

**Joining efforts towards more help to Syrian refugees
and to containing the Syrian crisis**

Roudaina Al Khani
Director and Founder of Platforms for sustainable cities and regions
Talk at the occasion of the Voices from Syria event
Queen Mary University – 21st January 2017

Invited by Syria Solidarity Society, QM Amnesty International Society,
QM Unicef Society and QM Oxfam

Good evening every one!

My name is Roudaina Al Khani. I am Director and Founder of the practice Platforms in London.

I have the honour to talk to you today about the importance of joining efforts towards more help to Syrian refugees and to containing the Syrian crisis.

First, I would like to thank the organisers for giving me the honour to be with you this evening. I thank:

Syria Solidarity Society,
QM Amnesty International Society,
QM Unicef Society and
QM Oxfam

Talking about the suffering of Syrian Refugees and what the Syrian population has been through in the past years is very harsh emotionally. But it is a major chance to think together of how we can best help and why we - as world citizens believing in humanity - should continue to raise our voice, lobby and influence.

The organisers asked me to start my talk telling about my activities, how I arrived to London, and why I am here today

By profession, I am an architect, urban and regional planner having my education and life experiences from Syria, my childhood country, and from France, Denmark and the UK. For me, these worlds are very connected. I established Platforms in 2015 based on many years of experience in how to work for better cities and to enable communities, joining other colleagues from around the world who work from London - this great city that I see as a real platform for bringing people together and for learning, spreading knowledge, sharing values and co-creation.

I work to develop cities that are good for living and inclusive to all citizens across divides, with good public and social infrastructure and vibrant economies. I work for respecting the environment, the heritage and the resources, and believe in sharing, exchange and participatory approaches around the future of our communities. I am contributing at both local and global levels. As a member of the scientific committee and chair of one of the world influential conferences last November, I joined my voice to other colleagues to call for a collective action by coastal cities and regions to counteract the negative impacts of climate change.

I am honoured to bring a new knowledge and fresh eyes to the UK. At the same time, I am learning from the UK and putting back new improved knowledge and practice. I am a humanitarian who values living, sharing, inclusiveness and fairness as important components for our wellbeing and prosperity.

It is chocking with these eyes to see a whole generation of Syrian people being exposed to inhuman conditions that go beyond any cruelty and that do not belong to the values of our 21st century.

Before moving to the UK in 2013, I lived in Denmark with my family being Danish married. In 2009 I decided to return to Syria with my daughters to be close to my parents and to help my childhood country. I was invited by the Presidency. I believed that Syria with its people could develop into a very active country contributing to progress and achievements in the world. I met ordinary people with good will, with good education and aspirations everywhere in Syria, and I worked hard to improve conditions and institutions. But with the beginning of the crisis in summer 2011, I moved again out with great sorrow. There were great gaps in the country, and I understood fully why people demonstrated peacefully calling for better living, respect and democracy – I call it citizenship. But the regime's answers were brutal, insensible and un-clever. This was a very bad turning point.

The decision to move out was not easy. A huge load of emotions is involved when you leave your place...when your children say goodbye for an unlimited time to their school, cousins, grandmother and granddad. Personal losses are enormous, and pain is unbearable, especially thinking that the whole terrible situation could have been peacefully contained by the government, and avoided.

I am privileged to have the chance to move across borders, to be a person with strong personal resources who can re-start in a new community; many do not have this possibility. Still it is very difficult to rebuild network, to transfer your grades and degrees and to prove relevance. Therefore, I feel responsible, being given the chance today, to be the voice of those who have no voice and no chance to join, and to call you for supporting the resourceful refugees so they can support other refugees, and to be patient with the fragile refugees.

To remind you of the situation in Syria, which causes these continuous waves of refugees and to draw your attention to the difficulties facing Syrians

It is now coming clear to the eyes of everyone that the situation is terrible and even deteriorating. The crisis has killed more than 300,000 and more than 1.2 million are injured. According to the UN, 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance. Over 6 million people have been displaced inside Syria's border seeking refuge. Several millions of Syrians are now refugees.

The country has witnessed massive destruction of its cities and social and economic infrastructure and bonds among people. Almost 80 % of Syria's industry, much of its agriculture resources and many hospitals, schools, shops and heritage are damaged.

Hundreds of thousands are trapped in areas threatened by airstrikes, living continuous fear and helplessness under the threat of the government barrels or the violence. Many lost family members. Many saw several family members being massacred in front of them or pulled out from fallen roofs.

How can you maintain a normal life under these conditions? How can you calm yourself and your children? As a woman I ask myself; what do pregnant women do if time comes for them to deliver? What happens to people who need emergency medical help?

It is no wonder that these terrified people flee, and still the decision for many parents and families to flee is a very difficult one. For how to ensure safety of your children under the harsh journey towards the unknown? How to pull with you, your older family member who has broken hips or lost memory? Many people have been forced to displacement leaving behind everything, or maybe nothing at all rather than the memory of ruins of where the local baker was, the damaged school, the empty balcony they used to share with friends in summer evenings and the place where they last said goodbye to a dear family member. Leaving your home ruined behind you, with all your social, cultural and mental references, is not easy!

Millions of children are affected by the on-going situation. Many live in constant fear, have lost parents, have lost eyes, hands or legs or live a trauma, wetting their beds.

Instead of seeing more playgrounds built...
Instead of living in safe, warm and cosy homes...
Like other children in the world.

**Fleeing is not the end of Syrians' pain journey.
What about the quality of life in the camps where these refugees end?**

There are over a million Syrians currently registered in Lebanon, 2.8 million Syrians in Turkey, and around 656,000 in Jordan.

About 900,000 Syrians applied for asylum in Europe between 2011 and 2016, with Germany taking the most part. Europe, which considers itself in a crisis situation, has only taken less refugees than what Lebanon or Turkey took!

Moreover, there are increasing restrictions on the entry of Syrian Refugees by Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. In June 2016, Jordan closed its border with Syria for security concerns - they said. As a result, more than 75,000 Syrian refugees have spent more than six months stuck on the Syrian-Jordanian border.

Life in the Syrian Camps is not easy at all. The landscape of endless rows of tents blowing away under the harsh weather of the region, which goes below zero temperature in winter times and get very flooded wet, should only be a short-time condition. Now it is over 5 years ago! People have been placed on stand by...waiting for what?

How can you raise your children and your teenage boys and girls in such an environment and with such poverty where a school offer is a dream for many?
How can you continue to be husbands and wives, independent individuals and family fathers with dignity when dependent in your living on a survival box that comes with international help?

I wonder how parents can contain their own trauma? What families do when they have traumatised children? This is a greatly devastating condition that needs specialized help and stable living environments. It cannot only be contained by a music session that lasts for a second!

Dear friends, an entire generation of Syrians is threatened to be lost with over 2 million Syrian kids out of education. What do these kids have as alternatives?

Now when almost 6 years are gone, let us ask: What communities are developing there in the camps? What citizens? How can the international community and international organisations offer more help and a more effective solution to these hundreds of thousands of people, which without being their fault have become a pressure on their host communities? How to revert the situation to enable these refugee communities and help them back to decent living?

We constantly hear sad stories about refugees who had to cross the seas, of refugees being stuck between borders facing different difficulties, from the cold weather to humiliation. Family members are scattered around the world, from New Zealand to Finland, South America, Germany and Canada. Visa procedures for family visits are sometimes impossible, as if the word has created extra borders to condensate pain...

Syrian refugees need safe environments

I am very thankful to the countries that opened their hearts to receive the refugees. I am very thankful to the communities that have been willing to share school benches and medical help. At the same time, I am sure that many Syrian refugees, with their high education, hard-working skills and entrepreneurship capacity are already a great benefit to their hosting countries. They can be your doctors, nurses, technicians and bus drivers. Many refugees will be a good resource when they get the right help to stand on their feet, re-find themselves, connect to the new place and re-gain hope in living and in the future. PLEASE GIVE THEM HOPE!

To face this humanitarian crisis and its consequences, let us build on the on-going humanitarian efforts, let us build on your efforts

Let us acknowledge the hard work of international organisations and NGOs. Let us acknowledge, with great respect, the great number of people behind them from all nationalities, who offered help to civilian Syrians both **in the camps** in Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey, and **inside** Syria where people are harshly trapped under exhausting conditions with no food, no medical help and no safety. Let us thank those who offered help wherever social networks have been ruptured and families are left without supporters. We are greatly indebted to the great number of doctors, peace and human right defenders who have given a noble hand and risked their lives to save others.

The work of many charities whether in Syria, in the neighbouring regions or in the distant host countries is greatly important and has significantly eased the suffering of many people. Just to mention a few, I mention the joint efforts by Syrian and Finish charities to establish a school for 1000 children in North Syria and initiatives in Aleppo to support orphans who lost their families. Several NGOs work from the UK as Syria Relief, which supports 10.000 Syrians with medical and mental health help and give support to orphans. Unicef supplies Syrian children with clothing kits, thermal blankets, school heating – 1 million children got help in 2015. But this support is needed each winter, and there are 8 million children in danger and need of help, and need for a future. The Red Cross helps and UN helps, but there is a clear shortage of budgets. The overall UN pledges for 2016 fell more than 3 billion US dollars short of what is urgently and essentially needed in response to the harsh situation.

In view of the situation, it is so important to help Syrians get decent entry to their new communities. It is important to demonstrate to them that life and human rights matter, and

that these are also our values. It is important to help them into housing, language learning, education, job and social network, and to help them to thrive as positive members of their host communities.

I am aware this event is non-political. However, I want to insist on the importance to deal with the political cause of the Syria crisis and the involved politics under this crisis

It is hard to witness this harsh condition of Syrian people without talking about the political reasons behind this crisis.

It is hard not to talk about the political difficulties raised around hosting Syrian people who are fleeing death and oppression in search of hope...

I worry for hate debates that are being accentuated by extreme right wings in Europe, capitalizing on economic shortages and policy failures. We have just heard how president Trump is growing a hate debate against Syrian people, making decisions to close the borders, rejecting Syrian refugees even from meeting their close relatives who are American citizens. Fortunately, there are many humanitarians in the US who refuse this approach, with New York saying no to Trump's orders and opening its doors. They understand that the worsening of the Syrian situation is to a great extent the result of regional and international tensions that are much beyond Syria and the result of passive international leadership.

Politics have unfortunately a great influence on the Syrian condition. There are many barriers facing help to isolated Syrian people. Many of the initiatives are aborted because of political pressure, or because of directly targeting the new built hospitals and schools, which are supported by aid from different sources, including from everyday citizens worldwide. **WE HAVE TO PROTECT THE AID!**

Government forces, Russia and other militant groups have been obstructing the flow of aid around Aleppo, in Zabadani, Wadi Barada River and other areas in Syria. Even the Red Cross has been unable to access. Even hospitals in Aleppo that are supported by the respected medical relief organization Médecins Sans Frontières have been targeted by air strikes.

SO HOW TO ENSURE THAT THE MONEY OF DONORS IS REALLY GIVING FRUIT?

It is hard to witness this harsh condition of Syrian people without raising awareness about the puzzling international political situation around this terrible condition, which is much beyond the hands of Syrian people.

The situation appeals to reflect on how to join efforts to extend aid and support charity work. It appeals to reflect on the role of the United Nations Security Council and the fact that it is still dominated by Russian veto causing millions of Syrian people to suffer, a country to go in a disasteric condition and many countries in the region, in Europe and other places to live the consequences of this situation. It is, therefore, very important that the principal member states of the council should support the Syrian population towards stability and fair conditions.

Syrian people would prefer to return to their homes, schools and fields. They prefer to return to a safe and democratic Syria for all its population as a member of a prosperous international community. Helping Syria towards a democratic transition is the most appropriate path towards reducing the suffering of millions of people and their imperative

need to flee. It is much easier, more logical and more humanitarian than accommodating these people in new countries and foreign environments.

Therefore, it is important to have a multiple level strategy to contain the crisis:

Firstly, Helping the refugees and strengthening their networks in their host communities so they become good citizens with the necessary resource to return to Syria.

Secondly, it is important to instigate the necessary political cover to extend help to Syrians in need inside Syria.

Third, joining the efforts of international aid agencies and supporting charities who are clear in their hard work as well as smaller grassroots organisations that have closer ties to local people as they can be more effective at distributing donations and helping relief on the ground.

Finally, working towards a transition to a democratic state with a new spirit, with which it will be possible to start establishing peaceful and liveable conditions in Syria favourable to all to encourage people to return and sustain. In parallel, efforts should support civil society ngos. so people can help each other in the reconstruction process and become more resilient.

We must maintain hope, which I see in our gathering today. I thank you vividly for coming here and supporting this important cause, which is no longer only a Syrian question, but it is a principal question about our shared human values, about our world democracy and our capacity and shared responsibilities to help and protect the rights of millions of people, of millions of children, women and men.

Thank you!

Roudaina Al Khani