The Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Neighboring Countries
Dr. Şaban Kardaş, Dr. Ferhat Pirinççi, and Mr. Oytun Orhan of the Middle East Strategic Research Center (ORSAM) – Turkey
March 2, 2015

The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs organized a panel discussion to discuss “The Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Neighboring Countries.” The panel discussion was moderated by IFI Assistant Director Rayan El Amine, and featured three speakers from Turkey’s Middle East Strategic Research Center (ORSAM).

The first part, presented by Dr. Şaban Kardaş, discussed the main factors driving Turkish policy in regards to the Syrian crisis and the influx of refugees. Further, he stated that Turkey is committed to the political solution proposed by Geneva 1. He stressed the importance of a political solution, which would force the current regime to adopt a political transition towards a more democratic administration. He also discussed the Turkish support of the moderate rebels, which Turkey believes to be the alternative solution. Kardaş expressed his concern towards the radical groups that pose a threat to Turkey and its security, especially on the borders.

The second part, presented by Dr. Ferhat Pirinççi, discussed the impact of the Syrian crisis on Iraq presented in seven dimensions. First, he explained that even though the number of Syrians that sought refuge in Iraq was not as large as other countries, the effect was represented in the displacement of the Iraqis. He stated that there are around 245 thousand Syrian refugees, and around 2.2 million Iraqis internally displaced. He later spoke of the effect of the Syrian crisis on the destabilization of the state’s structure in Iraq. Further, he claimed that the political system became problematic as presidential elections and parliamentary elections were delayed and was further challenged with the rise of ISIS and other radical groups who created a policy of revenge within Iraq. He also discussed both the economical impact and the social impact of the crisis. He compared Iraq’s economy to that of Turkey, claiming that there are “structural problems” with Iraq’s response to the crisis. He stated that Iran’s export of arms to Iraq has tremendous negative effects on its economy and infrastructure. In addition, its economy was affected by the decrease in tourism. On the other hand, the social dimension of the crisis changed the demography of Iraq and threatened the security of the country. Dr. Pirinççi also stated that the security forces in Iraq are using forced “displacement as a systematic policy.” In regards to the military effect of the crisis, he claimed that due to the previous lack of support and trust in the military some people welcomed ISIS forces viewing them as saviors from “al Maliki army” also described as a “Shiite army.” Finally, he explained the impact of the crisis on international and regional alliances of Iraq.
The third part, presented by Mr. Oytun Orhan, discussed the humanitarian aspect of the Syrian crisis and the effects of the refugees on their neighboring countries (Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq). He presented the official statistics of Syrian refugees present in these countries and the unofficial speculation regarding the non-registered refugees. Mr. Orhan spoke of the barrier between these refugees and the hosting communities. He claimed that the “the main issue is the difference in the language and life style,” between the Turks and the Syrians. He also mentioned the blame that falls on the refugees due to the rise of unemployment in the hosting countries. In addition, he claimed that the presence of the refugees has created security threats to their neighboring countries, as some of them were associated with terrorist groups. In addition, the presence of refugees changed the ethnic and sectarian demography of several regions, as most of the refugees were Sunni Muslims. This change, in his view, affects the social peace of neighboring countries, and he gave the example of Lebanon. He also expressed the concern that the Syrian refugees created a “burden” on the main services of some countries, whose economy was already struggling. He added that there is a positive aspect to the refugees’ presence, and that is the new economical opportunities of trade that have been created by Syrians. Finally, he explained the Turkish policy’s approach, which aims at integrating the Syrian refugees into Turkish society.

The panel discussion was concluded with questions that dealt with the effects of the Syrian crisis on intraregional trade; its effect on the Sunni-Shiite struggle; the role of the United States in the Syrian crisis and the American and Turkish support of the moderate rebels; as well as the effectiveness of the Turkish policy in regards to the Syrian crisis.