



# From 19<sup>th</sup> Century to Syrian Civil War: South America as a Syrian Migration Destination and the Case of Brazil

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## Abstract

Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, many South American countries have declared open door policies for the Syrians seeking refuge. Although the number of people who have reached South America is quite low, the attitude of South American countries has gained special international attention due to political, social and historical reasons. In this respect, Brazil has a special status as the main destination of immigration from the Levant to South America since the 19th century. Brazil is already the home of a large Syrian diaspora. The country has accepted 2,298 Syrian refugees since the beginning of the civil war according to the official data and hosts more Syrians whose application process is ongoing. Today Brazil is the main receiver of the Syrian refugees in South America. This paper discusses the underlying reasons of recent open door policy of South American states, the current situation of Syrian refugees in the region and the problems encountered at the level of policy-making and policy implementation phases with a special emphasis on the developments in Brazil.

**Keywords:** Syria, Brazil, South America, Migration, Refugee, Asylum

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This article is a revised and extended version of the paper "From 19<sup>th</sup> Century to Syrian Civil War: South America as a Syrian Migration Destination and the Case of Brazil" presented at the 5th STT-MENA Conference on "Migration and Socio-Cultural Change", December 12-13, 2016, Sakarya, Turkey.



# 19. Yüzyıldan Suriye İç Savaşına: Suriyeliler için Göç Destinasyonu Olarak Güney Amerika ve Brezilya Örneği

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## Öz

Suriye'deki iç savaşın başladığı 2011 yılından bu yana pek çok Güney Amerika ülkesi, iltica etmek isteyen Suriyelilere açık kapı politikası uygulayacaklarını ilan etmişlerdir. Her ne kadar Güney Amerika'ya ulaşabilen kişi sayısı az olsa da Güney Amerika ülkelerinin bu tutumu siyasal, sosyal ve tarihsel nedenlerle uluslararası alanda dikkat çekmiştir. Bu açıdan Doğu Akdeniz'den Güney Amerika'ya 19. yüzyılda yaşanan göç hareketinin ana destinasyonu olan Brezilya, özel bir konuma sahiptir. Brezilya, halihazırda sayıları dört milyona ulaşan kalabalık bir Suriyeli diaspora nüfusuna ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Ülke, iç savaşın başlangıcından bu yana resmi verilere göre 2,298 Suriye vatandaşına iltica hakkı tanımıştır ve başvuru işlemleri süren daha fazla sayıdaki Suriyeliye ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Günümüzde Brezilya, Güney Amerika'da en fazla sayıda Suriyeli mülteciye ev sahipliği yapan ülkedir. Bu çalışma, Güney Amerika ülkelerinin yakın geçmişte uygulamaya başladıkları açık kapı politikasının ortaya çıkışındaki nedenleri, bölgedeki Suriyeli mültecilerin hali hazırdaki durumunu ve politika yapımı düzeyinde ve mültecilere yönelik politikaların uygulaması sürecinde karşılaşılan zorlukları Brezilya'daki gelişmelere özel atıfla incelemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Suriye, Brezilya, Güney Amerika, Göç, Mülteci, Sığınma

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## **1. Introduction**

Today, the displaced people living all around the world come from different countries of Asia and Africa but due to the ongoing civil war and the extensive media covering, attention is mainly focused on Syrian refugees.<sup>1</sup> According to the latest data provided by the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the number of Syrian asylum seekers registered by the institution has exceeded 5 million people by April 2017.<sup>2</sup> Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, many South American countries have declared open door policies for the refugees from Syria. These countries are Brazil, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, Uruguay, and Argentina. Although the total number of Syrian refugees scattered across South America is trivial when compared to the millions living in the neighbors of Syria and thousands in Europe, the open-door policy of South American countries gained special international attention due to political, social and historical reasons. The tradition of Arab immigration to South America, multi-ethnic and multi-racial population compositions of the South American countries and the sympathy of the South American left to the Assad regime in Syria are the underlying reasons for the current policies of the South American countries on the Syrian issue.

Brazil, as the fifth largest country in the world comprising almost the half of the territory and population of South America, was also the main destination of immigration from the Levant to South America during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. And today, Brazil is the main receiver of the Syrian refugees in South America, having accepted more Syrian refugees than the total number residing in other South American countries. Within this framework, this paper aims to briefly explain the history of Syrian migration to South America since 19<sup>th</sup> century and discuss the underlying reasons of recent open door policy of South American states, current situation of Syrian refugees in the region and the problems encountered at the level of policy-making and implementation phases with a special emphasis on the situation in Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup> Lily Ballofet, "Latin America & the Arab World: One Hundred Years of Migration.", Retrieved November 8, 2016, <https://lebanesestudies.news.chass.ncsu.edu/2015/09/30/latin-america-the-arab-world-one-hundred-years-of-migration/>

<sup>2</sup> "Registered Syrian Refugees", UNHCR. (2017a), Retrieved April 28, 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

## 2. Immigration from the Levant to South America

Arab immigration from the Levant, the then territory of the Ottoman Empire to the Americas started in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued at a considerable pace until the 1930s. It is estimated that during this period, around 250-300.000 people emigrated from Levant, mainly from what is today Lebanon and Syria to South America. Main receiver countries in South America were Argentina and Brazil.<sup>3</sup> Arab migrants, the majority of whom were Christian Arabs coming from Syria and Lebanon, started to arrive Brazil, just as many other countries in the Americas, during the 1880s alongside Armenian and Jewish migrants.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the Arab descendants living in Brazil prefer to call themselves as Syrian or Lebanese due to their country of origin or as Arabs due to their ethnicity,<sup>5</sup> while the word “Turco” seems to be outdated for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Despite the lack of data, Brazil officially claims that the country currently hosts millions of Arab descendants with the majority of seven to ten million Lebanese descendants.<sup>6</sup> Main causes of immigration that continued until the World War I and lost its speed since then, were political, religious and economic problems. In the case of Brazil, which is today the home of more Lebanese people than the total population of Lebanon and millions of Syrian descendants, the first generation of migrants faced many difficulties just as the other migrants from various nations of the world did. Most of the Syrian and Lebanese migrants came to Brazil with little financial resources and started work as peddlers. In the following decades, many of them succeeded as businessmen and established family companies. Beginning from the second generation, due to the wealth gained, Arab diaspora in Brazil started to provide better educational

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<sup>3</sup> Ballofet, “Latin America & the Arab World,”.

<sup>4</sup> Ignacio Klich & Jeffrey Lesser, “Introduction: “Turco” Immigrants in Latin America”, *The Americas*, (1996), vol. 53, no:1, p.1-14. James G. Thomas, Jr., “Mississippi Mahjar: Lebanese Immigration to the Mississippi Delta”, *Southern Cultures*, (2013), vol.19, no:4, p.35-54.

<sup>5</sup> John Tofik Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian–Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press 2007, p.12. Jeffrey Lesser, “Middle East Migration to Brazil: Constructing Latin Levant Ethnicity”, *Travessia – Revista de Literatura*, (1999), vol. 39, p.57-72.

<sup>6</sup> “República Libanesa”, MRE. (2016b), Retrieved November 14, 2016, [http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=5373&Itemid=478&cod\\_pais=LBN&tipo=ficha\\_pais](http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=5373&Itemid=478&cod_pais=LBN&tipo=ficha_pais)

opportunities for their children and a wave of educated Arab descendants started to occupy respected positions in the society as physicians, lawyers, and politicians.<sup>7</sup> Many descendants of the Arab immigrants in other South American countries also enjoy a respected economic and social status. Many of them served as presidents of Argentina, Ecuador, El Salvador, Honduras, and Colombia.<sup>8</sup> Just to give an idea, today, besides the position of the Lebanese descendant Temer as the President of the country, 10% of the members of the Brazilian Congress is claimed to be descendants of the Arab migrants.<sup>9</sup> Immigration from Syria and Lebanon alongside Palestine, Iran and Egypt to Brazil is still ongoing in relatively smaller numbers due to ongoing political problems and conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. South America and the Syrian Civil War**

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011, South American countries preferred to stay either neutral or to adopt a pro-Assad policy. In both occasions, leaders of the South American countries called for non-interventionist policies. This non-interventionist stance based on a strong pre-conditioned view on the US interventionism in the Middle East put them out of the discussion table or caused them to be labeled as supporters of the Assad regime. On the other hand, their choice of handling the Syrian refugee problem brought these countries to the center of attention at the international fora. In opposition to the situation in Europe and in the US where different countries and politicians have contrasting views on the refugee flow from Syria, leaders of the South American countries with governments from different political views, took almost the same welcoming stance for the Syrians. What makes the situation more interesting is that they have not positively or negatively discriminated the refugees according

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<sup>7</sup> Karam, *Another Arabesque: Syrian–Lebanese Ethnicity in Neoliberal Brazil*, p.12

<sup>8</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, “The enduring success of Latin American politicians of Arab origin”, *Washington Post*, Retrieved November 11, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/16/the-enduring-success-of-latin-american-politicians-of-arab-origin/>.

<sup>9</sup> “From Syria to Brazil: Following a century-old route to a new life”, Retrieved November 19, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/brazil-syrians-welcome-here-1860804555>, 16.062016

<sup>10</sup> Roberto Rodolfo Georg Uebel, “International Migrations to Brazil in the 21st Century: Profile, Outlook and Trends”, *Population Review*, (2017), vol.56, no: 1, p.90.

to any ethnic or religious criteria and decided to open the borders despite their own internal economic, social and security problems.

The political stance of the South American countries towards the Assad regime in Syria is diversified. Not only Venezuela but also other members of the ALBA project have reiterated their support to the Assad government in Syria, which holds observer status in ALBA, on different occasions.<sup>11</sup> For example in the official announcement on the decision of the Venezuelan government to admit Syrian refugees, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro reiterated his country's support to the President of Syria, Bashar al-Assad whom according to Maduro is "the only authorized leader in Syria".<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Brazil has refrained from giving political support to the Assad regime while insisting that there is "no military solution to the Syrian conflict".<sup>13</sup> Even in 2011, at the very beginning of the conflict, Brazil in coordination with the two other IBSA states namely India and South Africa which were interim members of the UN Security Council at the time, adopted a non-interventionist stance on the conflict in Syria and Brazil reiterated this view on many different occasions.<sup>14</sup>

The non-interventionist approach of Brazil is unanimously shared by other South American countries<sup>15</sup> and the two leading regional organizations of South America, UNASUR, and MERCOSUR, share the same approach. Due to the efforts of Brazil, the ASPA initiative bringing Arab League and UNASUR member South American countries together within the framework of UNASUR to promote bi-regional economic and political

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<sup>11</sup> "ALBA joins efforts to halt aggression against Syria", Retrieved October 11, 2016, [http://guyana.embajada.gob.ve/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=179%3Aalba-realizara-esfuerzos-para-detener-agresion-contra-el-pueblo-de-siria&catid=3%3Anoticias-de-venezuela-en-el-mundo&Itemid=19&lang=en](http://guyana.embajada.gob.ve/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=179%3Aalba-realizara-esfuerzos-para-detener-agresion-contra-el-pueblo-de-siria&catid=3%3Anoticias-de-venezuela-en-el-mundo&Itemid=19&lang=en)

<sup>12</sup> Nicolás Maduro, "Venezuela ofreció refugio a 20.000 sirios", Retrieved September 11, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22cA2amrvR4>

<sup>13</sup> "Participação do Brasil na Conferência Internacional sobre a Síria (Genebra II) - Montreux, Suíça", 22 de janeiro, MRE. (February 21, 2014a), Nota 12.

<sup>14</sup> Adriana Erthal Abdenur and Monique Sochaczewski, "Brazil in the field of humanitarian aid: mapping out its role in the Syrian conflict" in *Humanitarian Crises, Cooperation and the Role of Brazil*, Rio de Janeiro: Médicos Sem Fronteiras 2016, p.83.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of External Relations of Brazil (MRE), "Declaração do Conselho de Chefes de Estado e de Governo da UNASUL sobre a situação na República Árabe da Síria", September 3, 2013, Nota 311.

relations was established in 2005.<sup>16</sup> ASPA members have been gathering in regular summits and final declarations of these summits have also become a channel for UNASUR to reiterate its approach to the ongoing conflict in Syria. The fourth and the last ASPA Summit took place in Riyadh in 2015. According to the Article 25 of the Riyadh Summit Declaration, UNASUR and Arab League member countries declared that they reaffirmed “...their commitment to Syria’s sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity and their commitment towards a political solution to the conflict” with reference to the Geneva Communiqué (2012). They also welcomed “the results of Vienna International Conference of the Foreign Ministers to reach a political solution to the Syrian conflict”. Article 25, in accordance with the related UN resolutions also “condemned use of chemical weapons in Syria” by any party involved in the conflict. On the issue of displaced Syrians and the refugees, the declaration called for more humanitarian and financial assistance without any specific action plan for a partnership with South American countries.<sup>17</sup> A similar approach was adopted by MERCOSUR which officially reiterates its support to a “political process” as the “only” way of a solution to the conflict in summit declarations which gather the heads of the MERCOSUR member states. MERCOSUR has also declared its support to the refugees and emphasized the facilitation of the visa granting and resettlement procedures in addition to offering support to the UN, without mentioning any promises on behalf of the member states.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to the pro-Assad and/or non-interventionist state policies of the South American countries, most of the Arab diaspora organizations in the

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<sup>16</sup> “Summit of South American-Arab Countries (ASPA)” ,(MRE), Retrieved July 6, 2017, <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/en/politica-externa/mecanismos-inter-regionais/9967-summit-of-south-american-arab-countries-aspa>

<sup>17</sup> “Riyadh Declaration”, Retrieved July 5, 2017, [http://www.lasportal.org/ar/summits/PublishingImages/Lists/Summits/AllItems/RD\\_english.pdf](http://www.lasportal.org/ar/summits/PublishingImages/Lists/Summits/AllItems/RD_english.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> “Comunicado Conjunto de las Presidentas y los Presidentes de los Estados Partes del Mercosur y Estados Asociados con Ocasión de la XLVI Reunión Ordinaria del Consejo del Mercado Común”, MERCOSUR, Retrieved July 5, 2017, [http://www.mercosur.int/innovaportal/file/5956/1/comunicado\\_conjunto\\_estados\\_partes\\_y\\_estados\\_asociados.pdf](http://www.mercosur.int/innovaportal/file/5956/1/comunicado_conjunto_estados_partes_y_estados_asociados.pdf). “Declaração Especial dos Estados Partes e Estados Associados do Mercosul sobre a Crise Humanitária de Gestão dos Movimentos Migratórios”, MERCOSUR, Assunção., Retrieved July 5, 2017, [http://www.mercosur.int/innovaportal/file/4677/1/declaracioncrisishumanitaria\\_pt.pdf](http://www.mercosur.int/innovaportal/file/4677/1/declaracioncrisishumanitaria_pt.pdf)

region, including the ones in Brazil, positioned themselves as supporters of the continuation of the existing regime in Syria.<sup>19</sup> The reasons for this support vary but clearly is not sourced from democratic considerations. Support of the Arab diaspora of South America to the Assad regime in Syria is mainly based on opposition to the idea of foreign military intervention and opposition to the general Middle East policy of the US. However, the Arab diaspora in Brazil, as opposed to the fierce pro-Assad discourse of the civil society organizations in Venezuela, at first tried to keep a neutral stance but then focused its attention on the situation of the Christians in Syria and defense of the existing regime against foreign intervention.<sup>20</sup>

Despite their hesitation in playing active role in the solution of the conflict Syria, many South American countries have declared that they would unconditionally accept the Syrian refugees. Brazil started to implement a special two-year humanitarian visa regime for the Syrian asylum seekers as early as 2013. This visa regime was initially planned for two years but was prolonged in 2015 for another two years. In September 2015, President of Venezuela, Nicolas Maduro declared that his country was prepared to accept 20.000 Syrian refugees.<sup>21</sup> In 2015, the government of Chile decided to accept Syrian refugees starting with 100 families. Totally, the Chile has provided 277 visas to Syrian nationals to enter Chile in 2014 and 2015.<sup>22</sup> In 2016, Argentina, which has already accepted 1000 Syrians offered the EU to accept 3000 more.<sup>23</sup> Argentina accepts the Syrian refugees via a special

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<sup>19</sup> Cecilia Baeza & Paulo Pinto, "Building Support for the Asad Regime: The Syrian Diaspora in Argentina and Brazil and the Syrian Uprising", *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, (2017), vol.14, no: 3, p. 334-352.

<sup>20</sup> "The Syrian-Lebanese Diasporas and the Syrian conflict (Venezuela, Brazil and Argentina)", New Generation Consulting (NGC), November 2014, Beirut.

<sup>21</sup> "After deporting 1,400 Colombians, Venezuela pledges to take 20,000 Syrian refugees", Retrieved 15 November, 2016, <http://qz.com/497494/after-deporting-1400-colombians-venezuela-pledges-to-take-20000-syrian-refugees/>

<sup>22</sup> "Chile government says it will take in Syrian refugees", Retrieved November 14, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-europe-migrants-chile-idUSKCN0R82AM20150908>. "Chile acogerá un "número importante" de refugiados sirios", Retrieved November 15, 2016, <http://www.elnuevodia.com/noticias/internacionales/nota/chileaco-geraunnumeroimportantederefugiadossirios-2096444/>. "SiriosRefugiados en Chile", Retrieved November 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AemYkQlf8Uw>

<sup>23</sup> Federico Rivas Molina, "Argentina recibirá a 3.000 refugiados sirios. *El País*", Retrieved November 18, 2016, [http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/...](http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/)

action plan known as “Programa Siria”<sup>24</sup> and applies a special humanitarian visa regime to facilitate their entrance into the country, just like Brazil.<sup>25</sup> Colombia has also decided to accept the Syrian refugees despite the fact that the country has more than six million internally displaced people due to internal security problems.<sup>26</sup>

## **4. The Open-Door Policy of Brazil for the Syrian Refugees**

### **4.1. The Asylum Granting Policy of Brazil**

In contrast to the history of Brazil as a country of migration destination, it has never been a considerable destination for asylum seekers. Brazil is one of the signing parties of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees. In Brazil, permanent legal arrangements for asylum granting were formulated as late as 1997. However, the country was a regional pioneer in this respect as the 1997 legislation was “the first comprehensive refugee law in South America”.<sup>27</sup> In 1977, UNHCR opened an office in Rio de Janeiro in order to deal with the asylum seekers from Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina which were ruled by military dictatorships at the time in order to resettle these asylum seekers in countries such as the US, Australia, and the European countries. While most of these people temporarily stayed in Brazil and were resettled in other countries, starting in the 1970s, Brazil accepted small numbers of asylum seekers from different countries such as Vietnam,

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<sup>24</sup> “Acerca del Siria” Retrieved November 18, 2016, <http://www.migraciones.gov.ar/programasiria/?acercaprograma>

<sup>25</sup> “Global Responsibility Sharing through Pathways for Admission of Syrian Refugees”, UNHCR. (2016c), Retrieved April 30, 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/588b4ddf4.html>

<sup>26</sup> Francesca Fontani, “Syrian refugee serves up a taste of home in Colombia”, Retrieved July 8, 2017, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2015/10/561e7fa76/syrian-refugee-serves-taste-home-colombia.html>. “Global Overview 2015: People internally displaced by conflict and violence”, Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) & Internal Displacement Monitoring Center (IDMC), (2015, May), <http://www.internal-displacement.org/assets/library/Media/201505-Global-Overview-2015/20150506-global-overview-2015-en.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Claudia Cruz Leo and Mary Beth Morand, PDES & Vinicius Feitosa, “Building Communities of Practice for Urban Refugees: Brazil Roundtable Report”, UNHCR, (2015).

Cuba, Angola, and Iran as either migrants or refugees.<sup>28</sup> Especially during the 1990s, Brazil started to emerge as a country of refuge; not as the primary destination but as a resettlement country. In 2002, first refugees to resettle in Brazil, a group of Afghans, entered Brazil via the country's collaboration with the UNHCR. Acceptation of the refugees from Afghanistan was also the first open door policy of Brazil targeting the victims of a conflict. Just as the welcoming Brazilian approach to the Syrians, the welcoming stance of Brazil to the Afghan refugees was declared by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, the President of Brazil at the time.<sup>29</sup> Since the 1990s, during the presidencies of both Cardoso and his successor Lula da Silva, Brazilian authorities continued to work on improving the capabilities of Brazil as a country of resettlement.<sup>30</sup>

It is worth noting that Brazil accepts the refugee definition of the Cartagena Declaration (1984)<sup>31</sup> which was issued by the Latin American states and has a more comprehensive and human rights oriented perception on asylum granting than the definition of the 1957 Convention.<sup>32</sup> In the years following 1984, Latin American countries reiterated their views on the situation of refugees on different occasions taking Cartagena Declaration as a basis. Lastly in 2014 at the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of

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<sup>28</sup> Julia Bertino Moreira, "Redemocratização e direitos humanos: a política para refugiados no Brasil. *Revista Brasileira*", *Política Internacional*, (2010), vol.53, no:1, pp. 115-116. "Refugiados no Brasil", ADUS, Retrieved April 29, 2017, <https://www.adus.org.br/refugiados-no-brasil/>

<sup>29</sup> Eloísa Escalate, "Brasil y la problemática de los refugiados: el caso del Programa de Reasentamiento Solidario", *Fronteira*, (2015), vol. 10, no:20, pp.41-42.

<sup>30</sup> Moriera, "Redemocratização e direitos humanos: a política para refugiados no Brasil. *Revista Brasileira*", p. 121

<sup>31</sup> *Dados sobre refúgio no Brasil.*, UNHCR. (2016a), Retrieved November 19, 2016, <http://www.acnur.org/portugues/recursos/estatisticas/dados-sobre-refugio-no-brasil/>. MRE. (2016a). "Refugiados e CONARE", Retrieved November 18, 2016, <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/pt-BR/politica-externa/paz-e-seguranca-internacionais/153-refugiados-e-o-conare>.

<sup>32</sup> Cartagena Declaration was issued as a non-binding advisory document by the Latin American countries which were dealing with the refugee situation caused by political instability and violence occurring in Central America at the time. The refugee definition recommended by the Cartagena Declaration "...in addition to containing the elements of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, includes among refugees persons who have fled their country because their lives, safety or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violation of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order." (Cartagena Declaration, III (3), 1984).

the Cartagena Declaration, ministers from Latin American and Caribbean countries met in Brasília and adopted the document known as the Brazil Declaration and the Plan of Action in order to improve the situation of the refugees, displaced and stateless persons in the region.<sup>33</sup> Besides their ongoing contribution to the discussion on asylum granting worldwide, both declarations reveal the innovative, democratic and participatory characters of the decision making on the issue, at the regional level. Both texts were adopted with the support of the participating countries and with the involvement of the civil society in the preparatory processes. Moreover, both support broad and human rights-oriented approach to the question of refuge and claim regional responsibility alongside the goal of international cooperation.<sup>34</sup> There is no doubt that hosting of the anniversary summit by Brazil provided the country the chance to lead the implementation of the ten-year action regional action plan envisaged by the document and share with the regional audience the success stories of the integration of refugees in Brazil which came from different conflict regions of the world.<sup>35</sup>

In Brazil, National Committee for Refugees (CONARE), which was established in 1997 as an interministerial body working under Ministry of Justice, is the main official unit in the country responsible for the evaluation of asylum requests working in collaboration with the UNHCR and Brazilian NGOs.<sup>36</sup> Since 1999, Brazil has been collaborating with UNHCR via CONARE as a country of resettlement. Until recently, citizens of African and Latin American countries, especially people from Angola and Colombia constituted the majority of the refugees in Brazil. In the

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<sup>33</sup> “Declaración y Plan de Acción de Brasil”, ACNUR, Retrieved April 29, 2017, <http://www.acnur.org/cartagena30/declaracion-y-plan-de-accion-de-brasil/>. “Brazil Declaration”, Brasília, Retrieved 29 April, 2017, <http://www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2014/9865.pdf>.

<sup>34</sup> Carlos Maldonado Castillo, “El proceso Cartagena: 30 años de innovación y solidaridad”, *RMF 49*, [https://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/47660/1/RMF\\_49\\_43.pdf](https://rua.ua.es/dspace/bitstream/10045/47660/1/RMF_49_43.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> “Cartagena+30: innovación y flexibilidad en las Américas y el Caribe”, ACNUR. (2014, December 2), Retrieved April 29, 2017 from <http://www.acnur.org/cartagena30/cartagena30-innovacion-y-flexibilidad-en-las-americanas-y-el-caribe/>

<sup>36</sup> Julia Bertino Moreira & Rosana Baeninger, “La integración local de los refugiados en Brasil” *Revista Migraciones Forzadas*, (2010), p.48. Yasa Rochelle Santos de Araujo & Patricia Fernandes Bega, “Public Policies in Support of Refugees in Brazil: Reflections and Challenges”, V. O. da Silveira et al. (ed.) XXIV Encontro Nacional do Conpedi – Ufs, *Direito Internacional Dos Direitos Humanos*. Florianópolis: CONPEDI, p.202. “*Dados sobre refúgio no Brasil*”, UNHCR. (2016a).

last years, people fleeing from the conflict in Syria and fleeing from the political and economic problems in Haiti, have been occupying the center of attention in the asylum granting policy of Brazil. However, the people coming from Haiti are not regarded as eligible for refugee status in Brazil. But the Brazilian authorities deal with them considering the vulnerable humanitarian conditions in their home country and also apply a specific humanitarian visa system for the Haitians. Civil society organizations are actively contributing to the asylum seekers in Brazil by providing financial help, healthcare services and support for social inclusion such as participation in Portuguese language classes. With more than 100 organizations involved in the activities supporting the asylum seekers and refugees, Brazil has the largest web of such kind in whole Latin America.<sup>37</sup>

#### 4.2. The Humanitarian Visa Regime of Brazil

Brazil has been granting asylum to Syrians since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in early 2011.<sup>38</sup> But until the launch of the humanitarian visa system, number of Syrians that have arrived the country and registered as refugees was very low (6 in 2011 and 37 in 2012). These numbers increased rapidly with the launch of the humanitarian visa regime.<sup>39</sup> According to the data of the Brazilian Federal Police Department, number of the people seeking asylum from Brazil, coming from around 80 different countries of the world, has reached 28,670 in 2015 from 966 in 2010. By the year 2016, totally 8,863 them were granted refugee status with the 2,298 Syrians comprising the majority.<sup>40</sup> Since 2013, CONARE has been implementing

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<sup>37</sup> Moreira & Baeninger, “La integración local de losrefugiadosenBrasil”. “Missão”, ADUS, Retrieved November 19, 2016, <http://www.adus.org.br/sobre-nos/historico/>. “Sistema de Refúgio Brasileiro: Desafios e Perspectivas”, CONARE. (2016), Retrieved November 09, 2016, [http://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/scripts/doc.php?file=fileadmin/Documentos/portugues/Estatisticas/Sistema\\_de\\_Refugio\\_brasileiro\\_-\\_Refugio\\_em\\_numeros\\_-\\_05\\_05\\_2016](http://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/scripts/doc.php?file=fileadmin/Documentos/portugues/Estatisticas/Sistema_de_Refugio_brasileiro_-_Refugio_em_numeros_-_05_05_2016)

<sup>38</sup> Karin Fusaro and Luiz Fernando Godinho, “Hands Across the Water: Brazil’s large Syrian community absorbs refugees”, Retrieved November 18, 2016, [http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2013/8/5201079e9/hands-across-water-brazils-large-syrian-community-absorbs-refugees.html?query=syrian refugees brazil](http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2013/8/5201079e9/hands-across-water-brazils-large-syrian-community-absorbs-refugees.html?query=syrian%20refugees%20brazil).

<sup>39</sup> Gabriel Gualano de Godoy de.” A crisehumanitária na Síria e seu impacto no Brasil. *Cadernos de Debates Refúgio “Migrações e Cidadania”*, Brasília: Instituto Migrações e Direitos Humanos, (2014), vol.9, no:9, p.89.

<sup>40</sup> “Dados sobre refúgio no Brasil”, UNHCR. (2016a).

a special humanitarian visa regime for the Syrians in collaboration with the Brazilian consulates abroad in order to facilitate the arrival of Syrian asylum seekers to Brazil, in accordance with the governmental policy of open doors, all the Syrian nationals requesting asylum from the Brazilian state are granted a humanitarian visa to enter the country easily.<sup>41</sup> According to the data of the UNHCR, a total number of humanitarian visas issued by Brazilian authorities since 2013 has reached 8,450 in addition to the 3000 Syrians that have resettled in Brazil.<sup>42</sup> But the number of Syrians who have arrived the country since the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011 can be expected to exceed this number as it is not clear whether all the Syrians entering Brazil have applied for refugee status.

By the year 2017, the Brazilian government has adopted a new Immigration Law in order to change the relevant legislation adopted in 1980 during the military regime. The new legislation was initially proposed in 2013 by Aloysio Nunes who is today the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Brazil. Although not directly targeting the issue of Syrian refugees, the new law reveals the three dimensions of the contemporary Brazilian approach to the issues of asylum and immigration. First of all, it can be expected that asylum seekers will continue to be regarded as potential migrants albeit in a receptive approach. Strong support of the civil society organizations including UNHCR to the new law explains that besides the improvements it is expected to bring to the lives of immigrants, it is also seen as a permanent legal basis and facilitator for the incoming of asylum seekers.<sup>43</sup> Secondly, it shows the humanitarian and non-discriminatory stance of Brazil in a period when the developed Northern countries are mainly dealing the issues of immigration and asylum seeking as problems. The new legislation based on the principles of equality and non-discrimination simplifies the bureaucratic paperwork and offers equal rights to immigrants including social, economic and political participation. Based on the prioritization of human rights, it institutionalizes the humanitarian visa system and makes it available also for the asylum seekers with needs of

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> “Resettlement and Other Admission Pathways for Syrian Refugees”, UNHCR (2017b, April 30), <http://www.unhcr.org/573dc82d4.pdf>

<sup>43</sup> “Em carta, mais de 100 entidades pedem a Temersação da Lei de Migração.” Retrieved April 29, 2017, <http://www.aloysionunes.com/em-carta-mais-de-100-entidades-pedem-a-temer-sancao-da-lei-de-migracao/>

“special asylum” from countries other than Syria and Haiti.<sup>44</sup> And thirdly, the ongoing discussion on the law within the Brazilian society and among the politicians has revealed the fact that, not all segments of the society are in favor of the legislation change. Although Brazilian government managed the legislation preparation process in a transparent and democratic way, many people from the right political view are uncomfortable with the new legislation. The possibility of terrorist threats and the potential financial burden of providing public services to foreigners having immigrated to Brazil are among the main concerns of the opponents.<sup>45</sup>

### 4.3. The Situation of Syrian Refugees in Brazil

In September 2015, President of Brazil Dilma Rousseff made her famous statement and announced on different occasions that Brazil has adopted a policy of “open arms” for the refugees who would like to live in Brazil and contribute to the “prosperity and peace” of the country.<sup>46</sup> The Brazilian government also decided to release a 15 million R\$ fund to be invested in the programs targeting migrants and refugees.<sup>47</sup> In October 2015, CONARE made an agreement with UNHCR in order to use the humanitarian visa regime of Brazil, which was also prolonged for the following two years, more efficiently in order to help the Syrian refugees.<sup>48</sup> Since the launch of

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<sup>44</sup> “New Immigration Law passed by Congress”, CONECTAS, Retrieved April 29, 2017 <http://www.conectas.org/en/actions/foreign-policy/news/47198-new-immigration-law-passed-by-congress>

<sup>45</sup> Renan Barbosa, “Nova Lei de Migração enfatiza direitos humanos, mas críticos pedem veto”, *Gazeta do Povo*. 2017, April 25, <http://www.gazetadopovo.com.br/vida-publica/justica-e-direito/nova-lei-de-migracao-enfatiza-direitos-humanos-mas-criticos-pedem-veto-73gx8w8g94mjekn4rvtzb982c>

<sup>46</sup> “Rousseff: “A pesar de momentos de dificultad tenemos los brazos abiertos para los refugiados”, Retrieved November 19, 2016 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caoilo7ySYM>. “Brasil es un país de acogida abierto a recibir refugiados, señala Dilma Rousseff”, Retrieved November 19, 2016 <http://www.un.org/spanish/News/story.asp?NewsID=33426#.WDAfW2PJPIU>

<sup>47</sup> “Brasil tem quase 9 mil refugiados de 79 nacionalidades”, UNHCR. (2016b), Retrieved November 19, 2016 <http://www.acnur.org/portugues/noticias/noticia/brasil-tem-quase-9-mil-refugiados-de-79-nacionalidades/>. “Centro de Referência e Atendimento para Imigrantes”, Retrieved November 19, 2016 [http://www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/direitos\\_humanos/migrantes/crai/](http://www.prefeitura.sp.gov.br/cidade/secretarias/direitos_humanos/migrantes/crai/)

<sup>48</sup> “Brasil tem quase 9 mil”, UNHCR. (2016b). “Sistema de Refúgio Brasileiro: Desafios e Perspectivas”, CONARE. (2016)

the humanitarian visa regime by the Brazilian authorities, Brazilian asylum granting system has been working in two ways. One is the evaluation of the asylum requests of the people who have already entered the country by legal or illegal means. The second one is the issuing of humanitarian visas to foreign nationals via Brazilian consulates. Humanitarian visas provide facilitated entrance procedures to foreign nationals so that they can travel legally and safely to Brazil and apply for the refugee status upon their arrival. In October 2015, Ministry of Justice released another fund of 5 million R\$ to contribute to the activities of the UNHCR. In addition, Attention and Reference Centres for the Immigrants and Refugees (CRAIs) were established in collaboration with municipalities in order to provide legal, social and psychological support the migrants and refugees regardless of their legal status.<sup>49</sup> Brazilian institutions are planned to provide Portuguese classes and courses for employment for a limited number of people including not only refugees but also asylum seekers and migrants. An average number of the annual participants of these services from the mentioned groups will be around 200 people.<sup>50</sup>

Some members of the Arab community in Brazil, just like the cases in other countries of South America and alongside with civil society organizations, have been trying to help the Syrian refugees by their own means.<sup>51</sup> But despite the strong social status of the Arab diaspora in Brazil, significant and institutionalized support for the Syrian refugees from the diaspora is missing. Indeed, both Christian and Muslim charity organizations, some of the Arab diaspora organizations, NGOs without specific ethnic or religious orientation, universities and municipalities are involved in activities targeting both Syrian refugees and refugees from other countries.<sup>52</sup> A distinguished example is the initiative of a church in Rio de Janeiro. Due

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<sup>49</sup> “Brasil tem quase 9 mil”, UNHCR. (2016b).

<sup>50</sup> “En Cumbre de Líderes, Brasil reafirma compromiso con protección y dignidad de refugiados”, ACNUR, Retrieved April 29, 2017 <http://www.acnur.org/noticias/noticia/en-cumbre-de-lideres-brasil-reafirma-compromiso-con-proteccion-y-dignidad-de-refugiados/>

<sup>51</sup> “Gualeduaychú: El Centro SirioLibanésrecibirá a unos 40 refugiados sirios”, Retrieved November 18, 2016, [http://www.apfdigital.com.ar/despachos.asp?cod\\_des=258889&ID\\_Seccion=12&fecemi=21/09/2015](http://www.apfdigital.com.ar/despachos.asp?cod_des=258889&ID_Seccion=12&fecemi=21/09/2015)

<sup>52</sup> Victor Begeres Bisneto, “Refugiados Sírios em Campinas/Speum Aladdins em a Lâmpada Mágica” *Malala*, (2016), vol.4, no:6, p.105.

to the efforts of the church and with the help of the Catholic NGO Caritas, around 30 Syrians most of whom are Muslims were brought to Brazil. These refugees had the chance to start a new life and receive regular help from the Catholic community in Rio de Janeiro.<sup>53</sup> It can be evaluated that while the successful integration of the Arab migrants to the Brazilian society might have played an important role in the decision of the Brazilian politicians to invite the Syrian refugees to the country, the role of the diaspora in both the policy-making phase of this decision or in helping the incoming refugees is quite limited.

By means of financial support, the refugees receive limited monetary allowance via the cash transfer program of the Brazilian government – Bolsa Familia<sup>54</sup> and the ones who were not able to find jobs, have been through serious difficulties in their new lives in Brazil. While regarded as one of the best countries for refugee resettlement alongside the US, Germany, and Sweden,<sup>55</sup> refugees in Brazil face many difficulties in their daily lives despite their low number. A study concluded soon before the arrival of Syrian refugees in Brazil had revealed the fact that main challenges faced by the refugees in Brazil were difficulties in finding jobs, receiving proper salaries, finding places to live in, accessing basic public services and lastly the discriminative approach of the Brazilian society towards the refugees due to lack of knowledge of who a refugee is.<sup>56</sup> Other studies and testimonials of the refugees reiterate the same findings and especially highlight the difficulty of pursuing a life in dignity without sufficient financial means or job opportunities. Xenophobia and discrimination are also other problems which are strongly related to the approach of the Brazilian society to the entrance of foreigners no matter they are refugees or not, to the job market.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> “EnBrasil, unaiglesiaatólicarecibe decenas de refugiados sirios”, Retrieved November 18, 2016 <http://www.diariolibre.com/mundo/latinoamerica/en-brasil-unaiglesia-catolica-recibe-a-decenas-de-refugiados-sirios-XX1231572>

<sup>54</sup> “From Syria to Brazil: Following a century-old route to a new life”, Retrieved November 19, 2016 <http://www.middleeasteye.net/in-depth/features/brazil-syrians-welcome-here-1860804555>, 16.062016

<sup>55</sup> Elisabeth Becker, “The Four “Best” Countries For Refugee Resettlement”, *UN Dispatch*, Retrieved July 8, 2017 <https://www.undispatch.com/the-four-best-countries-for-refugee-resettlement/>

<sup>56</sup> Moreira & Baeninger, “La integración local”, p. 48

<sup>57</sup> Araujo, & Bega, “Public Policies,”.

Syrian refugees in Brazil have been encountering similar difficulties such as the limited monetary help from the government in addition to the lack of official help in finding habitation. Many of them cannot prove their level of education or work experience due to the absence of necessary documents.<sup>58</sup> Limited support for social and economic inclusion such as language classes and consultancy for entrance to the job market are other problems. Despite the needs of the refugee families coming from a zone of conflict, psychological or physical healthcare services for refugees are rare and are mainly provided due to efforts of local authorities and civil society. Although refugees are eligible for free healthcare, it is not easy to be reached in practice<sup>59</sup> when considered that public healthcare services are not even sufficient for the Brazilians. In the case of the Syrian refugees, especially women and children who are either dependent on the income of their husbands or parents, suffer more from the harsh conditions.<sup>60</sup>

It can be said that Syrian refugees have been encountering similar problems of survival just as the refugees from other countries with possibly an exception of discrimination due to the media coverage on the situation of the civilians in the Syrian Civil War and speeches of the Brazilian politicians such as the former President Rousseff in support of the refugees. For example, on August 19, 2015, on the occasion of the World Humanitarian Day, Brazilian authorities and UNHCR launched an awareness raising social media campaign in collaboration with the civil society organizations in order to inform the Brazilian public on the refugee problem in the world.<sup>61</sup> In accordance with the awareness raising activities of the Brazilian authorities regarding the refugees, a Syrian refugee girl settled in Brazil carried the Olympics torch at the Rio 2016 Olympics torch relay.<sup>62</sup> It should be mentioned that awareness raising is quite important since the refugees are legally eligible as beneficiaries of some of the social

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<sup>58</sup> Gerardo Lissardy, "Cómo Brasil se volvió el mayor refugio para sirios en América Latina", Retrieved November 17, 2016, [http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/12/141202\\_brasil\\_refugio\\_sirios\\_alatina\\_en](http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2014/12/141202_brasil_refugio_sirios_alatina_en). "From Syria to Brazil", 2016

<sup>59</sup> Araujo & Bega, "Public Policies," p. 207

<sup>60</sup> "En Brasil, una iglesia católica recibe a decenas de refugiados sirios", 2015

<sup>61</sup> "Dados sobre refugio no Brasil", UNHCR. (2016a).

<sup>62</sup> "A refugiada síria Hanan Daqqah", Retrieved September 11, 2016, <http://www.brasil.gov.br/cidadania-e-justica/2016/05/brasil-abriga-8-863-refugiados-de-79-nacionalidades/hanan.jpg/view>

programs just as the Brazilian citizens and this is prone to cause a negative reaction among the Brazilian society towards the refugees.<sup>63</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

The emerging open door policy of South American countries towards the Syrian refugees have gained considerable attention due to the already existing large Arab diaspora in the sub-continent and thanks to the media coverings featuring the welcoming speeches of the statesmen from the region and stories of a handful of refugees who had the chance to start a new life in South America. On the other hand, neither the existence of a wealthy diaspora nor the embracing policies have proven sufficient to provide a sustainable life for the refugees. The outstanding examples of solidarity and generosity towards the Syrian refugees among the Arab diaspora organizations are relatively low. When the existence of a wealthy and populous Arab diaspora in South America is considered, Syrian refugees living elsewhere in the region seem to receive little support from the earlier generations that have settled in South America.

Regarding the fact that South American countries have been using their open-door policy as a tool of promotion in the international arena, the initial success of brand-making the region as a safe and hospitable heaven seem to backfire as the problems occur. A recent example is a case in Uruguay where only a handful of Syrian refugees were accepted into the country with an applauding national and international media coverage. Soon after, the refugees declared that they wanted to return as they were not able to find jobs and financial support of the Uruguayan government was not.<sup>64</sup> Similar cases of failure in the struggle for survival on the side of the refugees occur in the other countries of the region. This fact reveals that many South American countries have adopted open door policies as symbolic gestures of solidarity without adequate institutional and financial preparation. Despite the merits of the humanitarian stance of South American countries in granting asylum, Syrian refugees in South America have been through many difficulties which reveal that cultural

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<sup>63</sup> Moreira & Baeninger, "La integración local", p. 49

<sup>64</sup> "Refugiados sirios quieren irse de Uruguay", Retrieved November 19, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KfinkYYT5-7o>

differences, being lack of language skills and skills for entrance to the job market in addition to the absence of financial and material support from the host countries, cause problems not only for refugees but also for the host countries. Consequently, the existence of thousands of Syrian refugees in South America is prone to trigger discussions on the role of diasporas in foreign policy decision-making processes and on asylum granting, social inclusion and religious diversity policies of these countries.

The history of Arab immigration to South America which surely effected the official policy of the countries in the region, plays an ambiguous role in this story. Despite their welcoming stance, in South America, the concept of refuge is still regarded within the general concept of migration which leads to the treatment of refugees as welcomed people but no more than migrants who are expected to find their way in the social structure based on “self-help” culture, just as the millions of people had done in the past. The story of the Arab migrants in South America is a revelation of the self-help culture deeply rooted in the socio-economic structures of these countries. In accordance with the image of a migrant who is supposed to make his/her own way, today the newcomer Syrian refugees are expected to act as the same. For example, the statement of the Venezuelan president Maduro on the Syrian refugees as “They are welcome to share this land of peace and contribute to our country’s development”<sup>65</sup> reveals the fact that South American nations regard the arrival of Syrian refugees as a new wave of Arab immigration. Similarly, President of Chile, Michelle Bachelet referring to the Syrian refugees has declared that her country “has always had open doors for the ones coming most of the time from distant lands”.<sup>66</sup> This approach of regarding refugees as new migrants are explicitly mentioned in the discourse of the politicians and disregard the specific humanitarian needs of the refugees. On the other hand, this attitude provides the refugees an opportunity to become contributing and both legally and socially accepted equal members of the host societies.

In the case of Brazil, despite the efforts of both Brazilian government and civil society to improve the situation of the refugees in Brazil, it is

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<sup>65</sup> Willa Frej, “Venezuela Plans To Take In 20,000 Syrian Refugees”, Retrieved November 5, 2016 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/venezuela-maduro-syrian-refugees\\_us\\_55ef279ce4b03784e276bc8b](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/venezuela-maduro-syrian-refugees_us_55ef279ce4b03784e276bc8b)

<sup>66</sup> “Chile acogerá un “número importante” de refugiados sirios”, 2015

clear that today what Brazil can offer for the future refugees is limited to legal status and hospitable political climate.<sup>67</sup> However, it should not be forgotten that during the course of history “Brazil had been a recipient of humanitarian cooperation more than a provider” as highlighted by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>68</sup> And today, by means of legal protection, the humanitarian stance adopted by the Brazilian authorities has carried the country beyond the international standards.<sup>69</sup> The recently humanitarian approach of Brazilian foreign policy is a novelty for Brazil which needs to be improved and supported with adequate financial resources and institutional mechanisms and should go beyond the granting of humanitarian visas.<sup>70</sup> Although Brazilian laws provide many rights to the refugees such as the rights to work, to get education or access to the public healthcare system,<sup>71</sup> supportive mechanisms are needed for the refugees to integrate into the society and participate the economic life. On the other hand, the steps taken by the Brazilian government in order to re-establish both the asylum granting system and the immigration laws of the country in collaboration with the UNHCR and the civil society shows that as an emerging country, Brazil deals with the matters of immigration and asylum seriously and is being prepared for taking more responsibility in the name of humanitarianism worldwide.

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<sup>67</sup> Marília Calegari & Rosana Baeninger, “De Siria a Brasil”, *Revista Migraciones Forzadas*, (2016), 51. Leo, Morand, and Feitosa, “Building Communities of Practice for Urban Refugees”.

<sup>68</sup> Celso Amorim, “Humanitarian cooperation in Brazil: testimony and reflections” in *Humanitarian Crises, Cooperation and the Role of Brazil*. Rio de Janeiro: MédicosSemFronteiras, (2016), p.103.

<sup>69</sup> Luiz Paulo Teles Ferreira Barreto, “La protección internacional de los refugiados en Brasil”, M. Lettieri (ed.) *Protección internacional de refugiados en el sur de Sudamérica*, Buenos Aires: Remedios de Escalada : De la UN La Universidad Nacional de Lanús, (2012), p.417.

<sup>70</sup> Duval Fernandes et al. “O fluxo de imigração recente para o Brasil e a política governamental: ossinais de ambiguidade. Notas preliminares”, *Cadernos de Debates Refúgio, Migrações e Cidadania*, Brasília: Instituto Migrações e Direitos Humanos, (2014), vol. 9, no: 9, p.93-102.

<sup>71</sup> “Refugiados e CONARE.”, MRE. (2016a), Retrieved November 18, 2016 <http://www.itamaraty.gov.br/pt-BR/politica-externa/paz-e-seguranca-internacionais/153-refugiados-e-o-conare>

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