



**SEEKING REFUGE:
FAITH-BASED APPROACHES
TO FORCED MIGRATION**

Poverty and Peacemaking II
March 3–4, 2017 at Princeton University

On the Ground Lessons from an International Perspective

Tahir Zaman, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) (Moderator)
Hajar al-Kaddo, Human Appeal
Gabe Huck, Iraqi/Syrian Student Project
Theresa Kubasak, Iraqi/Syrian Student Project
Isis Sunwoo, World Vision International
Jenna Spitzer, Princeton University (Student Rapporteur)

In this roundtable, representatives from community-based organizations and international NGOs reflected upon their approaches to providing aid to forced migrants, recognizing the differences and similarities across their ideals and practices.

The session began with an introduction by the moderator of the roundtable, Tahir Zaman, from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Tahir encouraged the participants to focus, during the session, on “our own position and perspectives on the issue – what are we missing?” Because “every perspective has blind spots,” Tahir hoped that the differences in perspectives of the participants could enable the discussion to tease out answers to the questions, “What are the lessons? For whom? What do they teach us about faith, humanitarianism, and mass displacement?”

Gabe Huck and Theresa Kubasak, founders of the Iraqi/Syrian Student Project, then offered their perspective from the ground: how they had developed a program for Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Egypt to enable students to receive scholarships to attend college in the United States. With one of their alumni present, Mohammed Eisa, and the moderator as a previous volunteer teacher, Gabe and Theresa explained how they had never tried to become an NGO but relied on “a whole community and net of people” to make their work possible.

Isis Sunwoo from World Vision International then explained how her organization, though operating at a much larger scale than Gabe and Theresa, is “not an eyeglasses organization. We are a child focused, Christian advocacy organization in over 100 countries with 46,000 staff around the world.” In its efforts to address 130 humanitarian crises in 63 different countries in 2016, Isis described how World Vision remained committed to “living out” the motto, “as international as necessary, as local as possible.” For instance, World Vision hires 90 percent of its staff from the communities they work with.

Hajar al-Kaddo, from Human Appeal, then spoke to the panel via Skype about her knowledge of Turkey’s response to the Syrian refugee crisis and Human Appeal’s attempt to provide long-term solutions to the crisis that “we all know is here to stay.” Hajar suggested that the Turkish government modeled their cultural ideal of accepting refugees as



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their guests, but that their approach failed to predict the continuity of refugees entering the country and the long-term solutions needed to address the crisis. Human Appeal, in its effort to provide long term solutions, is thus focusing on finding “housing, suitable work, language training, psychological and social support” for refugees. Tahir then asked Hajar about the potential limits of approaching refugees as guests: “Doesn’t that pigeonhole people into binary roles of host and guest? Shouldn’t we be looking to go beyond a host and guest framework?”

Although Hajar’s internet connection dropped before she could fully reply to Tahir’s question, Mitzi Schroeder from Jesuit Refugee Service responded that, in her experience, refugees do not always want to be subsumed into their new society, just as her great grandmother had lived in New York without learning English because she preferred to remain in her German community. Mohammed suggested that refugees may need extra encouragement to integrate, to which Mitzi said: “It’s fine to say we should encourage people to reconcile and communicate between host and refugee. It’s one thing to encourage; it’s another to force. To force would contradict the dignity of the refugees. People need to have that choice and be helped to understand the benefits of having relationships, but that has to be a dialogue – it can’t be a forced choice.”

Towards the end of the session Tahir presented another provocative question: “Are international NGOs really on the ground? Are they learning from migrants themselves? How do we learn from the people who are on the move?” Tahir explained that, while in Greece, he saw the capacity of migrants there to create sustainable lives for themselves in the space that had been created for them in the city. Without relying on international NGOs, these migrants had established communities and structures of support suggesting, Tahir proposed, that organizations should be learning from refugees and creating space for them to establish lives independently, as opposed to relying upon aid organizations.

In response, representatives of NGOs at the session reinforced the primacy of individuals on-the-ground in dictating the decisions of large-scale organizations. Isis recognized, “We need to do better to bring voices into policy conversation, but most of our staff are in those communities. They tell us how things are and we respond to what they say.” Similarly, Mitzi noted, “the majority of our staff and volunteers are refugees or are living in villages with refugees. Almost all of our staff members are drawn from local communities.” And Joel Charny, President of Norwegian Refugee Council – USA and former Vice President of InterAction, pointed out “the irony” of being an international aid NGO: that these organizations are criticized for interfering when they provide aid, but “when we’re not there, we are criticized for not being there.” Instead of relinquishing the role of NGOs, Charny suggested that these international organizations and community-based groups each have their role to play in the network of support, and that the goal of those in the aid community should be to “look at how we can work together better to build on our strengths.”