

History matters. Distinct Responses of the Middle Eastern States to Refugee Movements

An Interview with Dawn Chatty

ILKER ATAÇ, CAVIDAN SOYKAN

Abstract: Dawn Chatty claims that today the world is far away from ensuring a fundamental right to all that was once guaranteed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: the right to seek asylum. Refugee Studies as a multi-disciplinary project and specifically anthropology as a discipline can tell us an insider's view of those migrants' journeys and their exile in other societies. According to her, although refugees are stripped of their agency and depicted as needy by the humanitarian aid regime, there is a growing scholarship on their plight and of their problems. Since Syrians' hope of being able to return to their country has rather been dashed, Chatty argues that a type of temporary protection would be the best solution to provide basic social and economic rights to Syrians. This type of protection should guarantee the right to work and basic education for Syrian youth as well.

Keywords: refugee studies, anthropology, Middle East, Syrian refugees, temporary protection

»When one understands the outsider, and the ›Other,‹ they no longer seem strange.« (Dawn Chatty)

Ilker Ataç (Vienna) and Cavidan Soykan (Izmir) spoke with Dawn Chatty for *movements* via e-mail in June and July 2017. Dawn Chatty is Emeritus Professor in Anthropology and Forced Migration and former Director of the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, United Kingdom. Her research interests include refugee youth in protracted refugee crises, conservation and development, pastoral society, and forced settlement. She is the author of *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge University Press, 2010, *From Camel to Truck*, White Horse Press, 2013, and *Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refugee State*, Hurst Publishers, forthcoming in October 2017.

Ilker Ataç & Cavidan Soykan: We are witnessing the biggest human displacement in the world since the Second World War. As you say, the emergence of Refugee

Studies as a multi-disciplinary project was a late response to the devastating issue of human displacement associated with the war, European fascism, and decolonisation. Refugees were rarely a matter of scientific interest until the 1950s, when the iconic work of Arendt's The Origins of Totalitarianism was published. We are talking of another ›refugee crisis‹ today and the failure of European states in responding to it. Where do you see Refugee Studies as a scientific project in light of today's mass displacement that is mostly from Syria?

Dawn Chatty: The mass displacements we are seeing on the shores of the northern Mediterranean are not new. Nor are they a crisis. But they do reflect a grave situation that the European states are not prepared to deal with. After WWII, the world's leaders came together to draft declarations and resolutions for the United Nations to address the horrors of the previous half century: mass evictions, displacement and statelessness, genocides, and the Holocaust. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the United Nations in 1948, set out, among other elements, in Articles 13 and 14, the right to leave and to return to one's country and the right to seek asylum from persecution in another country. Yet today, we have made the very act of seeking that protection illegal. Refugee Studies has a large role to play in educating not only the academe but the general public in the international human rights and refugee rights we have all signed up to as well as in understanding the significance of the journey into exile, the migration networks, and the general contribution that refugees and other forced migrants make to their places of sanctuary as well as for those left behind.

You are trained as an anthropologist, and your work in the field of forced migration carries the perspective of this discipline. Compared to other disciplines that work on forced migration and refugees, how does Refugee Studies benefit from anthropology? What are/what can be the main contributions of anthropology to the study of today's urban refugees in Turkey?

Anthropology offers an emic perspective: it offers an insider's view of human society and explains our differences and similarities. Anthropology, engaged anthropology, offers opportunities for the public to develop a greater understanding of other peoples, cultures, and societies. When one understands the outsider, and the ›Other,‹ they no longer seem strange. It is the beginning of acceptance and reduces discrimination as well as ethnic violence.

There has been a lot of discussion on the failure of international refugee law in providing protection to Syrian refugees. Thousands of people lost their lives in search of a safe place in the Mediterranean within the past decade. What do you think about the basic premises of Refugee Studies today both in terms of its moral imperative and its scientific interest in refugee experience? Do you think scholars working on Syrian forced migration could convey/respond to refugees' needs and voices, or does the project of ›political humanitarianism‹ govern the field right now?

Scholars working with displaced Syrians in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan are producing scientific papers which show that first the Syrians are making significant contributions to the countries — often in the informal economy. But a lack of understanding of their predicament has meant that social discrimination has emerged in each of these countries. Scholars have also revealed the shortcomings of the humanitarian aid regime in its insistence on a template for providing assistance; a template which strips Syrians of agency and reduces them to vulnerable and needy people. More scholarship is emerging which shows that, notwithstanding the enormous pressure that these countries face, local civil society is emerging and working with the displaced to improve their situation and help prepare them for returning one day through effective education programmes and active engagement in building a civil society.

Political humanitarianism, European policy of containment in the region, is unsustainable in the long term. Europe needs migrants — skilled and unskilled — and Syrians realize that they cannot return home anytime soon. A compromise will emerge soon which recognizes that third country resettlement is not generally in the interest of either the displaced Syrians or the states of Europe. Instead, a form of temporary protection, of complementary or subsidiary protection, will start to be negotiated, allowing more Syrians access to Europe's labor market. Here, basic economics or economic humanitarianism will prevail, where countries needing certain skills will be matched up with Syrians (and other refugees) who have those skills on a temporary — not permanent — basis.

You argue that refugee crises in past centuries shaped contemporary refugee movements and regimes in the Middle East. On the one hand, you emphasize the importance of social relations and transborder movements, which go back to the late period of the Ottoman Empire. On the other hand, we can see that each country bordering Syria has responded differently to this complex emergency. Can you clarify your argument that ›History matters‹ for explaining the responses by Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan towards refugees from Syria?

First of all, each country has originally received the displaced Syrians who are most closely related to its own citizens on the other side of the border. Take for example Turkey, the first wave of Syrians was from Aleppo and Idlib provinces, and they sought sanctuary and safety in the Hatay Province of Turkey. Many had close social (kinship) and economic ties in Hatay and were treated as temporary guests (*misafir*), just like those who were there in the 1938–9 period of time, when the Hatay provinces were transferred from French mandated Syria to Turkey. So the social links were strong. Furthermore, places like Gaziantep were largely developed from a provincial town to an important city with Syrian investment from Aleppo businessmen. So, the relations were already there to accept these not so strange ›strangers‹ and provide them with sanctuary. In Lebanon it is the same. Greater Lebanon was created by the French mandatory authorities from Mt Lebanon (a special Ottoman self-governing region in the late 1800s) and added to it the Syrian city of Tripoli as well as the agricultural lands of the Syrian Bekaa. So, people were already related to each other and had strong social and economic ties. It is thus no surprise that so many Syrians from Homs came to Lebanon for safety. Once in Lebanon, they were treated as guest workers. Before 2011, there were times when Lebanon had as many as 400,000 Syrian workers in the agricultural and construction industry. These close economic ties as well as social ties meant that Syrians were not turned back when they sought safety from the violence in Syria. Jordan saw the same. The first Syrians to flee to Jordan were from Dara'a, a town near the Jordanian border where many tribal links exist with the tribal community of Dara'a. Thus, in all three cases, we can see that the partition of the Ottoman Greater Syria (or Bilad al-Sham) resulted in many families, communities, and tribes seeing their rootedness and territory suddenly divided into and across several new nation-states. The recent historical memory of earlier times still holds.

When you refer to the term tribe here, are you making a reference to a specific social group? Do you mean ethnic communities in this case or do you imply that this group of people belongs to a minority? Because the term tribe has colonial connotations, and, once, there was a long discussion on its usage in the field.

It is an issue I have long dealt with, as it is very common in contemporary anthropology to avoid the term ›tribe‹ especially in African anthropology where the colonial impact was particularly savage. However, in the Middle East — specifically the Arabian Peninsula — there was really only the neo-colonial impact after World War I and the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The term tribe, here, is not an imported European colonial construct, but rather a local and regional one. The tribes — Bedouin —

call themselves ashira and asha'iri (tribe/tribal) or qabila and qaba'li, and this social construction refers to the segmentary lineage groups that make up the ashira/qabila. Thus, when I mentioned the tribes of Northern Arabia and the close kinship ties/tribal ties across Der'a and Ramtha and northern Jordan, I am looking at locally constructed social grouping.

Not all people in Syria are tribal, seeing themselves as belonging to specific kin groups and lineages, but many are and most go by the term of bedouin. There are many ethno-religious social groups in Syria, too, such as the Armenians, the Assyrians, and even the Isma'ilis. You can also count the Druze in this category. But I would say the Kurds are an ethnic group (with numerous religious affiliations) and they too are organized tribally — think the Barzani and the Talabani. So too are the Circassians of Syria. Thus, Syria is made up of many ethno-religious social groups, tribes, ethnic nations, and other social groups and communities.

In 2011, Turkey declared an open door policy towards refugees from Syria. Nevertheless, it is difficult to call Turkey a ›refugee-friendly country.‹ Syrian refugees usually receive temporary protection status with limited economic and social rights, and these rights are not based on the Geneva Refugee Convention. Besides, Syrians work in precarious jobs with high exploitation and precarious standards. The question of Syrian refugees also divides the Turkish society, which regularly shows itself in attacks on Syrians. Moreover, the open border policy seems to come to an end and a high wall is constructed along the Turkish-Syrian border. How do you contextualize these developments in the broader context of the Middle East and Turkey-EU relations?

First of all, Turkey has signed the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Only it has limited it — made a reservation — to only consider Europeans for refugee status. So, Turkey has provided refugee status for people from the Balkans, especially Bulgarians in recent conflicts. Maybe as part of the earlier pre-accession talks, Turkey has also adopted domestic asylum law. It is the only country in the Middle East to do so. This asylum law tries to regularize the status and conditions of displaced Syrians in Turkey. It has provided far superior temporary accommodation in temporary camps for nearly 250,000 Syrians — something Lebanon has not done, and the Jordanian government has done badly. Most Syrians in Turkey are permitted entry, given ID cards that grant them free health care and also access to education. For the first three to four years, that education was in Arabic in the Temporary Education Centres (TECs). But now that the crisis continues, Turkey is beginning to insist that education must be in Turkish. It has also permitted the issuing of work permits. But here, there

is little that can be done. Most Syrians work in the informal economy. It is tolerated, and most employers do not want to see Syrians have work permits as then it means the employers have to pay higher salaries and also government benefits. The point I want to make is that employment is the key to successful temporary protection/temporary integration. When a Syrian can support his or her family, he/she knows they are safe then until it is possible to return to their country. If they cannot work, or if they might be arrested for working (as happens in Jordan, if one works without a work permit), then safety is compromised and insecurity continues.

Is it surprising that after six years of hosting nearly three million Syrians, there are, at the local level, real signs of social discrimination and concern over local jobs and other social issues? These need to be addressed by the government, to persuade Turkish people that Syrians are not taking their jobs, or causing them to be unemployed, that their own jobs are not under threat, and that their wages, in the informal economy, are not being depressed by the presence of Syrians. The Agreement to halt the flow of Syrians to the EU is not a solid contract. I don't believe that Turkey has been paid what it demanded, and I am not sure whether visa free travel will be granted from the EU. So, I think we are going to see many more changes. Building a wall to keep out desperate people doesn't work. It doesn't work along the US/Mexico border, and it would not work across the Syria/Turkey border. The frontier is too long; the threat of violence behind it is too strong to stop people looking for safety — where they may live without fear of death on a daily basis.

You argue that temporary protection, rather than resettlement, is the main aspiration of those who flee Syria. However, the war in Syria seems to have no end in the near future. In this context of changing temporalities, what should be the priorities of the host countries of Syrian refugees: should they see them as future citizens or as temporary guests? Do you think there should be differences in these policies between countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan on the one hand, and, on the other hand, countries like Germany, Austria, Sweden, and the United Kingdom? Moreover, do you think that new transnational migration patterns will emerge as a consequence of the Syrian civil war?

Temporary protection is perhaps the most rewarding and useful form of international protection that someone escaping war can aspire to. The Syrian conflict has seen this form of protection emerge as the most sought after for very good reasons. Syrians fleeing into Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey, have been very reluctant to register officially with the UN agencies as refugees. They have instead sought out arrangements where they could work, where their families were safe, and where they

could access health and education possibilities for their children. In other words, they were searching for ways to sit out the armed conflict and were ready to return. Many Syrians understood that if the government did not fall, if there was no regime change, their only hope of being able to return to Syria after the conflict would be if they were not seen as ›traitors‹ by the Asad regime. In other words, if they either were not officially out of the country for any other reason than to work. A good example is a case that has been repeated many times over of a professional Syrian couple and their children who arrived in France in 2013. They wanted only permission to work (they were doctors trained in France). They intended to remain in France — but not to become French citizens — until the fighting in Syria ended. They wanted to work and send their children to school. But the French government wanted them to apply for asylum as refugees. There was a stalemate: the Syrian couple did not want to be refugees, they just wanted temporary protection and permission to work to support themselves. They knew that if they became formal refugees in France, they would be unlikely to return to Syria if the Asad government did not fall. Now, in 2017, it looks very unlikely that President Asad and his regime will collapse, and so those who did go abroad for work know they will be able to return. But those who have claimed asylum abroad may never be able to return while he remains in power.

Of course, there are those not as highly skilled who have been unable to support themselves and have registered with UN agencies for third country resettlement. Only a small percentage will receive it; the remaining will be left in limbo for a very long time. Already Lebanon and Jordan want to send Syrians back to Syria, but the Asad government is not interested in receiving them back. Rumours abounded in 2015–16 that the UNESCWA team working on the post conflict Syria were only looking at a population of 17 million — minus the five million that had fled abroad. In Turkey, we know that Syrian refugees have become political pawns and that some of the more skilled and better educated may be offered citizenship. Whether this will be permanent or temporary citizenship remains to be seen. Certainly, temporary ›citizenship‹ for this new form of refuge and asylum is a distinct possibility in future conflicts.

According to UNICEF, six million Syrian children are directly affected from the conflict, and more than half of the refugees outside of Syria are children. Nearly half of the registered Syrian refugees in Turkey are under the age of eighteen. You have pointed out that Syrian refugee children have access to education in Turkey. However, only one third of the school age children are enrolled in public schools. The enrolment rate remains quite low despite all the efforts of NGOs, UNICEF, and the government. On the other hand, some Syrian parents might prefer their children to

have an education in Arabic with the fear that they otherwise might forget their native language. You are known by your workings on refugee youth. What could be the reasons of this low enrolment rate in Turkey based on your research? And how do you think this problem of learning one's native language and access to education be compromised in the long-term?

Yes, nearly 50% of Syrians who have taken refuge outside of Syria are under the age of 18 and in some places more than 60% of these are not enrolled in education (e.g. Lebanon). There are many reasons for this. In some cases, the families need the older children to work in the informal economy to help the families eat and pay rent. In other cases, it is the lack of sound education facilities with curriculum of meaning. In Jordan, for example, second shift schools for Syrians were set up for three hours in the afternoons. But they could not teach to a level that would give most of the students a fair run at the national end of year exams (the Tawjihi). If the school becomes more like a baby-sitting service, then it is not surprising that students drop out. In Turkey, the situation is more complex. At the beginning of the crisis, the Turkish government permitted Temporary Education Centres (TECs) to open, which taught in Arabic and used a modified Syrian state curriculum. This was very popular, and many NGOs supported this. It gave Syrians hope that their children could be educated and at some point slip back into the Syrian run system at the end of fighting. But as we move deeply into the sixth year of the conflict, many are asking themselves whether they shouldn't learn Turkish, too. A bi-lingual curriculum is ideal in such a case. But unfortunately the Turkish government seems to have decided that enough time has been given to Arabic instruction and is now insisting that Syrians must study the Turkish language and curriculum. That is understandable politically. But socially, a bi-national curriculum would be preferred, certainly by Syrians. It gives them a chance to temporarily be ›citizens‹ of Turkey, but also the option to return to Syria one day when the fighting stops — being still fluent in Arabic but also in Turkish, too.

You have a new book coming out titled Syria: The Making and Unmaking of a Refuge State this October. Could you please tell us how the idea of this book was shaped and realized?

As Syrians began to flee the country looking for safety elsewhere, I was struck by the irony of a state that had offered sanctuary for so many millions of people from the middle of the 19th century to the present time and that was now producing forced migrants seeking sanctuary among neighboring states. I had already interviewed the

oldest living members of Circassians, Chechnyans, Armenians, and Kurds who had found safety and sanctuary in Greater Syria from the middle of the 1850s to the 1920s. And I thought that if I also looked at the Palestinians and most recently the Iraqis who found refuge in Syria, I would have the basis for a book which revealed the unique character of the Syrian people, shaped very much by their recent history. Then, by also interviewing displaced Syrians in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, I would be able to show other aspects of forced migration, accommodation, integration, and hospitality which is so very much present in the Middle East region and has shaped the response to the Syrian humanitarian crisis.

You place the Syrian forced migration into a larger context of widespread migrations that shaped the region within the past 150 years in your new book. Could you please tell us more about your arguments in the book, specifically with regard to the remaking of Syria?

The argument I try to make is that the legacy of the Ottoman millet (ethno-religious communities) was such as to disperse belonging among a network of similar co-religionists. So, throughout the region, Greek Orthodox, Jews, Catholics, Protestants saw themselves as tied to their own religious hierarchy but not necessarily specific territory. So members of these ethno-religious communities tended to live side by side with others (strangers), not necessarily their co-religionists. This co-habitation produced a local conviviality, a cosmopolitanism, which made receiving other people — forced migrants from other armed conflicts — natural. These same events also supported the social institution of Karam (hospitality, generosity) or the duty to be hospitable. These same notions, which are also found regionally, help explain why nearly five million Syrians are being largely successfully accommodated and hosted in the neighboring states of Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.

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Journal for Critical Migration and Border Regime Studies

Turkey's Changing Migration Regime
and its Global and Regional Dynamics

Vol. 3, Issue 2/2017

[transcript]

ISSN 2509-8322