

“Syrian refugees will not go back and have to be integrated”

By Nathalie Vandystadt

Interview with Steffen Angenendt, research fellow, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)

With countries neighbouring Syria and Iraq already inundated with refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict, the atrocities and massacres committed by the self-proclaimed Islamic State terrorist organisation have led to a new wave of refugees. These people are here to stay, says Steffen Angenendt. He consequently urges Europe to demonstrate more financial solidarity and to develop migration and foreign policies that address the long-term situation.

What are today's emergencies in the context of the Middle East crises and conflicts?

The crisis of Syrian and now Iraqi refugees is quite different from other crises, first of all because of its scale. The figures vary, but there are around ten million displaced persons in Syria and outside the country. Half the population is affected. The duration is also exceptional: refugees could be away from the country for five years. So different approaches are needed. The burden is huge for the neighbouring countries, which are completely overwhelmed. Jordan has serious water supply problems, for example. But the refugees are not there for the short term. Given the low rate of resettlement of refugees, notably in Europe, the neighbouring countries have to adapt. They need integration structures.

Is the EU doing enough to help these countries?

At the end of October, the calorie level of food supplies declined. But beyond humanitarian assistance, infrastructures for children need to be built. A whole generation is being deprived of schooling. Europe has to give more money. There was a donors' conference in Berlin in late October, at which Germany pledged another €640 million up

to 2017. That is good, but not enough. The problem is that we do not really know how to set up these infrastructures, since Lebanon and Jordan don't want to build them. They know that if they do, the refugees will never leave. The same is true for Turkey.

Steffen Angenendt

These countries are dealing with different degrees of urgency...

Turkey is a large country, whereas in Lebanon, refugees now represent a quarter or one sixth of its population. That has quite another impact. But Turkey also fears an influx of Kurdish refugees from Iraq. So Europe should not necessarily provide the same assistance to these countries.

Do Europeans have a strong enough presence on the ground?

There are agencies on the ground to implement aid. But that is not the problem. The Turks have excellent humanitarian aid expertise. They are fast and well organised. The immediate problem is money. And next is the problem of knowing how to deal with the long term. That aspect will be far more complicated because it is a question of integration and dealing with countries that fear they will be destabilised.

How do you assess the collaboration between European states and the countries neighbouring Syria and Iraq?

There are networks, of course. But states

are sovereign. That is why the situation comes within the realm of foreign policy and diplomacy, but also security policy, since the debate, in Germany and elsewhere in Europe, also concerns Europeans returning home after fighting in armed groups in Syria and Iraq.

Are Europeans' positions on Syrian refugees evolving as pressure builds?

I am not very familiar with the situation in other European countries, but in Germany, certain members of the government are really pushing for the country to do more to assist refugees. At the same time, Home Affairs Minister Thomas de Maizière singles out the other European countries for blame because Germany is taking in the greatest number of Syrians. So the positions are not coherent. I think that the other European countries are experiencing the same problem because migration issues are so politicised. In Germany, the general impression today is that we should do more, but that can change if reception policies are badly implemented. The situation can even become violent, as in the early 1990s, when there was a record number of refugees. The country is preparing in one respect to take in more Syrian refugees, but everything can change if local integration policies fail. Germany is building new reception centres as well as centres for refugees staying for a long period, even in isolated regions, because we have quotas. But the local authorities, who also use empty schools, are trying to keep asylum seekers concentrated in one place. This is a big mistake because, again, the refugees are here to stay. We need regional policies and integration facilities.

Will the reform of EU rules on asylum help distribute the refugees better in Europe?

The pressure is so great that things will necessarily have to change. We absolutely have to debate the meaning of shared responsibility. We need criteria. ■