Member Debrief: Video Conference for Parliamentarians on the Migration and Refugee Crisis with Ferid Belhaj, Country Director for Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, World Bank Group

Jointly organised by the Parliamentary Network and the World Bank Group

The Parliamentary Network (PN) co-organised in partnership with the World Bank Group a Video Conference regarding the current global migration and refugee crisis. The conference was an occasion to bring together MPs from 8 sites worldwide with representation from Athens, Ankara, Beirut, Berlin, Brussels, London, Paris, Stockholm (observer), Tunis, and Vienna. The discussion centred around informing MPs on the current state of play with regards to regional migration and refugee flows and what MPs should be discussing and doing in order to be more effective in minimising the negative impacts of this crisis, both home and abroad. Each site had an opportunity to give comments, and the event was co-hosted by Hon. Jeremy Lefroy (MP UK, Chair of the PN) and Hon. Olfa Soukri Cherif (MP Tunisia, Vice-Chair of the PN), looking to focus the discussion around the current situation in countries affected by the crisis, the priorities that legislators and MPs should raise to their respective governments to address the crisis, and how to integrate communities which are now part of a different society, whether in the region or in a different continent.

Hon. Jeremy Lefroy (MP, UK) co-moderating this event from London.
Country Director Ferid Belhaj began by giving a brief overview of the current situation in Lebanon, a country of 4.2 million citizens hosting 1.5 million refugees. This is the largest refugee hosting country per capita, and although the Lebanese people have been resilient and absorbed many of the exogenous shocks to their society, the country as a whole is not in balance. In September 2012, a report discussing the social and economic impact at the UN Security Council noted that an existential threat to Lebanese society existed because of the massive influx of refugees; at that time, half of the refugees were in the country as opposed to today. The adverse economic impact of this crisis between 2012 and 2015 is estimated at $7.5 billion in Lebanon. The World Bank for its part has been able to put $75 million on the table, only further highlighting the urgency for resources and action in Lebanon and the region at-large.

Hon. Yassin Jaber, MP from Southern Lebanon, added the distinction in the total amount of refugees Mr. Belhaj cited, as this does not take into account the number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as well, totalling a combined number of around 2 million registered refugees in the country. Further, there are not enough schools to teach children, which will lead to a new lost generation which could be prey to terrorist organisations. Thus, this overflow represents a significant security challenge not only in Lebanon, for the entire region and world. Hon. Jaber wished to point out that a political solution in Syria must happen as a foundational step to solving the refugee crisis, finishing by saying “Lebanon has been doing its best but we are so close to a breakdown, especially in the financial sector.” Hon. Gerald Zelina from Austria agreed, noting that the situation in Austria cannot be financed in the long-term; thus, “the only solution is to bring peace to Syria.” Hon. Mohammad Kobbani from Beirut added the economic strain which has taken place, highlighting that there are country-wide electricity and water shortages at the moment. Further, Hon. Kobbani noted that the solutions are chaotically done through the private sector, leading to the illegal use of electricity and improperly treated sewage and sanitation systems. Hon. Jean Oghassabian stressed the redundancy of international development initiatives, highlighting that assessment and evaluation needs to be
more rigorous going forward. He also added that Lebanese authorities are not being consulted when it comes to programmes and initiatives from international donors, thus “nobody knows if the needed outcomes are realised.”

“We need to sit down and agree on the numbers and incorporation in local populations.” – Niki K. Kerameus, MP Greece

**Hon. Niki K. Kerameus** looked at the direct and indirect impacts of displacement, actions from the Greek national authorities, and immediate recommendations from her country’s perspective. “Greece is the gatekeeper of Europe; an ideal entry point for refugees in search for a better life in the EU,” she remarked, citing that more than 500,000 refugees and migrants had gone through Greece in 2015, a 1,000% increase from the previous year. Directly, public administrative capacity has been weakened by a nagging recession, but this is exacerbated by the strain of additional refugees coming into the country. Further, one of Greece’s main industries, tourism, has been impacted negatively in the form of cancellations where refugees arrive. She cited one island which lost 20 million euros alone as the unprecedented flow of migrants was not an incentive for vacationers to be on the island. Indirectly, the anti-migrant sentiment in Greece has been growing since 2012, and the fear of right-wing sympathisers who are opposed to a multi-cultural country is increasing. Further and as noted by the MPs from Lebanon, there is an inherent security issue to investigate, as the recent November 2015 attacks in Paris were done by terrorists who had entered the EU through Greece. Although one must not conflate the two issues, there is no doubt that those with malicious intent might take advantage of the migrant and refugee situation to cause further harm on the European continent.
The Greek national authorities deployed coastguards and police to directly address the issue, and although Hon. Kerameus is in the opposition, she noted that the Government is doing a much better job with the incoming flow of migrants and refugees. However, she was quick to point out that this effort would have been impossible without NGOs and the United Nations present at the entry points to provide the most significant assistance. Finally, she offered ideas of how to alleviate this crisis; first, greater enforcement of the EU borders must be negotiated with Turkey, a country not part of the European Union. “Hot spots” need to be set-up along the Greek and Turkish maritime border in order to allow more thorough administrative proceedings and assistance for migrants and refugees. Secondly, her belief in the staunch commitment of the EU member states to not refuse refugees sends the right signal of solidarity, for both hopeful migrants entering the EU and governments continent-wide. Where tragedy is evident, there are ways to integrate migrants and create economic opportunities not only for migrants, but also for an ageing European continent.

Hon. Yusuf Ziya İrbeç from Turkey made brief remarks, citing that of the 20 million estimated refugees who are in the world today, 40% are currently in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Greece. He expressed the belief that the issue can only be solved by unburdening countries that are gravely impacted; “The European population is around 450 million. If it could take 1% of the refugees, it would help significantly ease off the pressure in MENA host countries.” He wished to see an EU system that is more properly equipped to take in refugees, as today the readiness of the EU is too limited. Representation from the European Parliament (EP) included Pekka Hakala, Valerie Ramet, and Rok Koželj, all working in external relations and external polices at the EP. Not only was the support for more intensive coordination and support to state institutions (including with the Turkish government) expressed as a long-term goal of the EU, but Mr. Koželj stated that the key takeaways from the video conference’s proceedings would be transmitted and considered in the future policy formulations at the EP.

Hon. Jeremy Lefroy, MP from the UK and Chair of the Parliamentary Network, went into further detail as to how he will continue advocating on this issue; specifically, the need for financial support to governments hosting refugees is something he stated as a priority to discuss with his Minister. Funding is a question which is also up for discussion, as international organisations are very much underfunded and the UK can have a positive role to play in this regard. Further, the amount of refugees being accepted into the UK needs to be discussed, as the current Government has changed its position over time, but a “more open approach will take quite some time, as it is politically sensitive.”

Question and Answer Session

Hon. Olfa Soukri Cherif (MP Tunisia, Vice-Chair of the Parliamentary Network) sought to understand how MPs can evaluate the impact of the crisis and what this impact means for issues such as security and terrorism. Further, she wished to add that placing refugees in camps is not a solution (as reiterated and agree upon by Hon. Yusuf Ziya İrbeç from Turkey), as it marginalises the people who have to live in such dire circumstances. Mr. Belhaj from the WBG elucidated the analysis, which included the reality that refugees are not only potential consumers, but also producers. “The Zaatari camp in Jordan had 168,000 refugees in March 2013. A year later, there were only 60,000; people went throughout the country, mixed with Jordanian citizens, and started small businesses.” He spoke
to the reality that the economic outcome is not as bad as expected with regards to refugees, but social integration and security are still substantial issues which need to be overcome if the refugee crisis is to continue over time. Mr. Belhaj noted the urgent need for EU financial assistance to help Lebanon absorb the shock in order to make refugees an asset to society and not a liability. Hon. Kobbani added that there is already competition between Lebanese and Syrians on the job market, as Syrians accept less income and less-desirable jobs while not paying taxes, which creates a hostile environment where Lebanese people are protesting this reality and becoming increasingly frustrated.

Mr. Belhaj noted the urgent need for EU financial assistance to help Lebanon absorb the shock in order to make refugees an asset to society and not a liability. Hon. Kobbani added that there is already competition between Lebanese and Syrians on the job market, as Syrians accept less income and less-desirable jobs while not paying taxes, which creates a hostile environment where Lebanese people are protesting this reality and becoming increasingly frustrated.

Hon. Myriam Boujbel (left) and Hon. Olfa Soukri Cherif (right) viewing the video conference from Tunis.

“This is not a Lebanese problem: this is an international problem.” – Yassin Jaber, MP Lebanon

Hon. Gerald Zelina from Austria asked “How can we ensure that international money goes to the refugee and not disappear in different channels?” Hon. Oghassabian from Lebanon remarked that the confidence in Lebanese institutions needs to be increased. The lack of coordination between donors and beneficiaries is partly due to the fact that the government institutions have no way to assess funds and avoid duplications. Thus, Hon. Oghassabian supported greater coordination and a direct passage of funds through government institutions in Lebanon going forward.

Rainer Stefan Venghaus, Head of the WBG Berlin Office, wanted to know what was missing from the Medium-Term Development Framework (MTDF) in order to get the necessary funding that Lebanon needs. Ferid Belhaj cited the need to redo the MTDF as it was originally geared to finance the needs of the hosting communities; however today the two populations are comingled, as refugees are part of the host communities. Thus, the framework needs to be reinvestigated, and the discussion regarding funding needs to be enlarged as well. Further, the Lebanese Government needs to be more active in processing and disbursing money. Hon. Jaber of Lebanon added that the commitments from donors do not consider Lebanon and Jordan on this issue, even though municipalities and communities are impacted by the increase in refugees within their society. He concluded by noting that international organisations are also insufficiently funded and need to be re-energised in order to accomplish their work as it pertains to migration and refugees.
Mr. Belhaj concluded by stating that “Jordan and Lebanon are offering the world a public good by allowing refugees to find safe havens in their countries. We do not have a mandate to work directly in Syria, but the World Bank can try to mitigate the spill-over effect of the crisis in neighbouring countries.” He emphasised that the unit of account is a human being, living on a territory under the responsibility of a country’s government. He stressed the importance in pursuing this dialogue between MPs “since the legislative branch holds the purse and they are the ones who authorise the aid.”

“There is a need for increased coordination among donors, direct support to Lebanon and Jordan, and an expedited political solution in Syria.” – Jeremy Lefroy, MP UK