The Refugees Crisis: the Challenge of Global Responsibility

In May, *MainGate* sat down with the Filippo Grandi, the 12th United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and a former Research Fellow at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI). Grandi assumed the post of High Commissioner on January 1, 2016.

**How did you end up at IFI?**
When I was Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), I interacted with AUB and IFI often. IFI started when I was at UNRWA. They are very focused on the Palestinian issue—that was my job. We did research initiatives together. It created a bond, a personal bond with Rami Khouri and Karim Makkidi. When I left UNRWA, [IFI] came very naturally as a good place to be. I was very keen to remain in the region. I needed a quiet environment conducive to reflecting, writing. I had contact with students, did a couple of talks, but what gave me the most work was contributing a book chapter on the UN in the Arab world and on my experience with UNRWA. My own book is being finalized more slowly.

When I agreed with IFI to become a research fellow, I was coming out of about nine years of work with UNWRA. Although I was taking a break, I didn't want to sever ties with that region. And Lebanon had an additional element of being in the midst of a refugee crisis. That to me was a factor. I thought it would be interesting to spend time in a country impacted severely by refugees, not as one of the responders but as an observer.

**Did being at IFI inform your views on refugees or policy in any way?**
I was exposed to a quite experienced academic community. I was able to breathe in that atmosphere. I’ve spent all my life at the operational edge of situations, without much time to take a step back, [and doing so] was invaluable. I wish I could still be there. I had a research assistant and had access to the knowledge of these academics and the University's resources. The book I’m writing is a reflection on 30 years working with refugees. I couldn’t have done this book sitting at home. Then, I had to go back to Europe to prepare to run for the position I now occupy.

**Let’s talk about the refugee crisis in Lebanon. What’s going on?**
The problems are many. Historical relations between Syria and Lebanon are complicated. They share a long border, leaving Lebanon very exposed. Lebanon is not only small and near but has fragile institutions and a fragile political balance. Whatever you plan and do for Lebanon, that fragility remains a fact. Lebanon needs help to cope with this huge presence of people, and not just in a humanitarian way—that’s provided—but with its institutions, in crucial sectors. In education, for example, many schools are doing double shifts for Syrians and non-Syrians. Many refugee children are still out of school. The risk of destabilization is very big.

What donors decided to do at the London Conference is very good. They added a development dimension to the aid for Lebanon, at least as long as the crisis is ongoing. This is great but it shouldn’t have taken five years. This is a crisis of social, economic, and institutional development in Lebanon. No matter how much money you put in, the risk of institutional collapse will remain. They pledged to put all children in schools and, in so doing, to help the Lebanese system build up to capacity and to encourage refugees to be self-reliant and provide them with work opportunities. This has been done with success in Turkey and Jordan but is more difficult in Lebanon because of
There’s a lot of discussion of refugees’ rights. What do states owe them? How do you negotiate those rights with states?

The UNHCR is an organization with a very clear mandate based on a convention and a series of related documents that stipulate that people who lose national protection—a protection from their own state that everyone is entitled to—through war, persecution, human rights violation, or whatever, should be helped. They move from a national level of protection to an international one. The first element of negotiation involves getting Country X to open its borders and not deport. Then we ask that people be given a fair hearing. Some may not be refugees so we don’t have a mandate over them. We must make sure that status of determination is done properly.

Very often countries that receive refugees have few resources themselves, like Lebanon. There’s a prevailing view that Europe takes all the refugees. We estimate that almost 90 percent are taken by developing countries, often next to wars, themselves fragile. There are negotiations regarding the rights of every refugee to work and education. Negotiation is done between donors and the country.

Then there’s the matter of finding a long-term solution for their plight. Solutions may be many, including resettlement in a third country; sometimes local integration is not possible. In Lebanon, it’s not possible.

The Lebanese government has been very clear, saying, the country is small, populated, and delicate. They don’t favor local integration, refused it for Palestinians, and [they’re declining it] now for the Syrians in greater number. They believe the best solution for Syrians is to return home. I think they’re right, but the Syrians can’t go until the war is over. A third country might offer naturalization prospects that others don’t. We have launched the proposal to resettle 10%, so far we’ve got pledges for 200,000 plus.

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If developing countries are taking 90% of refugees, why is so much press coverage being given to the issue as it unfolds in Europe? Because all the press are in Europe. Well, that’s a bit provocative, but you know what I mean. It’s also because Europe is the place where the refugee convention was created and signed in the 1950s in Geneva. The origin is very interesting. During the Cold War, [the convention was] conceived to help refugees fleeing persecution in the Soviet Bloc countries. So Europe became an important asylum place and also where the doctrine on asylum was developed. It became a pillar of refugee protection. Remember in 1956, hundreds of thousands fled the Hungarian War and were taken in as refugees. The notion evolved, but Europe remained a very significant center of refugee protection. When the European Union was created and developed its own legislation, the rights of refugees were very central in that.

This is first time, since the Balkans war, that Europe faces a mass influx. Last year, we calculated that a million people reached Europe, even larger than the amount during the Balkans war. This is a bit different too. They’re coming from outside, and Europe has been very destabilized by this, politically. That reaction became high profile, the fact that Europe was reacting in a defensive way. That made headlines. We’re worried because, of course, the European states set the standards, so if they shift to more restrictive asylum procedures, it’s not good for refugees worldwide.

So what do you make of Europe’s response so far? Their initial response was fairly good because they said, Okay, people are arriving, we need to strengthen the reception capacity at our external borders (Greece, Italy), admit those that are refugees, send back the others.
and distribute them throughout Europe. The fatal flaw was that only a few countries came forward; screening was unorganized; the flow was left unchecked and streamed to a few countries only. It was not regulated well. And then this provoked a reaction. Each country went on its own, closing borders and locking up individually. So we decided to discuss with Turkey. We say to Europe: “Once the dust settles, revisit your systems.” Sharing the burden is very important.

So only a few countries came forward and they received the bulk? They had agreed to a relocation scheme in the summer of 2015, but they didn’t really implement it. The flow continued unchecked: the people that arrived in Greece at the point and continued of their own volition to Germany, Austria, and Sweden. So these three countries became very big recipients of refugees. Public opinion, which had shown a great deal of solidarity last year, changed. Unscrupulous politicians manipulated this for electoral purposes. We started seeing, at the beginning of this year, borders closing. One country does it, others follow. This damages goods, people, and the flow of goods into and out of the EU.

How’s the United States been doing? The United States is a country of refugees and migrants. There has been, traditionally, a greater acceptance there than anywhere in the world because diversity is so much a part of the country’s texture. It is by far, by a mile and then some, the largest contributor to refugee programs of all types. They are also the largest resettlement country in the world. I think that the current yearly figure is 85,000 per year. It seems

small compared to Lebanon with 1.5 million, but it adds up year after year. The US often moves to its territory people that are very vulnerable. It’s a life-saving mechanism for, say, single refugee women, LGBT refugees, or people with special needs.

We all know that, even in the US, there’s been some tension around the refugee issue, that refugees from certain areas may pose a security threat. Our message is that this is not that case: those kinds of people don’t usually follow the refugee channel. It’s important that we don’t politicize refugees.

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What are your hopes for your tenure? It’s tough for people on the move. They face hostility and are perceived as threats to cultures, security, the economy. It’s important to get away from that view. We have a moral and sometimes legal mandate to help them. Refugees have been great contributors to societies where they’ve fled. The UN will meet on this topic in September and ask its members to agree on a global compact, which is complex but fundamentally says that refugees and migrants are a global responsibility, not just that of the Lebanon, Jordan, and Kenya. Broadening this sense of responsibility is really what I want to promote during my tenure.

Globalization isn’t only about Internet or fast travel. It’s also about sharing in the more complex challenges it brings, including higher human mobility and the obligation to help those in need.

Another big part of what I do is go out and look for money. We projected, roughly, a $7 billion annual need in 2015, yet we raised only 50 and 55% of that from donors. That’s just to sustain the efforts of my organization, UNHCR.