Report of the 7th Käte Hamburger Dialogue

Coming home to Syria: Feasibility and Preconditions

13th March 2017, Duisburg
Organized in cooperation with the Volkshochschule Duisburg, the 7th Käte Hamburger Dialogue counted with the participation of Dr Faten Ghosn, Senior Fellow at the Käte Hamburger Kolleg/ Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21) and associate professor of international relations at the University of Arizona; Rana Khoury, PhD candidate at Northwestern University; Dr Samuel Rizk, Country Director of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Syria; and Dr Bernhard Trautner, Senior Researcher from the German Development Institute (DIE). The panellists presented and enlightened the audience with the lively discussion under the moderation of Michael Backfisch, Senior Political Editor of Funke Media Group.

Highlighting the diversity of Duisburg and the initiative, the discussion was framed in the international humanitarian governance overall. Panellists addressed three main facets of Syrian refugee crisis: the evaluation of the current stage of the conflict and mapping of complications; the preconditions required in Syria in order to offer sufficient stability for the refugees to return and live; and a question over the role of governments, regional and international organizations in the voluntary return process.

Peace Talks and Obstacles for the Mediation

Introducing the audience to the topic and the current situation in Syria, Ghosn remarked that the conflict has protracted for five years without any improvement. Several mediation attempts brokered by Russia, Turkey, and Iran, face four major obstacles. The first obstacle concerns the crimes against humanity committed by both sides. Secondly, despite a drop in the number of factions involved in the conflict, a strong and sound division among them presents a difficult task for any mediator to set common interests at the negotiation table. Thirdly, this fragmentation continues to deepen as the strongest groups adopt radical Salafist grounds. Lastly, the exclusion of other important groups from the negotiations impedes advances of any further fructiferous mediation. This exclusion is a result of the pressure made by some actors, which fight against terrorist organizations (i.e. ISIS), and other external involvements whose goals are not always aligned with those of the internal actors. With little prospect of improvement, the situation draws Ghosn to the questions about the best way to mitigate the effects of the conflict.
Challenges for Coming back and Resilience

As the Country Director of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) in Syria, Rizk gave an insight into the field showing the depth of the crisis, how it has been addressed, and which challenges the returning Syrian refugees are facing. Furthermore, he discussed the implication for international actors. According to his estimates, four decades of human development are lost in a country which was about to become a middle-income country six years ago, Rizk emphasized. Now over half of the population has been displaced inside and outside the country.

Beyond the conditions related to security, the overall economic situation, the lack of income caused by internal displacement and the absence of public services in some areas of the country, are also major concerns which have been addressed by the UNDP for the past three years. Within this framework, the concept of resilience, as stated by Rizk, is the guiding approach to recognize and address how people cope with and recover from the crisis and more importantly how the recovery could be sustained. By focusing on resilience, the UNDP has worked with partners in order to support Syrians to stay in the country. The reason of displacement, Rizk explained, is rooted in a lack of income sources or basic services such as education, access to water and electricity. As a result, by 2015 two and a half million people were reached directly and indirectly as roughly 28000 job opportunities were created in a year.

When thinking about the conditions for people to come back, it is important to know their concerns and the opportunities offered to keep them at their homes dignified and safe. This is an important background and prerequisite that displaced people would be looking for in order to return to Syria. To Rizk, it is even a more cost-effective approach to lessen the burden on countries that are hosting refugees. Therefore, measures to ensure a safe, voluntary, sustainable and dignified return should be explored. A wide range of aspects should be part of this consideration from the absorption capacity of the country to the social tensions that it could arise: What are the livelihood opportunities in monetary terms? How should the role of women who have headed female household over the past five years further evolve? Where are possible settlements placed both in urban or rural areas? And most substantially how social cohesion and peace
could be maintained? Raising Tunisia as an example of reconciliation after the Arab spring, Rizk argued that when compared the intensity of the conflicts, it will take a long time for Syria to be a place where people will want to come back and stay.

Protracted Refugee Situation in Neighbouring Countries

From the conditions of the dwellers that are still in Syria, the discussion drifted to the situation in neighbouring countries, as Khoury introduced the audience to her findings from the field research. Nearly five million Syrian refugees are located in Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. This is because displacement mostly occurs from developing countries to developing countries as the first place of asylum. Many of these countries, including Jordan, are not signatories to the UN treaties on refugees and do not necessarily cooperate with the UNHCR in this field. More specifically, Khoury stated that Jordan has over 600,000 registered Syrian refugees although the government has an estimate of 1.4 million Syrian refugees in the country while the local population is about six million.

Most of those Syrians are located in urban areas and not in camps as commonly happens in other receiving countries. From Jordan, Syrian refugees have two phases of informal return to Syria as the borders were closing over the last years until being completely blocked today. The first phase comprises the late 2012 and early 2013, which for Khoury showed that Syria was going through changes. These changes were related to the control when rebel factions took over the southern parts of Syria (Daraa) where most of the refugees in Jordan were coming from. This group of refugee was also the one deciding to return in this phase. These groups of returnees consisted mostly of men and whole families which went back and forth between Jordan and Syria until the full closure of the border.

The second influx in 2015 reflects the conditions in the host state which were becoming complex for the refugees. Although the UNHCR classifies a period longer than five years as a protracted refugee status, to refugees three years in a host country of Jordan already feel protracted due to the limited opportunity of legal occupation and the continuous drop in funding. By July 2015, the WFP cut aid due to a lack of funds from donors. This has become an important motivation for refugees in Jordan to return to rebel-held territories in Syria with a certain level of basic services and sufficient governance. According to these patterns, asserted Khoury, the third phase of return is most likely to happen when a minimum level of security is reached in Syria and thus motivates refugees to come back.
German Perspectives on the Issue and the Development Aspect of Returning Home

In the case of Germany, despite not being a classical immigration country, it has been a host country for displaced persons after the Second World War when nearly 10 to 12 million people returned and were part of the reconstruction, financed by the United States. A few years later an immigration policy launched by Germany focused on filling handwork needs and opened up job opportunities for people from the southern Europe, especially Turkey. As Trautner explained, at the beginning of the 1980’s the German government incentivized the returning of those immigrants at a very limited extent, resulting in a low number of returnees going back to their countries of origin. Nowadays, most of the Syrian refugees in Europe live in Germany and in this sense, talking about voluntary returning is not an innocent issue, especially when talking from a German perspective. The concepts such as migrant, home or refugee subtract and diffuse when these populations find themselves unidentified with their country of origin which after 10 years will be completely different.

The development aspect of this issue lays in the fact that the political mandate for humanitarian assistance is rather clear: delivering aid based on needs. This means that despite the diverse actors involved in the conflict, there is no political agenda when this aid is delivered, as Trautner stated. Therefore, in development cooperation, it is necessary to have partners in order to meet needs beyond first relief and besides infrastructure aid, which will not be sustainable.

Discussion: Preconditions and Limitations

On the political aspect of the crisis, Ghosn made emphasis on the need of having a common agenda, which already points out to a power-sharing agreement between the government and the rebels. In this sense, talks towards an inclusive government are necessary and power sharing should encompass the political, economic and military aspects. The rebel groups’ willingness to negotiate comes from a lack of support from the EU and the USA and the pressure from Turkey. For Ghosn, what is possible in this situation might not be ideal for both government and rebels.

On the other side, Rizk turned the focus of the discussion to his experience in the field and the projects that have been carried out by the UNDP in Syria, mentioning that some people face more fragile security situations than others do. Hence, the projects focus on giving them a way to generate an income, which has been working lately, by supporting the resilience of affected families. In
terms of cost effectiveness and further policies from host countries supporting resilience in Syria, through projects that allow them to make a living, could be more effective than supporting programmes for refugees in other countries. Linked to this, the main point of the discussion among panellists was how to develop a better long-term approach for humanitarian response. By the time conflict parties reach an agreement, situation could protract for years and will require even support when returnees find a different country than the one they left. In this sense, not only infrastructure will need to be reconstructed but something even harder to be built up again: the social fabric of a country.

In terms of questions raised by the audience, concerns over the incentives that would be created for refugees to come back to Syria were discussed and focused especially on the activities they will be doing, such as an appropriate way to insert themselves again in a job market of a changed country. The incentives can vary in diverse levels. Still, they are yet to assure the voluntary return if the conditions are insufficiently appealing.

In this sense, Rizk responded that the projects in the field to create jobs are not intended to replace a development plan or to be sustainable as they are emergency jobs. Contrasted to the opportunity of migrating, these temporary positions lack attractiveness to incentivize refugees to stay in or return to Syria.

Report written by Laura B. López