United Kingdom’s Foreign Policy towards Syrian Refugees

Under The Supervision of

Dr. Iram Khalid

Submitted by

M. Najam-ud-din Farani

PhD International Relations

Session (2015-2019)

Department of Political Science, University of the Punjab, Lahore
Introduction

The civil war in Syria which began in 2011 has harbored a state of human insecurity for the civilians at large. The United Nations (UN) estimated statistics reveal that the ongoing fight for the last five years in between Assad forces and the coalition opposition forces against Assad regime, with the addition of radical jihadist forces of the Islamic state (IS) has led to more than 250,000 casualties, resulting in the forced migration of millions of Syrian civilians from their homeland (DW, 2016).

The refugee crisis in Syrian conflict requires immediate humanitarian responsibility to protect (R2P) at local, regional and global level. At the local level, there are around about 6.5 million internally displaced people in Syrian Arab Republic (BBC News, 2016). At the regional level, there are 2,503,549 Syrian refugees accommodated in Turkey, 1,069,111 in Lebanon and 635,324 in Jordan (UNHCR, 2016). 10% of Syrian refugees are seeking human security in Europe (BBC News, 2016). The United States (US) Secretary of State John Kerry has himself highlighted this state of human insecurity in Syria in addition to the plight of millions of refugees all around the globe which has led to the emergence of greatest humanitarian crisis that the human history has seen after World War 2 (Rudaw, 2016).

UK being an important member state of Europe has an important role to play in dealing with the incoming Syrian exodus of refugees through its foreign policy. UK’s 2020 plan for the resettlement of Syrian refugees in UK, UK’s humanitarian
financial aid assistance to the internally displaced people in Syria, UK’s humanitarian financial aid for the resettlement of Syrian migrants at the regional front and the British political assistance for a multilateral peace settlement of Syrian crisis are some of the policy focus issues that are going to be addressed in this paper.

This research study is going to focus on the convergence/divergence of interests in between UK’s Humanitarian assistance policy directed towards Syrian refugees and the British national security interests at the local, regional and the global fronts. This research study is also going to focus on the absence of a British military approach and its impact on the resolution of Syrian humanitarian crisis.

**Literature Review**

The origins of scientific research in migration academic discourse can be traced back to the late 19th century (Greenwood & Hunt, 2003). The international legal history of migration studies can be traced back to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention which was developed to deal with the European migration crisis created in the aftermath of World War 2 (UNHCR, 2010). In order to make the 1951 protocol universal in character with reference to the rights of the refugees, 1967 New York Protocol was made to amend the existing protocol on the rights of refugees (UNHCR, 2010).

How these protocols function in the world politics? Goldenziel (2014) work is of immense significance in this regard as he elucidates the role of humanitarian regimes based on international human rights organizations. How these humanitarian regimes work to provide better conditions for migrants. He also argues about the limitations that multilateral treaties face with reference to the selfish nature of state’s national interest.
It is not only the international organizations which might provide a challenge to state’s national interest but the refugees themes can become a source of threat against a country’s security and stability. In this regard, Weiner (1992-1993) tries to elucidate the impact of different kinds of population movements on state’s security and stability based on the economic, political and environmental motivations. Kunz (1981) typology for refugees further helps us to understand the circumstances and the motivations in which individuals or groups can leave their home countries in order to find refuge in a foreign land.

There has not been a lot of work done in terms of aligning international relations theory with the migration studies. Degu (2002) is of the view that the volume of refugee crisis in IR theory is marginalized due to the fact there is a lot more focus on the relationship between states and nations. Additionally the IR theory caters more to the western narrative than the non-western narrative. Bretell and Hollified (2015) also strengthen Degu’s (2002) case highlighting the theoretical fragmentation of Migration issues across different disciplines which signify the need for the development of a grounded theory for refugees in IR theory.

The Historical Contextualization of Syrian refugee crisis is based on the news reporting of BBC News (2016). The case building for a refugee crisis in Syria is based on the official data sets collected by UNHCR (2016). The British response to Syrian humanitarian crisis is based on the Gower & Cromarty (2016) research briefing paper submitted to the House of Commons Library about the British Government’s 2020 for the settlement of 20000 Syrian refugees in UK. The summary details of the UK’s foreign policy objectives with reference to financial humanitarian assistance at the local and regional level are being detailed by the UK Department for International Development (UK Government, 2016a). The absence of British military action during Syrian humanitarian crisis has been explained by
Strong (2015) wherein he explains the role played by the British Parliament in stopping the path of British air strikes in Syria in the wake of domestic constraints.

**Research Methodology**

The research methodology for this research paper is going to be based upon the mixed approach comprising both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. This mixed approach is going to be a Qual-Quan approach. This mixed approach is further going to be based on the case study method in which the ethnology of refugees as a community is going to be explored and described with the help of official written documents of international, intergovernmental and governmental organizations, books, journals, newspapers and web links. Empirical data sources of international established research institutes are going to be utilized as secondary sources of data evaluation related to Syrian refugee studies.

**Conceptual Framework**

Population movements occur everywhere in the world. The migrations in population movements can be from rural to urban areas; from poor to rich countries; from insecure to secure countries etc. Population movements are a source of opportunities as well as constraints for the states. From a historical point of view, the European refugee crisis created as a result of the World War 2 provided an opportunity for the states and their respective leaders to devise an international protocol which could deal with an exodus of such massive level. This particular protocol i.e. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention provides a definition, role and rights of a refugee. According to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, a refugee can be defined as (Yeo, 2014):

“Owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, Religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political
Opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to Such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or Who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former Habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to It.”

Kunz’s (1981) typology can be of great assistance in defining the character of different refugee groups. Kunz has divided the refugee groups based upon their motivations into three groups. They are (Collins, 1996):

- Majority Identified Refugees
- Events Related Refugees
- Self-alienated Refugees

According to Kunz (1981), majority identified refugees can be described as the group of people who have left their homeland based on social and political motivations which might include support of majority at home with reference to the cause for which they have left their motherland. They keep in touch with their homelands and try to contribute to the local resistance/liberation movements. If their effort for political change becomes successful, they prefer to return back to their homelands as repatriates. Such behavior was being exhibited by the Algerian refugees in 1950’s, Zimbabwean refugees in 1970’s and Nambian refugees in 1980’s.

According to Kunz (1981), the event related refugees are such who face active or latent discrimination based upon their minority status. These type of refugees do not have the same level of affiliation or patriotism that is being exhibited by the majority identified refugees. The discrimination against such refugees can be based upon religious or ethnic differentiation. The refugees from Rawanda in
neighboring African countries can be considered as an example of event related refugees.

According to Kunz (1981), self-alienated refugees leave their homeland on account of multifarious individual reasons. They do not show societal group psychology.

Weiner’s (1992-1993) work in addition to Kunz’s work can help us a lot to understand the motivations and the desires which can become a cause for a citizen to become a refugee. Weiner characterizes three types of motivations which can make a citizen to become a refugee. They are (Weiner, 1992-1993):

- Politically motivated refugees
- Economically motivated refugees
- Environmentally motivated refugees

The majority identified refugees and their motivations can be explained in terms of politically motivated refugees. The refugees who are seeking economic security and move to a richer country to achieve it are economically motivated refugees. Floods, earthquakes, famines, global warming and other environmental disasters can also become a source of environment based migrations.

Weiner’s work is also of great significance not only explaining how refugees leave one country and enter another but also mentions that how entering a new place creates certain level of opportunities and constraints of the state receiving refugees. These constraints can range from cultural assimilation to economic burden, from border safety to the internal security threats.

In this paper, UK’s foreign policy towards Syrian refugees is going to be understood not only from the humanitarian perspective but also from the national security perspective as well.
Historical Contextualization

The Syrian crisis started in the year 2011 and still continues on. The major conflicting parties at the local level are:

- Assad regime
- Coalition opposition groups
- ISIS

The Arab spring also had its impact on the political spectrum of Syria in 2011. Assad and his family had been ruling Syria for many years. The clear absence of democracy keeping in view that the government never represented the majority of the people at large. The sectarian differences also played some part in it. The result came in the germination of an armed opposition against Assad and his supporters resulting in the death of thousands. The addition of ISIS resulted in the intensification of conflict Syria. The sectarian make up of this conflict also resulted in the proxy involvement of the two opposing Muslim Middle Eastern forces i.e.

- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- Islamic Republic of Iran

Saudis are supporting the anti-Assad coalition forces whereas Iranians are supporting the Pro-Assad forces (BBC News, 2015). The global forces would not have been able to keep themselves isolated from this situation. USA and its allies were in favor of removing the Assad regime as they believed that Assad was chiefly responsible for this whole mess from the start (BBC News, 2015). On the other hand, Russians are of the view that any move to remove Assad would be in direct conflict with the principle of non-intervention in state affairs (BBC News,
Russians are of the view that it is more important to deal with ISIS than to remove Assad.

Britain being a close ally of US and a central state in European Affairs could not keep itself isolated from this whole conflict. The 10% Syrian migrants marching towards Europe required a sophisticated response in policy from Great Britain which it did in terms of humanitarian aid.

**UK’s Government’s 2020 plan for Syrian Refugees**

The UK Prime Minister David Cameron announced his 2020 plan for accommodating Syrian refugees inside Great Britain on 07-09-2015 (Gower & Cromarty, 2016). Richard Harrington, a British MP, has been appointed by the British Government to oversee the implementation of this 2020 plan (UK Government, 2015a). According to this plan Britain will help accommodate 20,000 Syrian migrants to settle down in UK by 2020. Almost 1000 Syrian refugees have already been resettled in Great Britain by the end of 2015, showing the British Government’s strong resolve to carry out its Syrian humanitarian policy in an effective way.

**UK’s Opposition’s Perspective on Britain’s 2020 plan for Syrian refugees**

There are those who think this is not enough if it is being compared to the refugee resettlement policies of other European states. Jeremy Corbyn, the labor opposition leader in the House of Commons, thinks that there still needs to be done a lot in terms of helping Syrian refugees (Moss, 2015). He thinks that the number 20,000 is quite less and does not meet the urgency of helping the Syrian refugees. Yvette Cooper, the Labor party politician and MP, has also criticized David Cameron on the handling of Syrian Migration issue (Wintour, 2015). The images of a drowned Syrian child, Aylan Kurdi, near Turkey’s shore of Bodrum has also increased
domestic pressure on the UK government to help the helpless women and children among Syrian refugees (Smith, 2015).

**Threat Perceptions about Syrian refugees in UK**

There are those who think taking so many refugees will not only become a burden on national economy but will also jeopardize the national security particularly in the aftermath of Paris attacks in the latter half of 2015. Keith Waz, the chairman of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, although has welcomed government’s policy to resettle Syrian refugees in UK yet he has raised doubts over the capacity of the government for accommodating 4000 refugees per year, which would be higher than any recorded estimates of refugee accommodation within UK in a single year (SkyNews, 2015). What if anyone in the form a refugee is an armed militant or an ISIS terrorist who would exploit the humanitarian asylum window in UK and attack innocent British citizens? The recent case scenario of Tareena Shakil, a British citizen, who has been convicted for supporting and developing links with ISIS during her visit to Syria with her toddler son, manifests the threat of an armed refugee who can cause havoc in Great Britain (Snowden, 2016).

David Cameron himself has explained the rationale behind limiting the number of incoming Syrian refugees inside Great Britain. He is of the view that allowing more number of Syrian refugees than 20,000 would not help in resolving the Syrian crisis as the fight still goes on inside the Arab republic (Wintour, 2015). Such an approach which includes only the maximization of humanitarian effort and minimization of political/military effort to resolve Syrian crisis will only create more number of refugees from Syria.
Britain’s Financial Humanitarian Assistance for Syrian Refugees

According to UN estimates, the Syrian refugees whether they are internally displaced, regionally displaced or displaced anywhere else require a financial target assistance of 8.96 billion dollars in demand for the year 2016 (UK Government, 2016a). UK is paying 1.12 billion pounds, highest in Europe and second to US, in humanitarian financial assistance to Syrian refugees (UK Government, 2016a). UK’ financial humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees should be analyzed at two levels i. e.

- Syrian Internally displaced refugees
- Syrian regional based refugees

UK’s Humanitarian Financial Assistance for Internally displaced Syrian migrants

UK’s humanitarian financial assistance for internally displaced refugees has been announced to be 561 million pounds out of which 321 million pounds have already been spent in financially assisting the internally displaces migrants in Syrian Arab Republic (UK Government, 2016a).

UK’s humanitarian Financial Assistance for Region based Syrian migrants

At the regional level, UK’s humanitarian financial response for Syrian refugees resettled in Lebanon is announced to be 304 million pounds out of which 146 million pounds have already been spent in financial aid (UK Government, 2016a). Similarly for Syrian refugees in Jordan, UK has announced humanitarian financial assistance amount of 193 million pounds of which 134 million pounds have already been spent to help the refugees get resettled (UK Government, 2016a). In Turkey, UK has pronounced its financial assistance amount to be 34 million
pounds of which 24 million pounds have already been spend in aid (UK Government, 2016a). In Iraq, UK has pledged 19 million pounds for Syrian refugees out of which it has already spent all the money it has announced (UK Government, 2016a).

**UK’s non-humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees**

UK has been consistently supporting the opposition forces in Syria against the Assad regime by political means. UK government has announced 67 million pounds for financially assisting the coalition opposition forces in their fight against the Assad regime (UK Government, 2015b). The UK government has further provided the opposition forces with an amount of 3 million pounds to locate and eliminate chemical weapons held by Assad regime so that they can’t be used against the civilians in this civil war (UK Government, 2015b). UK government has also announced 29 million pounds for limiting the spread of Syrian conflict at the regional level (UK Government, 2015b).

**UK’s absence of Humanitarian/Military Intervention in Syria**

There is a humanitarian crisis in Syria going on as has been observed by UN and other international agencies and states. The situation in Syria is getting worse by each passing day. This calls for a policy based on UN’s protocol for Responsibility to Protect (R2P) (UN, 2016). Although UK’s conservative government is still providing financial assistance to opposition forces yet it has failed to achieve parliamentary support for military action in Syria (Strong, 2015). There are multiple reasons for lack of humanitarian/military intervention in Syria by the UK government.

Firstly, the recent experience of Libyan humanitarian intervention is still fresh in the memories of British people which ended in a worse situation as compared to
the circumstances before the downfall of Qaddafi. Secondly, the involvement of Soviet Union in Syria in support of Assad has made the situation a lot more complex. There are chances that If US, UK and the allied forces also intervene militarily in Syria, the conflict will not only expand in the region on proxy basis but it might become the feared beginning of a hot war between US and Russia. Thirdly, UK’s non-humanitarian assistance to coalition opposition forces in Syria has not yielded beneficial results. Fourthly, British People still remember the Blair years of Iraq war and they seem not to be ready for another fiasco like Iraq. Fifthly, in view of the sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria, if UK is going to take active part in war, it might project the notion of proxy warfare in Syria on behalf of UK. Sixthly, conservative would not like to face the same backlash that the labor party faced as a result of Blair years in Iraq.

The UK Home Minister Tharessa May has herself contended that any effort to make single military intervention will not yield the desired peace settlement in Syria (Independent, 2015).

**Comparative Analysis of UK’s Syrian refugee policy with other EU states**

For convenience, UK’s Syrian refugee policy is going to be compared with two major European states i. e. Germany and France. In terms of humanitarian financial assistance, UK is the biggest European state in terms of supporting Syrian refugees with an amount of 1.12 million pounds. In terms of accommodating number of Syrian refugees in Europe, UK lags behind Germany (Harding, Oltermann, & Watt, 2015). In terms of military offense, UK lags behind France especially the offensive posture French President Holland has taken in the aftermath of Paris attacks (Black, 2015). In terms of multilateral efforts for a peaceful settlement of Syrian crisis, Germany and UK, together with Kuwait and Norway have declared
under the auspices of Syrian regional conference conducted in London that the peaceful settlement of Syrian crisis can only begin through political settlement in Syria wherein there has to be a transitional government facilitating the process of political transition in Syria (UK Government, 2016b).

Findings

Following are the findings of this paper given below:

- UK Humanitarian financial assistance policy to Syrian refugees is the best policy exhibited by any European state in comparison.
- The number of Syrian refugees allowed in UK according to the 2020 plan is low as compared to the number of refugee intake by other European states.
- UK has limited the intake of Syrian refugees by 20,000 keeping in view of the national security threats that it might face in future.
- UK has avoided humanitarian intervention in Syria due to the Russian involvement, experience of Blair years during Iraq war and the disastrous consequences of the Libyan humanitarian intervention in recent memory.

Recommendations

Following are the recommendations of this paper given below:

- UK should follow the political settlement discourse with reference to the resolution of Syrian crisis.
- UK should follow a multilateral peace settlement discourse towards the resolution of Syrian crisis.
- UK should abstain from unilateral military intervention.
- UK should allow Syrian refugees in Great Britain after they get security clearance regarding their background history of activities.
Conclusion

UK’s foreign policy posture towards Syrian refugees is one of humanitarian nature instead of pestering a posture of military intervention. It has helped in avoiding the escalation of conflict at the regional level. It has also kept the hopes alive for a futuristic peace settlement of Syrian crisis.

Bibliography


Degu, W. A. (2002, November 18). *THE State, Refugee Migration And IR Theories*. In W. A. Degu, *The state, the crisis of state institutions and refugee migration in the Horn of Africa: the cases of Ethiopia, Sudan and*
Somalia (pp. 1-22). Amsterdam: Amsterdam Institute for Social Science Research (AISSR).


