

A Keynote Address by

**HER EXCELLENCY MRS. EMİNE ERDOĞAN, THE FIRST LADY OF TURKEY**

Conference on the Syrian Refugee Crisis

SETA Foundation at Washington D.C.

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*\*Prepared Remarks*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I greet you all with love and respect. I am very pleased to be with you in such a great environment. I would like to thank the SETA Foundation for organizing this Conference on the Syrian Refugee Crisis. I hope that this panel will yield positive results.

Distinguished Participants,

I wish I could have addressed you today about ways in which we can make our world more prosperous, but unfortunately, we are here to talk about the biggest humanitarian crisis of the 21st century.

Syria was a special country which we all remembered with its famous mosques, ancient cities, authentic market places, churches and synagogues. It represented one of the richest cultures of the Middle East. Unfortunately today, Syria has become synonymous with war and the refugee crisis. In fact, it is more appropriate to call this crisis a “crisis of humanity” because the situation that the Syrian refugees are facing is just as terrible as the civil war in Syria.

Millions of people fleeing the cruelty of an oppressor could not find mercy in this big world. The Mediterranean which is a sea of civilizations became a sea of death. Thousands of people have been condemned to death due to self-serving policies of those who did not want to disturb the comfort in their countries. “Comfort” is so meaningless in face of death and innocent children, isn’t it? The picture before us, however, is a testament to such meaninglessness.

In five years, close to half a million innocent people died, more than 6.5 million were displaced and 13.5 million affected by the civil war. In the meantime, the actors in the international community built their strategies on closing their doors to the refugees. Since the people who died on the shores of the Mediterranean were Syrian, they did not attract the attention of the modern world and the organizations dealing with human and women’s rights.

Dear Colleagues,

Under these circumstances, allow me to be proud of my country that opened its doors to 3 million migrants without any hesitation! Almost half of the people who fled Syria to save

their lives are currently guests in my country. Yes, we do not call them “refugees”; we call them “guests”.

3 million refugees are sheltered in Turkey irrespective of their religion, language or race as a result of an open door policy. We open not only our doors but also our hearts to these people who arrive at our borders without making any discrimination whatsoever.

I would like to give you a striking example. Kilis is a city in southeast Turkey with a history of 3000 years. Currently, the refugee population in Kilis is more than the population of the city itself. Think about this for a moment... The locals who conduct their daily lives in peace are hosting as many people as the local population in their land.

I believe that this explains very well what I mean when I say that we have opened our hearts. There are many other cities and towns in my country doing exactly the same thing. Many beautiful people share their food, home and toys of their children with the refugees. Some suggest that Kilis should be awarded the Nobel peace prize. It is not important whether Kilis is awarded this prize or not because all cities in my country have already won the appreciation of our conscience as a result of their actions during the Syrian crisis.

Distinguished Participants,

It is not possible to understand Turkey’s stance in the context of existing international relations theories because in my country there is an understanding of civilization that values people simply because they are human. Our country is a place that hosted many of the most important civilizations throughout history. Almost all tribes in history passed through Anatolia.

In my country, mosques, synagogues and churches stand side by side. My country has a rich historical experience where people of all creeds and origin have been able to live side by side.

Turkey’s current strength does not emanate only from its economy and young population. It also stems from this historical and culture richness. Our famous poet Yahya Kemal once answered a question posed by a European about Istanbul’s population in the following way: “We live together with those who are below the ground.”

This reply shows that the teachings of Rumi, Yunus Emre and Hacı Bektaş-ı Veli are still very dynamic even many centuries later. We are inspired by this deep-rooted heritage when determining our policies. Our language, religion and origin may be different, but our common denominator lies in the fact that we are all human and this surpasses all other considerations. This is why we can share the same neighborhood and the same city with 3 million refugees when necessary.

152 thousand Syrian children have been born in our country so far and 39% of the refugees are school age children under the age of 15. We are doing all we can to make sure that they do not become a “lost generation”. 90% of the children staying in temporary protection centers are receiving education. For children who are not housed in these centers, the doors of our state schools are wide open. There are of course language and integration problems. This is where non-governmental organizations play a significant role.

Occupational courses are provided to Syrian women in temporary protection centers. So far, 13,000 women attended these courses where they tried to lift the burden of the war. Children and youth have been able to alleviate some of their burden at psycho-social support and skills centers.

Turkey spent 10 billion dollars so far for the Syrian refugees. All of this money was spent from our own resources. Foreign support remains only at 455 million dollars. Municipalities, non-governmental organizations and our people are also making generous contributions in addition to the resources provided by the state. Women who do not have other means are knitting hats and shawls for refugee children to help protect them from severe winter conditions.

We believe that our efforts will bring about a great blessing for our country. It has already made Turkey the most generous country in the world; Turkey is the top country in the world in terms of humanitarian aid in comparison to its gross national product. With a growing economy, Turkey will continue to exercise this humanitarian spirit in every area.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am sure that you are all special people who are following Turkey closely and trying to assess its place in global politics. As you well know, our country is going through difficult times in recent months. I came here with the pain of our martyrs. My beautiful country is the target of PKK terror and other terrorist organizations. I assure you that these attacks that target the territorial integrity of my country will never succeed in dissolving the historical brotherhood of the people in Turkey. As I mentioned before, this brotherhood is deep-rooted and inseparable. Therefore, terror organizations and their collaborators who have no grassroots in society will drown in their own malicious intentions.

Unfortunately, terror unveils its ugly face everywhere. Last week, there was a terrorist attack targeting the heart of Europe. We were saddened by this attack at least as much as the attacks in Turkey because terror attacks in Madrid, London, Paris and Brussels are no different than attacks in Istanbul and Ankara. No matter who the perpetrators are, the source of terror is the same. These perpetrators are dark souls who use their human faces as a mask.

DAEŞ which engages in terror by using Islam will never smear the good name of Islam or true Muslims. Islam is a religion of peace and it will stay that way for eternity. Turkey is a place where Islam is experienced in the most refined form and it will continue its efforts against DAEŞ as a state and a people.

Distinguished Participants,

My biggest wish is to see the children who had to leave Syria in such dire circumstances return to their country. All children in the world deserve a peaceful home, a good life and a bright future. It is the responsibility of the international community to provide them with this opportunity.

Those who remain indifferent to human values in times of such crises can make no contribution to human rights, women's and children's rights at other times. If our conscience is not more effective than bullets, tanks and missiles, all claims to development and civilization are null and void. In a world where racism is so flagrantly expressed, the good and

dignified people ought to show more courage for it is only their courage that may save the dignity of mankind.

I believe as Rumi says that “it is those who share the same feelings and not the ones who speak the same language who will best understand each other.” Therefore, I hope that this gathering here today will also be a sign of hope for the Syrian refugees.

Perhaps, one of the countries best positioned to understand the issue of refugees is the United States of America because America is a country that has welcomed refugees throughout its history. As President Obama said, “The United States is born of immigrants.”

Therefore, we should make an appeal to the collective conscience of mankind for an international effort to ensure that the Syrian refugees can live in humane conditions. Conscience is the only key to unlock dirty policies. All that is needed is empathy. Just think of what a Syrian woman or child has had to leave behind when fleeing the country. There is no need to think of what they are able to take with them for you can be sure that those suitcases hold nothing but fear and despair.

I would like to end my remarks by reminding everyone that there are important responsibilities that the international community must perform. I hope that meetings such as this one will serve as a reminder for such duties.

I would like to thank the representatives of the SETA Foundation in Washington as well as all panelists for their contributions to this meaningful event. I am also grateful to the valuable participants who have shown an interest in this subject.

I invite you all to Turkey, the most beautiful place in the world for multi-culturalism. I hope that you get a chance to understand our country from the right sources and experience our cultural and human values closely. I greet you all wholeheartedly.