Reflections on Working with Syrian Refugees in Turkey

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Introduction

It is very sobering the effects that war can have on a people. During the 2014 World Economic Forum in Davos, Turkey’s Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, noted that despite the challenges, Syrians are well catered for in Turkey (World Economic Forum, 2014). Since then, I could not help but ask myself the following: What is it like to be a Syrian refugee in Turkey? What are the general conditions like? What sort of assistance are they getting and where does the assistance comes from? Thus, going to Turkey to conduct a fieldwork with Syrian refugees there was an opportunity I was never going to squander.

In this journal, I have provided: (1) my prior knowledge of what it is like to be a refugee; (2) some light on the general condition of the Syrian refugees in Turkey; (3) humanitarian assistance; (4) the Syrian refugee children and my experience with two of them; (5) the role of women; and, (6) the nonviolent strategies adopted by Syrians to undermine some of the tactics deployed by the Assad regime. Besides being a primary source of data based on my experience and interactions with Syrians and others in Turkey, I have also made use of various secondary sources of data.

My Prior Knowledge of What it is Like to be a Refugee

Growing up in Cameroon and seeing the plight of nomads as well as of (descendants of) refugees from Nigeria, Namibia, and Liberia significantly broadened my perspectives. Some of them were well off, others were living in dire conditions and the government of Cameroon had a very limited or no program in place to cater for the refugees. This was also at a time when television images were largely of those suffering from famine or warlike conditions in places like Somalia, Ethiopia, and parts of the Middle East, just to mention a few. At a very young age,
I decided that in all I do, I will strive to give others the dignity, humanity, and the understanding they deserve as human beings. (I wonder what the refugees from the Central African Republic are currently going through in Cameroon).

In mid-2010, I visited the Republic of Congo’s border areas with Angola and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. I heard first-hand accounts from people who were affected by the Angolan civil war of 1975-2002 (with some interludes) and also from survivors of the (DR) Congolese crises. I saw how our taste or need for oil, electronic gadgets, and other minerals victimizes lots of people around that area also cursed with repressive regimes. All these only added on my desire to enhance the human rights principle of the peaceful resolution of disputes and contribute toward the struggle for a more peaceful and just world. As such, the marriage between human rights and lasting peace can never be divorced. The aforementioned pretty much informed my decision and interest to join other students and practitioners to go to Turkey from 08-16 March, 2014, and conduct a fieldwork with Syrian refugees there as part of a program offered by George Mason University (United States).

General Condition of Syrian Refugees in Turkey and Those Displaced in Syria

As of this writing, there were more than 722,000 registered Syrian refugees in Turkey alone and there is a very wide gap in the funding appeal vis-à-vis the funding received (UNHCR, 2014). There are other tens, if not hundreds of thousands, of Syrian refugees in Turkey who are unregistered. The Syrian opposition is divided and this rift was very apparent for all to see as we interacted with different Syrian groups in Turkey.

I felt very touched after talking to Sasha Ghosh-Siminoff. He made us understand that Syrians are used to dealing with refugees (from Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq); however, Syrians
are not used to being refugees themselves. I understand Syrians have always been open and welcoming to refugees. I immediately had to put this in perspective: African countries opened their doors and were welcoming to South Africans when their country was under Apartheid rule. Now that South Africa is one of, if not, the biggest economy in Africa, South Africans are now carrying out xenophobic attacks against other Africans including those fleeing from warlike conditions. The point is not for South Africa to reciprocate the kindness but for them not to forget their history, especially this early on.

Based on my observation, Syrians in Turkey have a peaceful environment within which to go to school, get healthcare, and carryout other activities as civilians within a country. Some Syrians own businesses – especially in the form of restaurants – in different Turkish cities. Some of the Syrians I spoke to expressed gratitude to the Turkish government and people for their kindness and hospitality. However, some said their presence in Turkey is frowned at because they put more pressure on the labor market and are willing to accept wages that locals would normally reject. There is also the problem of language as Syrians speak Arabic while Turkish is the predominant language in Turkey.

Syrians in Hatay have a different experience. Hatay is largely inhabited by Turkish Alawite minority, the same sect of the Assad family in Syria. Talking to Syrian refugees in Turkey, I realized that they are seen as those who are opposing Bashar al-Assad and want his regime to fall. The Alawites in Turkey are sympathetic of the Alawites in Syria and are very vocal in their support of the Assad regime. These can also be backed by secondary data (for example, see Sotloff, 2012).
Humanitarian Assistance

I was fascinated to realize the scope of the activities carried out by the Assistance Coordination Unit (ACU) in Gaziantep ranging from provision of healthcare to delivery of food aid within Syria. The ACU receives funds from international donors, governments, and organizations. The Director, Oussama Kadi, used an interesting analogy in reference to the much divided Syrian opposition and the demands from the outside world: “when a building has been bombed, you cannot come from outside and ask those fleeing the building to organize themselves in a queue so as to orderly evacuate from the building,” and later added, “this is exactly what the world is asking us to do – it’s not feasible.” This seemed telling for a while, however, Coser (1956) held that when a group of people are attacked or threatened, they tend to come together, join forces in order to stave off any threat or attack from the out group. Thus, the question remains: why is the broader Syrian opposition so divided and what can be done to help all the groups in Syria co-exist in peace and harmony?

Moreover, it is close to a death sentence for anyone caught carrying medical supplies to areas besiegéd by the regime. ACU staff members put themselves in harm’s way in order to deliver humanitarian aid in Syria to those both in regime- and opposition-held areas. One of these staff members is Dr Khalid who, among other things, administers polio shots to children in Syria amidst the war. I was moved by his selflessness and I am glad I had the opportunity to correct a myth he had about Africa.

In the course of his talk to us on March 11, 2014, Dr. Khalid said that the Assad regime keeps bombing and killing them as if Syrians “are Africa people.” So when I asked what he meant by that, he said Syria was a very advanced country with great infrastructural development
and the people are not used to war compared to Africans who are used to war and that war is regarded as business as usual on the African continent. At that point I had to make it clear that it is true that Africans have been dying from senseless circumstances for a long time now but the loss of one life anywhere in the world, including in Africa, is a concern. And also that war is not business as usual on the African continent.

The work done by the staff at the Suriyeli Yetim Çocuklara Yardım Derneği orphanage and the Suriyeliere Yardım Derneği rehabilitation center in Hatay also needs to be commended. Every child at the orphanage has lost both parents to the war raging on in Syria with no end in sight and are taken care of by the staff there. The rehabilitation center was packed with individuals who have been physically and permanently deformed by the war in Syria and were been taken care of by a very dedicated team of staff at the center. In the midst of the sorrow and solemnity, someone at the rehabilitation center spontaneously caused everyone in our group to laugh when he referred to me as, “Obama.”

I also came across individuals who told me it was their first interaction with someone of dark skin while others pleaded to take photos with me. I can still see the face, through the eyes of my mind, of a beautiful Syrian lady who pleaded with me to take her to Cameroon. All I could offer her were some words of comfort and a dance during our Bosphorus sail in Istanbul. More so, a countless number of Syrians in Turkey were very appreciative of our visit as they saw it as a sign that there are people around the world who truly care.
The Children

War can definitely have profound and untold negative consequences on people and much more so on children. The trauma it causes may take a long time to dissipate. Children, who for the most part have no hand in causing or sustaining a war, suffer the most. I came across a multitude of such children and will like to share the experience of two of them:

At a local school in Istanbul, there was a child – about 8-year-old – who recently moved to Turkey from Deraa, Syria. When asked to doodle during his early days at the school, all he was drawing were missiles, bombs, guns, and tanks. Now he draws flowers and happily joins his peers to sing, “Syria is one beautiful flower.” This explains the joy I had when I took a snapshot (see picture 1) with the boy, both of us holding a placard in Arabic which translates as, “Education is your weapon.” This goes to show the benefits that education has especially when conducted in a peaceful environment.

Contrarily, there was another boy – about 7-year-old (see picture 2) – who moved to Turkey from Damascus and to him, his drawing is about a representation of reality in his home country. Following his description of what he had doodled in front of me (see picture 3) is a house, a river with a fish in it, and a missile that is launched to destroy both the house and the sea creatures; with everything happening under the bright sunlight. This was heartbreaking. I hope the education he is getting in Turkey will not only serve as a source of knowledge but also a distraction from what is happening in his home country so he does not get traumatized.

At the Olcay Külah Ortaokulu (Gaziantep Şehitkamil) school, the Syrian refugee children attend school from 2-5 p.m. Even though I take delight in an African proverb which says, “Half bread is better than none,” three hours of schooling a day is just not enough to
provide the children the education they deserve. Other problems along the lines of education include: overcrowded classes; lack of funding; some of the curriculum being dictated by the Turkish government; shortage of school supplies like books; and, poor remuneration for teachers most of whom are barely qualified in the subjects they teach. In any case, half bread is always better than none and the efforts of all the individuals and organizations working toward educating the future of Syria must be commended. Worth mentioning is an online education initiative championed by Dr. Amr Taleb to teach those in Syria. In the course of it, Dr. Taleb is also actively seeking international accreditation for the online education initiative.

In another vein, I believe in bringing up children in the way they should grow so they do not depart from it when old. Things may go wrong at some point but providing children a solid foundation for their development is imperative. Listening to Abou Maen I could tell he had been through a lot and it was great having him share his experience. He believes children should be taught that, “democracy can’t be achieved without the drop of blood.” Coming from a conflict resolution background, I believe in applying interest- and rights-based approaches, respectively, to address conflicts before turning to a power-based approach, if need be. As such, Abou Maen (and others who share his believe) should look at Singapore’s history to understand that democracy can be achieved without the drop of blood.

The Role of Women

I was very impressed by the few Syrian women I came across in Turkey. Besides Hind Kabawat (a very committed peace advocate), I also had the opportunity to hear from Lamia Nahas (a lawyer from Aleppo), Huda Rajab (of Save the Children), and Iman Chahoud (lawyer and judge from Idlib and head of the Transitional Justice Society). They were
very specific regarding their aspirations and views. Huda Rajab expressed her wish of a peaceful Syria where the children can go back, play and go to school.

Lamia Nahas spoke from a more historical standpoint. She talked about students being forced to fill out paperwork at school and automatically becoming members of the Baath Party during the Hafez al-Assad’s era. If any of the students asked any question, their parents were to be chastised for it. This actually puts the level of oppression within Syria in perspective. She also talked about the role of technology in enabling Syrians to show the outside world what was and is still going on: “In the 1980’s, there were no cameras and now there are smart pens, phones, and so on all thanks to the Americans and the Europeans,” she noted. She concluded with an aspiration I strongly support: a Syria in which women have dignity and play a significant role.

Iman Chahoud focused on the endemic corruption in Syria and the basis for transitional justice. She was keen on highlighting the high level of corruption, oppression, fear, the absence of the rule of law, and a system of putting the wrong person in the wrong position. She expressed that in transitional justice, it is important to talk about the victims and the need to reform the legal system. And that transitional justice can only be implemented after the violence. She had a caution for Lamia Nahas: “Saudi Arabia [one of the key – secondary – players in the Syrian conflict] doesn’t want women to play any role.” And later added, “Women will have a significant role if the men really want it, and it’s backed by the constitution and the rule of law.”

In my opinion, women remain one of, if not, the most untapped resource in (parts of) the Middle East. I totally support the full integration of women not only in the economy but also
in the political life of their respective countries. Probably, the Middle East would have been a more admirable place – than it is right now – had the women been provided a level playing field with the men. (I am aware this challenge also exists in the West, though not on the scale as in much of the Middle East).

**Nonviolence as Creative and Non-Static**

I have always known nonviolence to be creative in approach, strategy, and implementation. Also, after reading through Gene Sharp’s (1973) 198 methods of nonviolent action, I thought the list was exhaustive. Listening to Soulaima, a very passionate humanitarian and peace advocate, I realized I was wrong. Truly, nonviolence is creative and non-static. Some of the nonviolent strategies employed in Syria included the following:

Women putting bread in their clothes against all odds and taking them into areas under siege; people putting money in CD/DVD casings and taking them into besieged areas; people pouring red coloring in public water fountains which symbolizes the extent of the bloodshed as a direct consequence of the conflict; individuals throwing Ping-Pong balls on the streets with the message, “down with the regime,” written on them; people mounting speakers in buildings which go off at a specified time with protest songs; and, some persons slaughtering cattle, putting them in certain military vehicles and taking them to besieged areas. All of these whilst creative with some positive humanitarian impacts like providing food to those being starved, unfortunately, none of the nonviolent strategies were strategic enough to fully weaken the fabric of violence deeply embedded in the Assad regime and some opposition groups.
Conclusion

In this journal, I provided my prior knowledge of what it is like to be a refugee. I also shed some light on the general condition of the Syrian refugees in Turkey. In addition, I explained the work of the ACU on humanitarian assistance, wrote about the Syrian refugee children and their plight, and the role of women. Finally, I identified some of the nonviolent strategies adopted by Syrians to undermine some of the tactics deployed by the Assad regime.

After Rwanda, Bosnia and so on, what has happened to “never again” and the problem of impunity? What can I do to make sure “never again” is fully operationalized? What is happening to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)? Beyond R2P what next after the said “protection,” if any at all? What exactly can be done in order to rebuild the lives of refugees and and those who are internally displaced in Syria? I have more questions than answers and it is my hope that such questions will inform my doctoral studies and continue to guide my career path.

It is very fitting to conclude with the words of Waleed (see picture 4), A Syrian restaurant owner in Rihaniyeh, Turkey, who used to work for the Syrian Red Cross and defected because of the discriminatory policies of the organization in favor of the Assad supporters. He said: “In the end, our Government will be like yours [in reference to the Government of the United States] except that we’ll have a Ministry for the Death and a Ministry for Handicaps. There will be more hospitals for rehabilitation than for ordinary illnesses and more buses for handicaps than for normal people. It’s no problem; all that will matter is that it’s a free Syria. At the end of this war, we won’t go back to Syria. We’ll go to the next place in the world where such is happening in order to help the people especially the refugees.”
Pictures

Picture 1:

Picture 2:


