

Interview - Nicholas Kristof

Written by E-International Relations

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Nicholas Kristof is a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning op-ed columnist at The New York Times. After graduating from Harvard College and then studying law at Magdalen College, Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, Kristof joined The New York Times in 1984, initially covering economics. He subsequently served as a Times correspondent in Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Beijing and Tokyo. In 1990 Kristof and his wife, Sheryl WuDunn, won a Pulitzer Prize for their coverage of China's Tiananmen Square democracy movement. He would later win a second Pulitzer in 2006, for commentary for what the judges called "his graphic, deeply reported columns that, at personal risk, focused attention on genocide in Darfur and that gave voice to the voiceless in other parts of the world." Regarded by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as an "honorary African" for shining a spotlight on neglected conflicts, Kristof has reported from conflict zones and impoverished countries all over the world, notably Syria, where he has visited several times since civil war broke out.

How has the way that you understand the world changed over time and what (or who) has prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I guess over time I've come to see how much more complicated the world is than it sometimes seems initially. I think when I was studying international relations as a student it often seemed a little more straightforward and, for example, I remember as a student having an instinctive admiration for leftist governments that seemed to be genuinely aspiring to help their people and took a much dimmer view of right wing governments that seemed to be more out for themselves. Then as a law student I traveled to West Africa and visited Benin and Togo. Benin had this classic leftist quasi-socialist government that said all the right things and yet was catastrophically underperforming and its citizens were clearly not well off compared to Togo, right next door, which was more of a classic right wing market economy. That was kind of a shock as it clashed with what I expected to find, and in general over the years I think over and over I've found that you constantly need to test your assumptions and hypotheses against what is really happening on the ground.

How much of an impact does actually being on the ground and talking with those affected in a war-torn or impoverished country alter the way you view conflict and conflict-resolution?

I think it's critical that journalists and diplomats and others get to the places that they're pontificating about and don't just talk to officials who speak English but get out of the capital and talk to real people. When we in journalism have made serious mistakes, for example the run up in the 1979 Iranian revolution I think we were oblivious to the power of fundamentalist Islam there. I think we were much too prone in the run up to the Iraq war in 2003 to think that Iraqis would welcome us. In fact it was pretty obvious that anybody that did go to Iraq in 2002 or early 2003, that Iraqis a.) didn't like Saddam Hussein and b.) didn't want us invading and were deeply suspicious of US intentions. So I think there's often the danger of analysts talking to each other inside a bubble and coming to conclusions that are perfectly plausible but utterly wrong.

The Syrian Civil War has been going on for more than four years. Do you see an end in sight to this humanitarian crisis?

My best guess is that there won't be a solution or an end any time soon. I think it's going to simmer on. I hope I'm wrong and I think it's possible that I'm wrong. I think that the only possible avenue to end the killing would be a

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ceasefire agreement that amounts to a de-facto partition of Syria, but I think that would be pretty hard to achieve. Not impossible, but unlikely.

You have stated that President Obama's greatest foreign policy failing has been Syria. What alternative approach do you believe would have succeeded?

I'm not sure that other approaches would have worked but it's manifestly clear that Obama's approach has not worked. What I would have liked to have seen would have been to follow the proposals from David Petraeus and Hillary Clinton back in 2012 to fund the more moderate rebels. I think that was an option in 2012, but that steadily became more and more difficult to achieve. I think that it would have been worth establishing, and is still worth establishing, kind of a no fly-zone, but maybe not a no-fly zone in the way we typically think of it. What I'm thinking of is an announcement that would just target Syrian military aircraft, not Russian military aircraft, and would not involve keeping American aircraft over the skies of Syria, but would simply say that if Syria uses its aircraft to drop barrel bombs, then we will take out a military aircraft in ensuing days, and we would probably do it by missiles from beyond Syrian borders rather than risk flying over Syria, and it might not even be the same plane, but essentially to make Syria pay a cost for those barrel bombings. The larger strategy would simply be to put pressure on the regime and its backers, Moscow and Tehran, to try to improve the odds that there can be a peace deal. I was a great fan of Richard Holbrooke's work in the Balkans and he understood that military power is best used not for its own sake, but as a leverage to achieve a peace deal.

What do you make of the rhetoric of leading Republican presidential candidates, be it Donald Trump or Ben Carson, that we should either turn our back on refugees or only allow Christian refugees?

This harsh rhetoric about Syrian refugees completely misunderstands the problem. It is a horrendously bad risk analysis and it is essentially political posturing that targets some of the most vulnerable people in the world. There obviously are risks of jihadis entering the U.S. but those risks primarily involve people coming as tourists or as students, not coming through the refugee process. To me, this echoes some of the saddest periods in American history when we have ridden our fears to target Japanese Americans during World War II, or when we kept out Jewish refugees on the eve of World War II and during World War II.

Can it be justified to make a parallel between the neglect of Syrian refugees today and the neglect of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany?

Absolutely. I think what we forget today is the degree to which Americans were afraid of Jewish refugees and perceived them as a national security threat. If one looks at the rhetoric at the time, Jewish refugees were often seen as potential Bolsheviks and socialists, at a time when we were really scared of Bolsheviks. The State Department also warned that the Nazis might infiltrate spies into the US as Jews which of course seems completely ludicrous to us today, but perhaps was no more ludicrous than the idea that the Islamic State is going to infiltrate refugees into the U.S. I don't think it's fully appreciated in the US that Anne Frank's family tried to come to the U.S. and they could not get approval and Anne Frank's death is on the hand of the Nazis but to some degree, it's also on our hands of our indifference at the time.

Should the United States' vetting process be stricter than what it currently is?

In the case of the U.S., I think the risks of infiltration are vanishingly small, partly because the vetting process is quite robust and while it is undertaken, those people are not physically in the U.S.

In your op-ed titled 'They are Us', you noted that the 'top priority must be making Syria habitable so that refugees need not flee'. What could be done, to make Syria more habitable and curtail the flow of refugees?

I would like to see this process undertaken of a no-fly zone largely intended to achieve a ceasefire and partition of Syria. But, that's hard and I don't know whether that's achievable. Though what is definitely achievable is making

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Jordan and Lebanon and Turkey habitable for Syrian refugees. A slight majority of Syrian children in those countries don't go to school. We can solve that and it is largely a financial issue. Benefits have just been cut off for refugees in those countries – that is a financial issue. The United States and Europe can solve that. So I would like to see us make greater efforts to make Syria habitable for Syrians but I recognise that it's an uphill struggle. I think it's a no-brainer to make the surrounding countries who are habitable for Syrian refugees reduce the push factors.

You've written an article about the volunteer organisation, the White Helmets. Just how important a role do they and other such volunteer organisations play in mitigating the effects of Civil War?

I really admire the White Helmets and it's not just the great work they do, but the model they provide of a non-sectarian organisation simply responding to human needs, rather than to 'in this person of my faith'. I think they're doing good and they're saving lives but at the end of the day, a White Helmet isn't an adequate defence against a barrel bomb. It isn't an adequate defence against a chemical weapon, and so I admire them, but I can't say that it's a fair fight. Another organisation that is similar is the Syrian Medical Society where you have incredibly brave Syrian doctors risking their lives to care for the injured even though those medics are very often targeted and again, I'm just full of my admiration for those people.

What would you say is the most important advice for a young journalist just starting out?

It would be to read a lot, and write a lot, and emphasise that it's not enough to get the story, but it's also important to figure out how to make it compelling. Right now, one of the problems is that there's a lot of information out there that is technically available but it's not absorbed by people who aren't interested in these issues. We tend to preach to the choir. I think our most fundamental challenge in journalism, especially those of us who want to have an impact is to preach beyond the choir and reach people who might disagree with us, might be challenged by our views and that's a complicated answer that involves images, video and great story-telling and it's hard, but it is so important.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is an Associate Features Editor of E-IR.