



Vol. 7 • No. 2 • Winter 2017

Islamic Solidarity

CAUCASUS INTERNATIONAL

Vol. 7 • No. 2 • Winter 2017

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Publisher: Center for Strategic Studies under the
President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SAM)
Responsible Editors: Javid Valiyev & Ilgar Gurbanov
Type of Publication: Periodical
Publishing House: «VANUR POLİQRAF» MMC

Caucasus International is a Baku-based academic journal that discusses policymaking in and on the Caucasus as well as the region's role in the global context. Each issue of the journal will focus on a global or regional theme and includes perspectives from authors from different countries and backgrounds. The journal focuses largely on the Caucasus neighborhood, but does so with a global outlook.



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Caucasus International is published by the Center for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan (SAM) in Baku. Since 2007, SAM has provided an impartial forum for discussion and debate on current regional and international issues. SAM is a government-funded non-profit think tank and is academically independent.



Publishing House

«VANUR POLİQRAF» MMC
Narimanov district, A.Aliyev str. 69/39
Baku, Azerbaijan



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BOOK REVIEW* - "Refuge: Rethinking Refugee Policy in a Changing World"

Alexander Betts & Paul Collier



* The Book Review was prepared by Dr. Özgür Tüfekçi Ph.D, Senior Editor of Caucasus International

The book *Refuge: Rethinking Refugee Policy in a Changing World* is written by Alexander Betts. Betts is the Leopold W. Muller Professor of Forced Migration and International Affairs at the University of Oxford, where he is also director of the Refugee Studies Centre and Paul Collier is professor of economics at St. Antony's College, Oxford. The book opens with an explanation of how one economist and political scientist decided to collaborate on refugees in the Middle East. This initiative emerged after the Jordanian think tank, WANA, invited both academics to come to Jordan and brainstorm with government on the issue. Subsequently, the authors broadened the scope beyond Jordan, aiming to develop a framework of ideas for rethinking a failing refugee system.

In this sense, they put forward broader ideas to carry forward, including the argument that refuge is as much a development issue as a humanitarian issue; the need to restore refugees' autonomy through jobs and education; emphasis on creating sustainable safe havens in the countries that host the majority of the world's refugees; recognition of a role for business alongside government and civil society; and the necessity of reconsidering refugee assistance for a world utterly different to that which the existing system was designed.

The introduction opens with infographics showing the distribution of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in the EU. Observing that "we live in disturbed times", the authors explain how European governments responded to a mass influx of refugees from outside the European region for the first time in the EU's history. The authors discover that European governments resort to unilateral decisions in moments of panic, and their policies are shaped more by the domestic politics of the moment than the search for collective solutions. Thus the book seeks to answer the question "what, in the twenty-first century, should the world do about refugees?" To provide a proper answer to that question, they first address another question: "why is the global refugees system not working today?".

According to the authors, global disorder is starting point of the entire story behind the failing system. Global refugee numbers are at their highest since the early 1990s: 21.3 million people. People seeking refuge are not fleeing poverty; they are fleeing

danger. This happens when a society ceases to provide security for its people. As long as fragile states are exposed to risks which implode into mass violence against civilians, displacement is unavoidable. Many of those displaced remain in their own countries, but many others seek haven beyond national borders. Regarding the Syrian crisis, the people who are in search of refuge have created the first true opportunity to reform the failing system.

The book claims that the dominant approach – creating a ‘humanitarian silo’ - is dysfunctional. The refugee camp is the silo’s default haven – usually remote, arid, and dangerous; almost always with strict prohibitions on socio-economic activity. The authors argue that this approach undermines autonomy and dignity; it erodes human potential by focusing almost exclusively on people’s vulnerabilities rather than rebuilding their capacities.

In this sense, the book’s main contribution is to proposing the creation of “special economic zones (SEZs)” in regional sanctuaries, which would help create jobs for refugees there. According to the authors, this begins with recognizing that refugees have skills, talents, and aspirations. They are not just passive objects of our pity, but actors constrained by crucial circumstances. They do not have to be an inevitable burden, but instead can help themselves and their communities – if we let them. This model has been realized in the King Hussein Bin Talal Development Area (KHBTD) with the establishment of a SEZ into which the Jordanian government has already invested more than 100 million dollars in infrastructure.

Empowering refugees through creation of “special economic zones” (which would help create jobs for refugees) is singlehandedly a robust policy. However, the book does not delve into the other dimensions of well-being, and the book would have benefited significantly from a discussion of education, social services and even moral approaches (not misemploying) to this social economic zones.

To sum up, Betts and Collier deal with the issues around the existing refugee system very well. The book focuses on enabling refugees to achieve long-term autonomy. In doing so, the first part presents the chronology of the Syrian refugee crisis, from its antecedents in the creation of institutions, to its denouement

in the deportation of refugees from Greece. The second part sets out a new approach to global refugee policy, one anchored not in camps, court decisions, and panic, but in the actual needs and the best ways to respond to those needs. The third part looks back, indulging in a fantasy of counterfactual history.

The authors critically examine and illuminate global refugee policy. They discuss the necessity of jobs for creating a system for the world's refugees. The book has the potential to become a seminal work on one of the world's most urgent problems.

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