

POLICY MEMO

Refugee Experiences and Behaviors in and out of the Realm of ‘Crisis’

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June 2020



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Executive Summary

In the past few years, the international community has faced several conflicts resulting in record high 79.5 million individuals seeking humanitarian protection within or outside of their home countries. While some refugee populations have been constructed as a refugee ‘crisis,’ others have not received similar public attention and recognition. This policy memo is based on a study that explores the effects that the discursive construction of ‘refugee crises’ has on refugees that are linked to a ‘crisis’ and those who are not. Utilizing a combination of a review of related studies, a discourse analysis, and interviews with refugees, this study finds the following: First, refugees actively follow and respond to public discourses. Such discourses affect refugees’ decisions, such as choosing country of asylum or resettlement when possible, throughout their journeys. The other side of the same coin is that refugee ‘crisis’ constructions often negatively influence experiences refugees (whether linked to a ‘crisis’ or not) because it portrays them as a ‘burden,’ ‘problem,’ or ‘crisis.’ Such portrayals have negative effects on the mental wellbeing of refugees and add to the already extremely challenging circumstances that they face.

Considering these findings, this policy memo puts forth the following recommendation: Given the impact of policy discourses on refugee experiences, imposing a sense of being a ‘burden,’ ‘problem,’ or ‘crisis’ through constructions of refugee ‘crisis’ adds to the challenges that refugees face throughout their journeys. Therefore, shifting away from such discourses to more humanitarian and internationalist discourses can considerably contribute to refugees’ mental and social wellbeing. This shift will require the framing of refugees as capable individuals in extraordinary circumstances needing humanitarian assistance, instead of people causing a ‘problem’ or ‘crisis.’ This alternative way of framing refugees in public discourse can play a key role in empowering refugees and allowing them to have a faster and smoother integration in their host countries.

The Policy Memo

Background / Research Question / Policy Issue

After an unprecedented 670,000 forced migrants arrived in Europe in 2015, the phrase ‘refugee crisis’ or its variations, such as migrant or migration ‘crisis’ or Syrian refugee ‘crisis,’ started to gain momentum in public discourses. Jean-Claude Juncker, the European Commission President, and Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, initiated the Brussels summit to discuss the ‘refugee crisis’ in October 2015. This summit was followed by an international summit at the United Nations (General Assembly High-Level Meeting on Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants) in September 2016 to serve a similar purpose on a global level.

In that moment, refugees, mostly those on the European borders, were constructed as a refugee ‘crisis.’ Despite the diversity of these refugees in terms of their countries of origin, the ‘crisis’ was overwhelmingly associated with the Syrian civil war. Meanwhile, there were other refugee populations as well. First, there were Syrian refugees who fled their country prior to 2015 and resided in Lebanon, Turkey, or other neighboring countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were 3.8 million Syrians who had already fled their country by the end of 2014. Second, according to the UNHCR, while more than half (54%) of all refugees worldwide in 2015 came from just three countries of Syria (4.9 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million), and Somalia (1.1 million), still a significant number of them came from countries that were not in the spotlight. This overview suggests that two general refugee populations can be identified. The first population is composed of those associated with the 2015 refugee ‘crisis’ and largely connected to the Syrian civil war and the European borders. The second population, on the other hand, is composed of refugees who are 1) from nationalities other than Syrian,

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2) present in geographical locations other than the European borders, 3) and from Syria or other refugee originating countries leaving their home prior to 2015.

This context invites a few questions. First, why the refugee movements were framed as a ‘crisis’ in 2015 while the number of refugees world-wide was already on the rise, mostly as a result of the Syrian civil war, starting in 2012? Second, what was the nature of the refugee ‘crisis’ constructions in the media and decision-making circles? How were the refugee movements framed? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how did such constructions affect experiences and behaviors of refugees themselves? In particular, with respect to the last question, this policy memo suggests considering refugee policies with a strong view to the actual experiences of refugees and the challenges they face in their daily lives. The policy challenge here is the introduction and incorporation of a refugee policy that reflects the experiences of refugees.

Methodology/data

This policy memo is based on a research project that is centered on a comparative case study of refugee movements that are or are not linked to a crisis. It utilizes a combination of a review of related studies, a discourse analysis, and interviews with refugees. For the literature review, both crisis and refugee experience/behavior literatures are examined (Keller 1975, Boswell 2002, Lindley 2014, Alcade 2016, and Triandafyllidou 2018). The discourse analysis examines the statements released at the end of 2015 and 2016 international summits on refugees and news articles on the front page of the following eight newsletters: the Guardian, the New York Times, the USA Today, the Globe and Mail, and the Sun, as well as Asharq Al-Awsat and Zaman Today. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this study relies on interviews with current or past Syrian and Iranian refugees residing in Canada.

Key findings / policy options

The 2015 refugee ‘crisis’ was sparked by the perception that the established European structures and policies were inadequate to attend to what was depicted as an emergency. The discourse analysis of the aforementioned international summits and newspapers suggests that the refugee crisis was constructed in response to the arrival of large groups of refugees at European borders in 2015, not the displacement of a significant number of

Syrians since the outbreak of war. Given the centrality of the state in shaping the meaning of refugee ‘crisis’ and the key role of states in dealing with refugee movements, the construction of a refugee ‘crisis’ discourses can have a direct impact on the experience and behavior of refugees. Such constructions can influence the resources available to refugees; depending on the policies adopted by each state, whether borders are open or closed, refugees are confronted with a particular set of opportunities or restrictions throughout their journeys. Within this context, there appears to be further restrictions on already limited resources such as access to refugee status and resettlement.

Contrary to the classic portrayal of refugees as bare victims, refugees actively interact with refugee-related developments, which can potentially influence their journeys, through personal networks, social media, and other means of communication. This finding is supported by both the discourse analysis and the interviews. A majority of the participants, who were refugees in Lebanon or Turkey in 2015, believed that the construction of refugee ‘crisis’ discourses in the media, coinciding with the presence of a large number of refugees on European borders, had a direct impact on their experiences and decisions. Esma, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon waiting to resettle to Germany, remembers that the process of her family’s resettlement to Germany was stopped as the European Union appeared to be overwhelmed at that moment in time. Nazanin, an Iranian refugee in Turkey waiting to resettle in Canada, stated that her family’s resettlement was delayed for months due to the shift of the international attention to the situation at the European borders.

After Merkel announced Germany’s open door policy - “Wir schaffen es – We can do it” -, it is recorded in the media that refugees on European borders were trying to reach Germany while chanting “Germany, Germany, we are coming.” Hassan, a Syrian refugee, mentioned that while waiting for resettlement from Lebanon, he unsuccessfully tried to go to Germany because according to his personal networks and the media, the German government was more open and welcoming towards refugees. The overarching theme of this study is that refugees are directly impacted by the developments that are constructed as a refugee ‘crisis’ and that they actively interact with and maneuver along the restrictions or opportunities that may be placed on their paths. Additionally, nearly all participants stated that refugee ‘crisis’ discourses gave them the sense that they are a burden for their host countries, a feeling that has had negative impact on their mental wellbeing and stands out when they reflect on their journey.

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Recommendations

Policy discourses’ influence on refugee experiences is twofold: First, such discourses can partly shape the way refugee movements are perceived in the society. Second, they impose certain characteristics and images on refugee populations. Considering such effects of refugee ‘crisis’ constructions on refugee experiences and behaviors, this policy memo puts forth the following recommendation. Given the agency refugees exercise and their interactions with public discourses, the framing of refugee movements in policy circles in a more humanitarian and internationalist manner can substantially contribute to the mental wellbeing and ultimately faster and easier integration of refugees in their host countries. Being a refugee means facing uncertainties, losses, traumas, struggles, and other extraordinary challenges; imposing a sense of being a ‘burden,’ ‘problem,’ or ‘crisis’ only adds to the challenges that refugees face throughout their journeys. Hence, shifting away from such discourses can improve refugees’ experiences. Portraying them as capable individuals facing extraordinary circumstances, as opposed to a ‘problem’ or ‘crisis,’ can play an important role in enabling them to have a smoother resettlement. Media and elites can play a key role in the formation of discourses that serve this goal.

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Author

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