

Conversation with Christina Bache Fidan

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► **TRANSCRIPT:**

Christina Bache Fidan has more than 15 years' experience working on human development, human security, conflict resolution and peacebuilding. She is currently a Research Fellow with the Center for International and European Studies (CIES), located at Kadir Has University, based in Istanbul, Turkey. Christina has a Ph.D. from the Department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick in the UK. Her dissertation concentrated on the impact of the private sector on human security and peace in fragile and conflict-affected states. Her case study specifically focused on the impact of the Turkish private sector on economic security in the Kurdistan Region (KRG) of Iraq. Christina has written numerous foreign policy, conflict resolution and peacebuilding related articles and reports in her capacity as a doctoral student and an international consultant. She has presented her doctoral research at international conferences and regularly provides analysis of developments in Turkey and the Middle East to academic and policy-oriented groups. Christina also assists companies and business leaders in understanding and implementing best practices in a way that complements their business values and maximizes their contributions to human security and positive peace.

Christina has an M.A. in International Peace and Conflict Resolution and a B.A. in International Studies from American University in Washington, DC. Christina is the Chair of the International Crisis Group's Ambassador Council in Istanbul and is a member of the United Nations Business for Peace/Principles for Responsible Management Education working group. Christina is a member of the Hollings Center's dialogue groups on "Iraq's Foreign Policy and Economic Challenges"; The Future of Turkey-U.S. Relations: Prospects for Cooperation in the Middle East"; and "The Future of U.S.-Egypt Relations"; the American Council on Germany and the Draeger Foundation, "Study Group on Demographic Trends, Migration, and Social Cohesion in Europe"; the German Marshall Fund's Young Transatlantic Network, the Global Women's Leadership Network, the Professional American Women of Istanbul, Propeller Club of the U.S. Port of Istanbul, International Studies Association, the European Consortium for Political Research, the Soho House, the Transfuse Association, Women's Foreign Policy Group, and Women in Foreign Policy (Turkey).

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I created some info graphs to showcase the quantitative data, which is often difficult to grasp, but should give a little bit of a better understanding of the dynamics in the region, and also we have folders. And I printed off some of the key documents with regards to the developments on the refugee scheme between the European Union and Turkey and those are in there as well as some of the movement of people from the water and land routes moving from Turkey to Europe. If you saw my bio you'll see that I have a peace and security background with a specific interest in how the private sector can enhance those two areas and so my presentation today will have two specific things, one which is a regional overview of how the front line states are responding to the

humanitarian crisis in the region, and the second will be a little bit about the EU Turkey refugee scheme that we've seen develop over the last year.

However, because of my professional background I wanted to just set the scene in a context for a global force displacement before moving on to the Syrian context. In 2015 we saw approximately 65 million forcibly displaced persons. The figures here you can see on the first screen, those that are refugees versus IDPs (internally displaced persons). The large figure of displaced persons has of course been IDPs with roughly 40 million individuals fleeing their homes, but staying within their countries of origin. Roughly 21 million people have been refugees and then there's approximately another 3.2 million, which have been asylum seekers. And the developments over the last decade in terms of the increase in displacement of persons there are three specific points that contributed to the displacement of persons.

One is that conflicts such as Afghanistan and Somalia, which are in their fourth and third decade, continue to see large outflows of people. The second is that there has been an increase in new conflicts or reignited conflicts, and the third is that the rate at which solutions have been devised to cease violence, to stop conflicts has decreased substantially since the end of the Cold War. And so what we see is that front line states are facing the greatest challenges to host refugees. And what is interesting is that 86% of the refugees under UNHCR's mandate for protection are living in low and middle-income countries, which clearly poses additional challenges for those host countries to be able to provide the kinds of socio and economic protection that is needed for those refugees.

Interestingly, hosts don't think about some of these countries as host nations, such as Iran, which has had two- or three-decade long history of housing or hosting Afghan refugees, for instance. And then moving onto the front line states in Syria, there are five states in the region who are clearly feeling the challenges directly from the Syrian conflict. What is interesting is the figures that I put here are only Syrian refugees that are registered by the United Nations, so some of the figures will give you almost a skewed understanding of what the situation is actually like for Syrian refugees or for the host countries in those regions.

But I'd like to start out with Iraq, which is of particular interest to me. It's the country that I conducted my doctoral research on as well as my Masters. And Iraq has been an ongoing conflict country. Violence eroded after the US-led invasion of 2003 and what is interesting about Iraq is that it has about 1.7 million internally displaced persons largely from Baghdad and southern provinces. And the majority of those IDPs are actually living in the north in Iraqi Kurdistan, which is the region made up of three provinces. They largely live on the local economy and in the fall of 2014 as the conflict increased in eastern Syria, about 250,000 Syrian refugees crossed over the border into the north as well.

And this is an interesting dynamic with regards to Turkey's role in the region and its response to the humanitarian crisis, because it financially contributed to the construction of three humanitarian refugee camps in the north and they are located in the Dabiq region, which is the border region with Turkey. And so in a way Iraqi Kurdistan has acted like a de facto safe zone or buffer zone for both IDPs and refugees, Syrian refugees, from crossing into Turkey. And as of earlier this year Iraqi citizens now have to apply for a visa to come into Turkey, where previously they could come on a tourism visa, which made it much easier for commerce and business folks to

cross back and forth. Moving on to Lebanon, as anybody who follows the Middle East knows, that Lebanon has been a state politically dysfunctional for quite some time and has struggled to even administer social services to its own citizens, let alone to Syrian refugees.

Lebanon has pursued an approach, where it in some ways doesn't even want to acknowledge that Syrian refugees exist in the country and at some point even ask the UNHCR to stop registering any new refugees. There are no formal refugee camps in Lebanon and so this certainly poses a very volatile situation for Syrian refugees in the country. It is extremely expensive to apply for a work permit for Syrian refugees and so many of them are living there as if they are not formally in the country. Jordan has been a long-term ally with the West, particularly large western NATO member states including the US, and has done a successful job at selling its ability to both provide support for Syrian refugees, and at the same time contributing to the fight against ISIS in Syria.

Recently Jordan just announced a new scheme for the support of refugees. Up to just this last year they had an approach of just delivering immediate services to Syrian refugees and this new report, which is a three-year long plan, which is still not that long of a timeframe, has taken a more of a resilience approach and it is trying to incorporate the Syrian refugees into the formal labor market. So it appears that there's some positive developments in terms of the state's transitioning in its approach to Syrian refugees. And as a side note, I have an American friend who is going on a fact-finding mission to Lebanon, I meant to say that, just next week with a foundation and her report will be available in the next three weeks or so in case anybody's interested specifically in Lebanon.

But I also wanted to talk a little bit about Egypt because it is also another potential hot spot that we may see in the next few years, particularly as the land and water routes are squeezing and they are closed off in this part of the region. Egypt has approximately 141,000 Syrian refugees that are registered by the UN, but there is concern that this number could actually be doubled, if not more. Egypt has squeezed international organizations, particularly humanitarian organizations or those who are deemed politically affiliated and also local NGOs. And this has made it extremely difficult for those organizations on the ground, whether they have an international connection or not, to provide services to Syrian refugees.

And it's interesting; when the Syrian conflict broke out I was there in Egypt and there seemed to be this sense of welcoming to Syrian refugees. Of course Syria and Egypt have close historical ties, but in terms of the average Egyptian there seemed to be sense of solidarity with Syrian refugees. And that has certainly changed over time and I think that the government, the Egyptian government perhaps in a way exploited the Syrian refugees for their own political gains in the sense of making excuses to not have to provide support to them. And what is also interesting is recently there has been an increase in Syrian refugees trying to embark on the journey from Egypt to Europe, and, again, as I mentioned there's even concern that not only Syrian refugees try and embark on the water route, but they would then perhaps try and move west over towards Libya to then make it up to Italy, for instance, and that is a concern.

Lastly we have Turkey. Turkey, of course, I found myself wanting to stand up and cheer after Mrs. Sahin spoke. It was really touching. Her vision and innovation, and just her heart is really apparent and I found myself really excited. I wanted to hear more. Turkey has had an open door policy for Syrian refugees, while at the same time has pursued the construction of a tightened border with Syria. And so I think that there seems to be almost conflicting policies, and certainly with the

predominant of Syrian refugees living within those border cities, aside from Istanbul of course, it's been interesting to see how the awarding of this temporary protection to only Syrian refugees is perceived to some here as a threat to the social cohesion of the country.

Turkey is also a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on refugee convention, however it places a geographic limitation on refugees. So it only officially awards—of course there's an ongoing case-by-case basis - but it traditionally only awards refugee status to those who are fleeing from Europe.

And in my mind although there is currently a temporary protection for Syrian refugees, I think that there is an opportunity for the migration and refugee legislation in this country to be realized, because even if the Syrian conflict were to end in the near future, how will Turkey respond to other conflicts? How will Turkey respond to other refugees coming to this country either transiting through to go towards Europe or those who would like to seek asylum in Turkey? Earlier this year Turkey eased restrictions on employment. I think up to the summer I think it's been something like 5,500 applicant or work permits have been awarded. Again, there's a challenge, because the work permit is directly linked to an employer.

Again, there's a geographical limitation on Syrians if they are registered, for instance, in Gaziantep, they can only find employment in Gaziantep, in the province. And so this also poses challenges for individuals because they are often working in jobs that do not match their educational levels or their occupational experience. And then also the other challenge for host communities is that the southern parts of Turkey, again where there are large numbers of Syrian refugees, have historically had high rates of unemployment and so that can be a trigger if not managed well for host communities, when they see these Syrian refugees in their region.

And then moving on to the second part, the events of this last year with regards to the movements of refugees, asylum seekers, economic migrants to Turkey, I think as somebody mentioned it was at such a high intensity that we in Europe had not seen since World War II, and I think that that was very alarming for some European member states, particularly those in Central and Eastern Europe who were literally witnessing people on the move. And what was also interesting is that the western Balkan states who are not members of the European Union, also played a role almost as if Europe was contracting out their implementation of obstructing or stopping migrants.

I think that was also something that was very alarming, to see the securitization of migration by seeing more emphasis on a police oriented or security services oriented approach to the humanitarian crisis. And so as we saw last year the larger EU member states, France, Germany, Austria and even Sweden largely led by Chancellor Merkel, those who I think had the understanding that something needed to be done, they started to discuss ways to, one, stop the flow of migrants, but then also to try and curb irregular migration.

And the interesting part about this is that there are 28 member states and traditionally each member state has its own migration policy, so there hasn't been an EU-wide migration, comprehensive migration policy that all of the states adhere to and so those main EU members, who were trying to come up with some sort of migration scheme, they tried to do it at such a fast rate and it was a little bit haphazardly. That's looking back, of course. But there is a lot more text than I would prefer to have it in a presentation but just because some of the details of the plan are a little bit more technical, like the EU-Turkey joint action plan essentially had two main elements

with regards to Turkey and Greece. One, support Syrians who are under temporary protection as well as to provide support to the Turkish host communities, and the second is the strengthen cooperation to prevent irregular migration flow to the EU.

Third part I put here is addressed through causes which are actually leading to massive influx of Syrians. The European Union is also providing financial support to other front line states in the Middle East and they have already been implementing it through the world food program USAID, which is also a major financial contributor to the E-card, the cash assistance card, which EU is trying to launch in Turkey. The EU has already been experiencing doing that in the Middle East and other front line states for the last four years, which is very positive, and I think it is misunderstood here in the local media as if it's something that you just decide on your own and it doesn't have any experience or technical knowledge to actually implement.

And this is the first aspect of that joint action plan, which is called the Facility For Refugees In Turkey. It's essentially a mechanism to work more closely with international organizations as well as the Turkish Red Crescent, for instance, in Turkey. And this is where the funding for this new E-card is coming from, this stovepipe here. And for years 2016 to 2017 3 billion have been pledged to support this initiative, 2 billion directly from the EU's overall budget and then 1 billion was pledged by individual member states. And then this is the third aspect, which is the EU Turkey statement, which is with regards to the readmission and resettlement of migrants, and this is probably the most controversial aspect of the agreement.

Every one irregular migrant that arrives to Greece is to be sent back to Turkey, and then one Syrian refugee who has registered in Turkey and has gone the legal route will be then directly resettled to a European Union member state. Some of the criticism around this particular aspect of the agreement is that the 1951 Refugee Convention states, that a state who is a signatory cannot send back someone to a third country which is not deemed safe. And there is question whether Turkey is a third safe country or not and how do you actually devise the definition of a third safe country in today's world.

And the other criticism is that the European Union and the border states do not have the capacity to fully interview new migrants just because of the sheer size of the migrant population. I think up to right now as of September more than 300,000 individuals have crossed. That's both crossing over up to Italy and also to Greece. In the first nine months of 2016 deaths are 42% lower than in all of 2015, however it appears as if this year it is safer in the sense since the scheme was developed and it is slowly being implemented.

But if the rate of deaths each month continue at the rate that they have, we will actually see more deaths this year, so the data is a little bit skewed there. And the other question is with regards to EU principles, democratic principles of asylum to those who are the most vulnerable, the second-largest community that is crossing into Greece are Afghans, which it's very interesting right now. The European, there is a, there's a recommendation in Parliament to look at whether or not Afghan, a certain amount of Afghans can be resent back to Afghanistan to safe areas, safe parts of the country. And so it's concerning that the European Union, which for those of us who grew up in the Cold War and saw this great union established and a leader for democracy and human rights, and it's concerning that, that the European Union might sacrifice its democratic principles simply because of a humanitarian crisis.

And the emphasis on a geographical location, or the emphasis that a solution with Turkey would somehow better manage migration is almost unbelievable. As long as we don't invest in conflict prevention measures, as long as we don't invest in sustainable solutions to positive peace, we will continue to see people on the move. And, if you're more interested, I could also maybe talk a little bit about some of the activities that are happening here in Turkey that I would love to connect you all with. There's a network of civil society workers and academics who follow humanitarian issues and we have members from different UN agencies that are based here in Turkey in the region and we started out as a simple group a year ago basically because we thought it was fantastic.

So we started out informally last year because we kept meeting people that had a connection or had interest and wanted to do something and it's been a beautiful development in the sense that many of us go to each other's activities. In two weeks there's a human security conference in Istanbul and we are going to have an additional NGO panel of NGOs who are working on the ground. And so I think the more that we can find ways, like with Synergos, at different levels and the more that we can combine or encourage individuals from different professions to learn from one another and to provide support to each other to their larger efforts, then we will be able to find solutions that the states themselves unfortunately are lagging behind.