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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast:
Understanding the global refugee crisis

Friday, March 3, 2017

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria, a podcast about ideas and the experts who have them. I'm Fred Dews. The United Nations Refugee Agency reports that the number of displaced people worldwide exceeds 60 million, including over 20 million refugees from their home countries. This is the highest number since World War II. Over the past few years we've seen wrenching images of men, women, and children living in vast tent cities and crossing dangerous seas in overburdened vessels, trying to find safety and new lives for their families. Immigration and refugee issues have affected politics in the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East as nations and the international community debate how to meet these challenges

To offer some expert insight into the current state of the refugee situation, and help us understand more about the process by which a refugee might gain entry into the United States, I'm delighted to be joined in the studio today by Jessica Brandt. She is an associate fellow in Foreign Policy and she is my frequent collaborator on the Brookings Essay long form project.

Stay tuned in this episode for a new installment of Wessel's Economic Update, plus another edition of Ask an Expert, where listeners send in questions and I get an expert to answer them. This week features a student from Notre Dame asking about the South China Sea. It's the sixth week of the Trump administration's first 100 days. To get the latest analysis and commentary from Brookings experts, visit the Brookings Now blog at brookings.edu/brookingsnow.

And finally, news and events are coming at us quickly these days, so we launched the new 5 on 45 podcast that offers rapid analysis from Brookings experts on what the Trump administration and Congress are doing. Visit brookings.edu/5on45 to

learn more and subscribe. And now, on with the interview. Jessica, welcome to the Brookings Cafeteria.

BRANDT: Thanks so much for having me, Fred. I'm glad to be with you.

DEWS: We are now collaborating on a different project. I'm very excited about it.

We've worked for a long time together on the Brookings Essay, and here we are in the podcasting booth.

BRANDT: It's great.

DEWS: So we're talking about the global refugee crisis. I gave some broad statistics on the global refugee crisis. Can you talk about the state of the global refugee crisis today?

BRANDT: Sure. Well, as you've said, it's a crisis that's unlike anything we've seen in the post-WWII era. A series of conflicts, including in Syria, have left more than 60 million people without safe homes. UNHCR released a report in the middle of last year with several important findings. On average, 24 people were forced to flee each minute in 2015. One in every 113 globally is either an asylum-seeker, an IDP, or a refugee. And this was the first time in the organization's history that that threshold of 60 million had been crossed.

It's important to know that not all of these folks are refugees. Many of them are internally displaced. UNHCR's latest statistics suggest that there are approximately 21.5 million refugees in the world. I think it's also important that we tend to think of the crisis as the Syrian refugee crisis, and the conflict there really is the largest single driver of displacement right now, but Syrians are only about a third of the world's total refugees.

Three countries combined produce half the world's refugees: Syria at 4.9 million,

Afghanistan at 2.7 million, and Somalia at 1.1 million, and I think this paints a broader picture, which suggests that as conflicts are lasting longer in places like Afghanistan and Somalia, and new conflicts are occurring in places in Syria, you know, the crisis is continuing to compound.

DEWS: You know, a few years ago in the summer of 2015 especially, we started seeing news reports of a lot of refugees trying to cross from North Africa into Southern Europe, and unfortunately that was about the first time that a lot of people, especially in the West, especially in America, started paying attention to the refugee crisis that had been ongoing. The fact is that most refugees from the Syrian conflict – perhaps elsewhere, but if we look at the Syrian conflict – are still in the Middle East, and they're in places in "frontline states." Can you talk about what the frontline states are and what the refugee situation looks like there?

BRANDT: Yeah, frontline states are states in Syria's neighborhood, places like Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey, and they are definitely feeling the spillover effects of the violence there. Many of them are swamped. You know, Turkey is currently hosting 2.5 million Syrians, that's the most of any country – I think it's actually a little bit more than that now. Lebanon has taken in more than a million Syrians, and considering that in 2013 its population was just 4.5 million, that's, you know, growth in population by nearly a quarter. And, you know, Jordan, which has a population of just more than 6 million people now houses more than 600,000 Syrians. And in those places, refugee camps are overcrowded, and you know, as is evident, providing shelter, medical care, not to mention education, etc., these things take resources and we're talking about countries that are not themselves wealthy. You know, ideally, international aid agencies would be

picking up the slack here, but there are chronic funding gaps. I just looked at some statistic that suggests that last year, UNHCR came up almost $2 billion short of its funding requirement for the Syria response plan. It was about 59% funded of the total $4.5 billion that was asked for.

DEWS: And in terms of this concept of resettlement – resettlement being, I think, refugees returning to their homeland and living there – very few refugees, as I understand, actually are ever resettled in their place of origin. Is that right?

BRANDT: So actually, this idea that less than 1% of the world's refugees are resettled in develop countries –

DEWS: Ok, like the United States, Canada, Western Europe –

BRANDT: Like the United States, exactly. Exactly. I think we had chatted a little bit about this before, and you were wondering why it's important that developed countries like the U.S. keep accepting refugees if we're potentially barely making a dent in the problem. But I would argue that, to the lives of the people that we are bringing here, it's more than a dent. But also, you know, refugees who are resettled in developed countries are those who are most vulnerable. So we're talking about female-headed households, victims of torture or violence, religious minorities, LGBT people, people with special medical needs that can't be accommodated in either their home country or the place that they first saw refuge. So these are people that, you know, are not expected to be able to integrate in their country of first asylum or go home.

DEWS: So let's talk about the relationship of the refugee crisis to politics in many European countries and in the United States – and again, keeping in mind it's a small

percentage of refugees that are trying to go into Europe, or even smaller trying to come into the U.S. But there have been some pretty significant impacts on politics.

BRANDT: Yeah, I would argue that it really loomed large over the past year, you know, in particular. You know, during the 2016 presidential campaign, President Trump said that the United States risks being flooded by refugees. He called them a Trojan horse, he said that our system was extremely open, and he, you know, vowed to curb the resettlement of Syrian refugees to the United States which – he's now following through on his promises. You know, his travel ban, which was announced just a few weeks ago, was cheered among leaders on Europe's far right. Geert Wilders, who's the far-right Party for Freedom in the Netherlands, who has been put on trial on more than one occasion for hate speech against Muslims and immigrants, celebrated the measure. So did far-right politicians in Germany. And it remains to be seen what will happen there. You know, there will be a series of election in Europe in the year ahead, and again, you know, this issue's really looming large.

DEWS: So as we're taping this, the Trump administration's refugee and immigration ban has been put on hold, but there could be a new one issued this week before this podcast even airs on Friday. But no matter what the particulars of that, you've written about the previous ban, the one that's hold, that there's an issue that's kind of beyond the seven countries that we've heard about on the immigration side, but on the refugee side there's a significant issue there too.

BRANDT: Yeah. I think there's reason to believe that we'll be seeing a new executive order in the coming days, and that that executive order will probably cut back on its most sort of discriminatory provisions, like ones that preference minority religions

– and we've heard sort of chatter that the provision that indefinitely halts resettlement of Syrian refugees probably will not be in the new ban. But I think what's gotten a lot less attention is a provision that I think almost certainly will be in the new ban, and that's a steep, across-the-board cut in the number of refugee admissions that the United States will allow next year. So the executive order as it's written now slashes that number by more than half, from 110,000 – that was the target set by the Obama administration for FY17 – down to 50,000. And then another provision that's also not gotten a lot of attention is that, as written now, the order increases the power that state and local officials have over resettlement. And as I think we all know, that could really politicize what's already been a rather contentious process. In 2015, 31 governors said that Syrian refugees were not welcome to resettle in their states, and Mike Pence, who was then the governor of Indiana, tried to block the [dispersal] of federal funds for that purpose. What's important here is that the courts blocked him, saying that the authority to sort of set foreign policy, immigration policy, etc. lies with the executive, but governors wouldn't have to contradict the executive in this sort of case to put the brakes on welcoming refugees, and it seems that the new law, at least as written, would give them more power to do it.

[MUSIC]

DEWS: Let's take a break here for Wessel's Economic Update.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel, and this is my economic update. Here in Washington, we're hearing and talking a lot about the federal budget, the Affordable Care Act, business tax reform, tax cuts, infrastructure spending, and the defense budget, all of which are important to future economic growth. But all those will take

legislation, and in case you haven't noticed, Congress and the word "quick" rarely occur in the same sentence. So you might wonder, what effect are taxes, spending, and government benefits having on the economy right now?

Well, the Hutchins Center here at Brookings has an answer. We call it our Fiscal Impact Measure. It tracks the contributions of taxes and spending to quarterly growth and GDP, not only at the federal level but at state and local levels too. After all, 85% of the 22 million government workers in the U.S. work for state and local governments, and state and local governments raise and spend more than $3 trillion a year, nearly as much as Washington does. The Fiscal Impact Measure – we call it the FIM – was developed by my Hutchins Center colleague, Louise Sheiner. It resembles a measure on the Federal Reserve's internal dashboard. But the Fed doesn't share theirs with the public. You can find ours on the Hutchins Center website, www.brookings.edu/hutchinscenter.

Here's what you'll see. The impact of fiscal policy on economic growth ebbs and flows. During the recession of the 2000s and the subsequent recovery, tax cuts and spending increases added 1.5% or more to the annual rate of GDP growth for a few years. Then, for a few years, government was a drag on GDP growth, but the private economy was so strong that didn't much matter until the Great Recession hit. The FIM tracks the 2009 fiscal stimulus that offset some of the collapse in private demand and declines in state and local spending during Obama's first term, and the untimely belt-tightening from Washington – the sequester, we call it here – that reduced GDP growth in Obama's second term. Look at it this way. From 2011 through 2014, fiscal policy

subtracted more than 1% from GDP growth, a big number in an economy that was struggling to grow at better than a 2% annual rate.

So where are we now? Well, for the past couple of years, local, state, and federal fiscal policy have neither added nor subtracted much on net from GDP growth. In the fourth quarter of 2016, for instance, the overall U.S. economy grew at a 1.9% annual rate. Of that, local, state, and federal fiscal policy contributed just 0.08%. Now, we'll be updated the FIM monthly, so if President Trump and Congress do agree on big changes on the Affordable Care Act or taxes or spending, you'll be able to see the impact on GDP just as Janet Yellen at the Fed does.

[MUSIC]

DEWS: I do want to get to some of your ideas for policy solutions to try to address the refugee issue, but first I want to dive a little bit more deeply into the process. You know, President Trump said they're flooding across the border and others have said they're not being checked, but my understanding is that there's a pretty significant vetting process that already occurs for refugees trying to enter the United States, at least. Can you talk about what that refugee process looks like?

BRANDT: Yeah. So, for refugees coming to the United States, the process really begins when a refugee gets referred from UNHCR. So UNHCR is the body that registers asylum-seekers and provides assistance until those asylum-seekers can be resettled, or more likely until they can return to their home country. And that registration process includes a number of factors: in-depth interviews, reference checks, things like iris scans and other forms of biometric screening. Then, among those who pass that stage, those background checks, a smaller number get referred for resettlement in third

countries – developed countries, countries like the United States – and as we talked about, those are typically the folks that are most vulnerable. And then among that pool, our government performs its own intensive screening. Eight U.S. federal government agencies are involved. There are six different security databases, five separate background checks, four biometric security checks, three separate in-person interviews, two interagency security checks, all to admit one refugee. And that process can take up to two years. And then once those screenings have been performed, the State Department assigns the case to one of nine voluntary agencies.

DEWS: That's quite an extensive process. Then those voluntary agencies will try to place the refugees somewhere in the United States. Are there any states that tend to get more refugees resettled there than others?

BRANDT: California's taken in the highest number. I think that's followed by Texas, Michigan, and Washington, although those are not necessarily just for Syrian refugees but for the number of refugees total that were accepted in FY16.

DEWS: So when we think about the likely changes that the Trump administration is going to put into effect on the refugee question, on the number of refugees that are allowed into the U.S., as you said, what effect does that have on the overall international refugee system?

BRANDT: Sure. Beth Ferris has written compellingly on this for Brookings on our blogs, but basically a core bargain of the international refugee system is the idea of burden-sharing. You know, the goal of that system is of course to ensure that the needs of the most vulnerable are met, but also that large scale migration doesn't, you know, come to undermine international security. And I think that if the United States doesn't

shoulder its fair share, its share of the burden – which, evidence suggests, it might not under this administration's new policies – I think that could have a real race-to-the-bottom effect. And in general, I think curbing the program sends a really powerful signal, you know, to allies in Europe. They let in more than a million migrants in 2015 and there's, you know, as we said, resurgent anti-immigrant populism on the rise there.

I think it sends a signal to anti-immigrant populists who argue that, you know, refugee admissions are detrimental to national security, even when evidence suggests that they're not. It sends a message to Syria's neighbors, who, as we've spoken about, are struggling to cope with the spillover effects of the civil war there. And to extremists, who are trying to paint the United States as unwelcoming.

DEWS: I think that's a really great point, about the connection between not resettling refugees and the national security interest. I think we see it in terms – in the political rhetoric – as a national security issue in the sense that you're letting in refugees and maybe they'll commit crimes and terrorism. But there's another way to look at it, as not admitting refugees, not dealing with the refugee crisis, is also a national security interest.

BRANDT: Yeah. I would argue that the picture's much broader, as in, you know, we don't want to weaken the international refugee system, we don't want to weaken our relationship with Europe at a moment that we need it. Europe's been a, you know, a very reliable security partner for dealing with terrorism and Russia. These are important issues. I don't think we want to allow conditions in Syria's neighborhood to deteriorate. We, you know, don't want states that are on the frontlines of the crisis to become fragile, or more fragile. You know, and again, I think inflammatory policies are, you know, are

not in our interest. So, failing to deal with the crisis if it, you know, weakens an alliance and is driving instability and is fueling anti-Americanism, what does – you know, I would argue that is a national security issue, just not in the way it's been framed.

DEWS: Well, let me ask you a question to kind of follow up on this. It's a very contentious issue. Do you think Americans should worry about refugees committing crime and engaging in terrorist activities?

BRANDT: Refugees are intensely vetted for security threats before they're resettled in the United States. It's the pathway in which they would receive the most scrutiny before entry. You know, there was a study last year that found that the odds of being murdered in a terror attack caused by a refugee is 1 in 3.64 billion per year. They were looking at 40 years of data, going back to the 70s. Yeah, not a single refugee, Syrian or otherwise, has been implicated in a terror attack since the Refugee Act of 1980, which set up the sort of systematic procedures for accepting refugees, and yeah. Since 9/11 we've resettled 860,000 refugees, approximately, and of those, only three individuals have been convicted on terrorism-related charges, none of their plots were successful, and I believe two of the three if not all three were aimed outside the United States.

DEWS: Well let's turn our attention, Jessica, to some kind of solutions, the kinds of things that organizations and other entities ought to be doing. First of all, we think of refugees kind of as an issue that national-level governments have to deal with, but it's not just a problem for the federal government, the national-level government, right?

BRANDT: Yeah, I think that's right. We tend to think about the crisis in terms of its cross-border and global dimensions, you know, but at the end of the day refugees

settle in real places. And so urban planners and school boards and local companies are – you know, they all have a role to play in accommodating new arrivals. Local governments are essentially responsible for providing housing, education, jobs; and, you know, doing that I think requires partnership with nonprofit community organizations that have deep ties in these neighborhoods, as well as a private sector because the private sector has financial and other resources. In Sweden, which is actually the country in Europe which I believe has taken in more refugees per capita than any other, the government offers a stipend to new employers who will hire refugees, and LinkedIn has been using its platform to help new arrivals to connect with jobs and internships. I think more of that kind of collaboration is really a promising path.

DEWS: You know, our colleague Bruce Katz from the Centennial Scholar Initiative has done a lot of research and writing on the role of cities in Europe and the United States on dealing with refugees.

BRANDT: He's done some great work on this, and I believe he has a blog on cities and refugees, which I recommend to you.

DEWS: Another colleague with whom you've worked very extensively and who's been on this podcast many times is Bobby McKenzie. He was on the program a few times last year to talk about the refugee crisis, he had a Syrian refugee on this program, it was very moving. He had Leon Wieseltier and he discussed refugee issues. And you and Bobby describe some solutions to the problem in a chapter for the recent *Brookings Big Ideas for America* volume that's available on our website. Can you talk about some of the ideas that you and Bobby came up with?

BRANDT: Yeah, certainly. You know, I think that knowing how few refugees will eventually be resettled in places like the United States and how long it may take before Syria is a safe place for people to return to, given that the violence there is still ongoing, I think it's really important that we focus on what's happening in those frontline states, and especially on education and labor markets. So I think, you know, it's critical that we increase access to education for refugee children in frontline states. We don't want to have a lost generation. I think, you know, the returns on investing in Syrian refugee children are enormous and long-lasting. And, you know, the classrooms are sort of the environment where they can learn from one another, and they can develop resilience, they can build conflict resolution skills, you know. But if they can't attend school, how can we expect them to integrate into their host societies? What will that mean for the country's economy in the future? So, I think it's really important.

You know, and how can we do that? I think we have to think carefully about the language of instruction. You know, I think to its credit, Turkey has lifted legal barriers for Syrian refugees to access education, but language is still an obstacle. You know, many Syrian refugee children are – they're primarily Arabic-speaking, and most of the instructors, you know, don't have the ability to teach Turkish as a second language, so getting them special training and getting some resources behind that effort would be really important.

And then I think it's also important to expand access to employment opportunities in frontline states. It's definitely a politically sensitive matter. I think one of the ways we can sort of advance that goal is to partner with the private sector. I think there are, you know, all kinds of incentives that could encourage companies to make commitments

that would expand labor market integration, things like ensuring refugees have access to financial services even if they don't have a place of permanent residence, enabling refugees to have access to seed funding to start new businesses. They may need technical assistance to do so. And then also, companies could make a proactive effort to procure goods and services from businesses that hire refugees. Jordan has a refugee response plan, and – but it needs more financial support. It's really a victim of one of those funding gaps. And then I think we can encourage Turkey to further open up its labor market. You know, last year it basically passed legislation that allowed Syrian refugees who've been in the country for at least six months to apply for work permits in the place where they first registered. It's important, but I think that it, you know, it may not go far enough, that it doesn't automatically give refugees a path out of the black market because it requires an employer to give his or her employee a work contract before the employee can apply for a permit. So if employers are benefitting from a sort of black-market arrangement, it seems unlikely that they're going to want to offer these contracts. So I think those are a couple of things we can do to sort of advance the situation in frontline states on the labor market front. And then I think in general, collaboration between government and civil society organizations is really important. So I hope that that continues.

DEWS: Jessica, can we look forward to hearing more from you on refugee issues in the coming weeks and months?

BRANDT: Yes, thank you.

DEWS: All right, great. So we will look for that on the Brookings website. I want to thank you for your time and insight today, Jessica.

BRANDT: Thank you very much for having me.

[MUSIC]

DEWS: I have a new question for an expert from a listener, Sarah, a student at the University of Notre Dame. Thanks for sending in your question, Sarah. I'll be sending you a Brookings coffee mug.

[MUSIC]

SARAH: Hello, Brookings Cafeteria podcast! My name is Sarah and I'm a student at the University of Notre Dame, and my question to an expert would be regarding the U.S. interests in the South China Sea and how that could potentially affect the U.S.-China relationship given the fact that China has been building arms and military power over the past couple of years, and has heightened its presence in that area, in regards to several neighboring countries.

KUOK: Hello, Sarah. My name is Lynn Kuok and I am a nonresident fellow at the Brookings Institution. Thank you so much for your question. It's an important one, and I'm glad that students like you are thinking about this issue.

So first, what are U.S. interests in the South China Sea? Why, as a non-claimant, is the United States interested in the dispute at all? We can think about the dispute at two levels. On one level, the quarrel is over competing territorial and maritime claims. At this level, there are six relevant actors, namely China, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Brunei. These actors claim all or some of the features in the South China Sea. On another level, the dispute concerns all members of the international community. It's about their rights under international law, particularly the United Nations

Convention on the Law of the Sea, or UNCLOS. These rights include freedom of navigation and overflight, as well of the peaceful resolution of disputes. Beijing would have everyone focus on the first level of the dispute to the exclusion of the second. It insists the dispute over the South China Sea should be resolved bilaterally between claimants, and without the involvement of actors like the United States or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a regional grouping that has expressed deep concern over the situation but nonetheless remains divided over the South China Sea. China's narrative sometimes succeeds in holding sway even in the United States and in smaller countries in the region where many fear China's growing political, economic, and military clout. In fact, during various interviews, then-presidential candidate Trump, when asked about the South China Sea, said that it was very far away and that other countries are affected far greater. However, I think it's important to remember that a rules-based international order is in everyone's interests, and that when it's undermined in one part of the world, it's undermined everywhere.

Further, for the United States, the dispute and how it plays out sets the tone in terms of its engagement for its wider relationship with China. So how does U.S. interest in a rules-based order affect U.S.-China ties? The first point to note is that defending this interest has nothing to do with being anti-China, though Beijing often suggests that this animates decision-making in the South China Sea. For instance, some countries in the region, notably Singapore, have drawn flak from Beijing for maintaining a principled position on this issue. Good relations with Beijing is important for many countries, not least the United States, with whom bilateral cooperation spans a range of global opportunities and challenges. Yet, it's also undeniable that the defense of a rules-based

international order sometimes brings the United States and other countries into tension with China. As you point out, Sarah, China has become more assertive in the South China Sea. It's reportedly militarizing bases and has sought to warn off ships and plans, asserting navigation or overflight rights. In this respect, regular assertions of maritime rights vested under international law are critical. They'll help to limit the extent of control China projects from the features it occupies, and discourage it from occupying new ones. Assertions would not be a militarization of the region, nor use of force, as Beijing claims. Indeed, the failure to exercise these rights risks a loss in law and in practice. The possibility of clashes underscores the urgency of concluding a binding code of conduct in the South China Sea, which would help to limit activities that might increase tensions. Expanding agreements to prevent incidents at sea and in the air in the South China Sea must also be pursued as an urgent priority.

Now, Sarah, you've asked about how the dispute impacts the broader U.S.-China relationship, but we mustn't forget that the state of relations also has implications for the South China Sea. A relationship that's fraught with tensions could heighten perceptions of threat in the region. It could also increase dangerous nationalist sentiment, which could in turn limit acceptable foreign policy options and put countries on a dangerous warpath. So what the United States and China really want to be working towards is a robust relationship that will withstand stresses.

So just to briefly sum up, the United States and the international community have important interests in the South China Sea. Defending these interests may well lead to increased tensions in the short term. However, in the longer term, preserving and strengthening a rules-based international order keeps everyone safer. When we think

about how the United States and other countries, including China, should be positioning themselves in respect to the South China Sea, we should really be thinking about the kind of world we want to live in. Is it a world where right or might governs relations between states? I think the answer is an obvious one.

Thank you, Sarah, for this opportunity to share my thoughts on this issue. I hope they've helped.

[MUSIC]

DEWS: Thanks, Lynn, for providing your answer all the way from Singapore. We appreciate it. If you want to ask an expert a question, send an e-mail to me at bcp@brookings.edu. If you attach an audio file, I'll play it on the air.

And that does it for this edition of the Brookings Cafeteria, brought to you by the Brookings Podcast Network. Follow us on Twitter @policypodcasts. My thanks to audio engineer and producer Gaston Reboredo, with assistance from Mark Hoelscher. Vanessa Sauter is the producer, Bill Finan does the book interviews, and our intern is Kelly Russo. Design and web support comes from Jessica Pavone, Eric Abalahin, and Rebecca Viser; and thanks to David Nassar and Richard Fawal for their support. You can subscribe to the Brookings Cafeteria on iTunes and listen to it in all the usual places. Visit us online at brookings.edu. Until next time, I'm Fred Dews.