the progress has been limited to regular political consultation between the Unit and the UN’s DPA in New York (OIC, 2014a). For greater cooperation on tackling refugee crises, the OIC has held coordinating meetings with the United Nations Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA). The first of such meetings took place in Jeddah in 2006 (OIC, 2007, p. 7), but since then there is no visible evidence of this any meaningful cooperation.

There has been a criticism of rich Gulf countries not taking Syrian refugees, but there is a need to examine this matter carefully. Firstly, Gulf countries are party to the conflict as they are supporting the Opposition against Assad in Syria. Within GCC countries there is a strong opposition to taking Syrian refugee, for instance, a Kuwaiti official said, “They [Lebanon and Turkey] are better suited for the Syrian refugees …. It is not right for us to accept a people that are different from us. We don’t want people that suffer from internal stress and trauma in our country”
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Table 2. Top six refugee hosting countries, 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of Refugees</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>1.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1.15 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>950,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia</td>
<td>659,524</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jordan</td>
<td>654,141</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: (AI, 2015)

(121) The Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Role of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). However, the opposition to Syrian refugees is not an exclusive case because the GCC members are not signatory to the International Convention on Refugee Rights and Statelessness. At the OIC Ministerial Conference on Refugees in 2012, António Guterres (2012) (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) had pointed to the need of OIC members signing the Refugee Convection. But still thousands of Syrians refugees have been accommodated on temporary visas in the Gulf states, but refugees move in search of permanent settlement elsewhere, for example in Europe (Kinninmont, 2015). In addition, refugees find it is cheaper to live in Lebanon and Turkey than in Kuwait (MacEoin, 2015). Secondly, there is commitment to humanitarian support is reflected through their continuous monetary support for Syrian refugees. Finally, GCC countries have a long history of generous humanitarian support. For GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, aid is used as a tool to maintain leading role in the Muslim world; thus, most of foreign assistance has gone to Muslim countries in Asia and Africa. During 1974 to 1994, Arab countries contributed 13.5 percent towards foreign aid (Villanger, 2007, p. 223). Among the GCC states, Kuwait is a leading contributor of foreign aid for Syrian refugees - $800 million during 2012-2015 – followed by the UAE’s contribution of $364 million during the same period (Kinninmont, 2015). The contributions of the Gulf States are far lower than $1 billion from the UK and $3 billion from the US because these are still small economies (Kinninmont, 2015). Internally, there is shortage of funding towards humanitarian crises like the Syrian refugees. The UN reported a shortage of 77 percent ($3.47 billion) of at the end of May 2015 (Jordan Times, 25 June 2015). Due to shortage of funds, the World Food Program around 30 percent of Syrian refugees from its food voucher program in 2015 (Kinninmont, 2015). This also meant the host countries have been left to deal with refugees through their own resources.

While many rich Muslim countries are providing direct funding to UN agencies, there is also ongoing work of the OIC that has received less attention. The OIC has
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The Islamic Development Bank (IDB) with its headquarters in Jeddah. IDB aims to enhance economic cooperation in OIC member states and in 2008 had US$2 billion in capital (Zuhur, 2011, p. 169). In 2006, the Saudi government provided $1 billion to IDB’s poverty alleviation program, which is operational in Africa and Asia (Johnson, 2010). The head of the IDB, Dr Ahmad Mohamed Ali, announced at the international donors’ conference in London to increase the Group’s support to $9 billion during 2016-18 to support countries hosting Syrian refugees (OIC, 2016, p. 15). This is a step in the right direction because host countries need help to counter economic costs of hosting refugees. This response is linked to an increasing demand from host communities for more support from the international community. Countries that host the largest proportion of Syrian refugees receive little international support. To ease the burden of Syrian refugees on Jordan and Lebanon, Japan announced aid of $970 million in April 2016 (The Japan Times, 16 April 2016). Despite international support, host countries are facing consequences of hosting an increasing number of Syrian refugees, for instance clashes between the refugees and the host communities.

There is a realization at the OIC level about the mistreatment of Syria refugees. Thus, the Organization has been trying to pressurize the international community to do more. Looking at Europe, it is also clear that Syrian refugees are just not seen as refugees, but as Muslim refugees. Therefore, the OIC has been calling on international community for considering the crisis as international and not just exclusive to the Middle East or Muslims (OIC, 2015a). At an emergency meeting at the OIC Secretariat in Jeddah, it Secretary General Iyad Ameen Madani said the following:

*The Syrian refugees who downed in the Mediterranean, or suffocated in a human trafficker’s truck in Austria, none of them are responsible for starting the Syrian crisis or for the failure to stop it. Yet, they are and continue to be the direct victims of both that crisis as well as the failure of the international community, particularly the Members of the UN Security Council, and the countries of the region, to find a solution to it. This must not, and cannot continue to be so (OIC, 2015c).*

In the case of the Syrian refugees, the OIC role has also been limited because its donors – rich GCC states – have been preferring regional solutions to regional problems (Kinninmont, 2015). In addition, GCC members have preferred direct coordination with UN agencies instead of using the OIC route. Thus, the forum of OIC has not been used beyond certain statements on the situation in Syria and the plight of Syrians. In addition, the OIC was used as a political tool by the powerful and rich GCC states for their agenda against the Assad regime in Syria. Saudi Arabia for pushing ahead its strict agenda against Bashar al Assad’s government in
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Syria hosted the OIC’s fourth extraordinary summit in Mecca in August 2016. The meeting was attended by 15 heads of states – all Sunni majority states except for Iran with most dependent on heavy Saudi funding – and the decision was made to suspend Syria’s membership (OIC, 2014b). Similar to what appears to be a norm at OIC and otherwise, only Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad objected to the decision of OIC (Alsharif, 2012). If the idea was to isolate and pressurize Assad’s regime by suspending Syria’s OIC membership, then it did not work. Syria views it as a violation of the OIC’s Charter. Through this decision, a big door for playing an effective role in conflict resolution was shut for the OIC. Since then, the OIC has been supportive of external efforts for conflict resolution in Syria, for example through the UN Special Envoy, and the UN Security Council. Ideally, forums like the International Syria Support Group, in which the OIC participates, should have been formulated by the OIC. This also points to the lack of significance of the OIC in the eyes of the leadership of its member states. In addition, the Organization lacks mechanisms to tap on opportunities.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian refugee crisis is on the rise as evident from the response of the international community. There is a lack of political will to deal with the crisis, which is not specific to Muslim countries as evident through the shortage of funding and refusal from many countries, especially in Europe, to accommodate Syrian refugees. In Europe, Syrian refugees are not just refugees, but Muslims with possible connections to armed groups and terrorist. In host communities, especially in Turkey and Europe, Syrian refugees are seen also a threat to local cultures. Then, host communities have been complaining about lack of support for them for bearing the economic burden of hosting thousands of refugees. With reference to Syrian refugees, the huge bulk is still hosted by neighbouring Muslim majority states like Turkey and Jordan. As the country of origin and many host countries are OIC member, the significance of the Organization in tackling with the crisis needs no further justification. However, the role of the OIC has been limited to reactionary statement demanding international community to do more and pledging funding through IDB. The OIC needs to mechanisms in places for effectively and collectively, on behalf of its members, dealing with causes and consequences of humanitarian crises. This would help in mainstreaming coordination with the UN and the EU, and other relevant organizations. While, the OIC has some coordination with the UN, it needs to initiate cooperation with the EU to handle issues of refugees and challenging emerging from the Syrian refugee crisis, such as Islamophobia in Europe. Lastly, it is very important for the OIC to develop mechanism for addressing the root causes of conflicts.
REFERENCES


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ENDNOTES

1 The Kings of Bahrain and Jordan, Presidents of Egypt, Iran, Yemen, Pakistan, Tunis, Nigeria, Chad, Gabon, Sudan, Bangladesh, Uganda and Turkey attended the summit.

2 The OIC Secretary General, Iyad Madani, had participated in meeting of the International Syria Support Group in Munich in February 2016.