



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

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

## Root Causes of Forced Migration

David Hollenbach, Georgetown University (Moderator)  
Wa'el Alzayat, Emerge USA  
Diane Paulsell, Cristosal  
Madeline Rose, Mercy Corps  
Julia Casazza, Princeton University (Student Rapporteur)

Root Causes of Forced Migration began with an encouragement by Fr. David Hollenbach, to extend the definition of “refugee” beyond the five typical criteria proposed by the United Nations. Drawing upon the work of Alexander Betts, Fr. Hollenbach proposed including in the definition of refugee individuals who face threats to their basic rights, insufficient economic resources, or infringements upon their basic freedoms. In a nod to the diverse factors responsible for forced migration, Fr. Hollenbach noted that “you can’t separate the conflict in Darfur with the expansion of deserts there - they’re interwoven”. Fr. Hollenbach then introduced the roundtable’s three featured speakers - Diane Paulsell, Madeline Rose, and Wa’el Alzayat.

Diane Paulsell, Board President of Cristosal, provided an overview of the forces driving forced migration in the Northern Triangle region of Central America. Second only to Syria in terms of violence, this region includes El Salvador, whose capital city suffers from a murder rate of 200 out of 100,000 people. In response to the murder, intimidation, extortion, and gender-based violence encountered by its citizens, the Salvadorian government relies on an “iron first approach,” employing excessive force directed at populations assumed to be associated with gangs. Corruption within the police force and the possibility of re-victimization at the hands of criminal organizations block victims’ efforts to gain protection. Particularly vulnerable are LGBT individuals and women, who the government fails to protect from hate crimes.

Over 560,000 people were internally displaced within the Northern Triangle region in 2014 alone. These refugees remain “invisible” to many Americans due to the “drop-by-drop” nature of their migration, Paulsell noted. By forming relationships with state institutions that acknowledge forced displacement, including El Salvador’s Human Rights Ombudsman and the Salvador Women’s Institute, Cristosal strengthens these institutions’ capacity to serve their citizens. Offering psychosocial and legal services, Cristosal helps victims of gang-related violence reclaim their rights. Given the challenges associated with attaining refugee status in the United States, Cristosal advocates a community development-based approach to in country relocation, which looks to “make communities more resistant to violence.”

Mercy Corps policy advisor Madeline Rose focused her introduction on the connections between violence, forced migration, and international development. Currently, 80% of humanitarian aid benefits people fleeing violence and oppression, which, Rose noted, constitutes a marked contrast



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from the previous status quo. Adding to this challenge, the nature of violence has changed; 40% of those victimized by violence are civilians, cities are often the target of violence, and perpetrators prove difficult to trace. Amidst a changing background of humanitarian needs, Mercy Corps studies how refugees survive and adapt to their new communities. Rose pointed out that technology supports a “transnational sense of identity” by allowing refugees to stay in contact with distant family members and conduct money transfers. Mercy Corps investigates the factors linked to refugee “rootedness” in Jordan, Afghanistan, and Somalia, including access to jobs, nationality, and identity, with the hope of increasing the efficacy of humanitarian intervention. Closer to home, Rose underscored the need to strengthen and organize anti-war efforts in the United States. The success of Mercy Corps’ resilience-based approach rests upon a de-escalation of violent conflict throughout the world.

Wa’el Alzayat, who served as senior policy advisor on Iraq and Syria to former U.S. Ambassador to the UN Samantha Power, provided a brief overview of the refugee crisis in Syria, where the largest perpetrator of violence against Syrians is the Assad government. The government’s “medieval tactics of besieging an area, allowing people to starve, and forcing them to surrender” account for the 12 million people – half of Syria’s population – that are displaced. As an ally of the Syrian government, Russia’s bombing campaign increased the rate of Syrians trying to get into Europe tenfold. This influx of displaced persons challenges European and American commitment to their core ideals, damaging unity within these nations. Alzayat pointed out that, faced with a divided political environment, the United States’ “lack of resolve” allows the drivers of forced migration to persist. Even without an immediate solution to its conflict, Syria needs a cease-fire to protect civilians and allow maturation of the political process – but such a cease-fire would likely require American intervention.

Farzin Ilych, director of Visions of Peace, pointed to the United States’ role in destabilizing North Africa and the Middle East, including its intervention in Libya and the “catastrophic failure” of NGOs. If the purpose of this panel is to address the root causes of forced migration, he insisted, then we must acknowledge our own responsibility for displacement of persons. Alzayat defended American intervention in Libya, noting that a failure to stop Qaddafi’s then-impending march on Benghazi would have valued the life of a dictator over those of civilians. “Without American intervention, Libya would look like Syria today,” Alzayat commented, “and I would take one hundred Libyas over one Syria.” Addressing the role of the U.S. government in preventing conflict, Rose pointed out that Samantha Power worked on legal frameworks of human security and was interested in devising an early preventative strategy; however, lacking civilian support, these strategies will never come to fruition. Rose also noted that the U.S. government’s tendency to contract out projects to NGOs results from its concern that aid funds will be diverted to support terrorism. Wary of this “McDonaldization of humanitarian involvement,” Mercy Corps does not accept contracts from the U.S. government.

The conversation then turned to the topic of engagement with refugees and other displaced persons. Paola Stevens, the director of Interfaith-RISE in Highland Park, urged those engaged in



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refugee work to “listen to the local people and their daily practices,” citing an instance in which, as an aid volunteer, she was tasked with distributing 200 sleeping bags to 1500 displaced Salvadorians who had never seen such an object before. Paulsell described Cristosal’s public awareness campaigns and its Civil Society Roundtable on Forced Displacement, which collects data on patterns of forced displacement and the characteristics of victims. Paula Piscitelli, President of the Community of Sant’Egidio, underscored the duty that faith-based organizations possess in “building a culture of peace.”

The roundtable then examined the relationship between violent extremism, forced migration, and democratic principles. Rose drew upon Mercy Corps’ research into why individuals choose to join violent extremist groups, commenting that “religion is very rarely a driver to radicalization” – rather, economic grievances, in the case of Boko Haram, and outrage with war crimes, in the case of ISIL, allow these groups to amass supporters, who are radicalized following their decision to join the group. Mercy Corps responds to this challenge in the form of youth empowerment and prevention programs, which support Nigerian civil society. Peter Lems, Program Director for Education and Advocacy on Iraq and Afghanistan for the American Friends Service Committee, spoke to the U.S.’s need to lead by example in its responses to violent extremism. Working in Aceh, Indonesia, Lems saw that, in the wake of the PATRIOT Act, Indonesians increasingly saw American laws as “western diktats” rather than “international human rights norms.” Alzayat responded to this concern by stating that regardless of whether these principles are associated with the western world, they remain indispensable, and to question them “is a disaster” for all involved. “The choices for people of any region – but particularly the Muslim world – should not be dictatorship or ISIL.”

Fr. Hollenbach concluded the session by urging participants to continue with their efforts to address the peace issues that drive forced migration. Governments, the United Nations, and other intergovernmental organizations remain essential to this effort, but faith-based communities are also involved in on-the-ground efforts to promote peace. The only functioning institution in South Sudan is the church, and when the country voted for independence, it was churches that organized to teach people how to vote and what voting meant.