REFUGEE CHAMPION

Former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband discusses Middle East collapse, humanitarian action, the meaning of Brexit, the future of NATO, and his own political future

The International Rescue Committee, one of the world's largest refugee aid agencies, provides humanitarian relief to displaced persons in more than forty countries. As IRC's president and CEO since 2013, former British Foreign Secretary David Miliband is a global leader in confronting an unprecedented crisis—sixty-five million refugees afflicted by war and famine from Afghanistan and Myanmar to Syria and Somalia. Miliband faces obstacles, not least of which is President Donald Trump's resistance to allowing refugees to find safe haven in the United States. Yet Miliband, based at IRC's headquarters in New York, believes he is making a difference—and repaying, in "a small way," the people who helped his Jewish refugee parents resettle in the United Kingdom after escaping the Nazi Holocaust.

The *Independent* has called Miliband the "prince across the water" for those in Britain's Labour Party looking for an alternative to Jeremy Corbyn's leftward march. Unlike his father, Ralph, among his generation's leading Marxist intellectuals in Britain, Miliband forged his political career on the back of Tony Blair's New Labour movement, which reconciled the left-leaning party with a new era of unbridled capitalism. As a member of Parliament and a junior minister in Blair's cabinet, he supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq—whose disastrous outcome, he has admitted, "induces a high degree of humility." Having resigned from Parliament to head the IRC, Miliband has not ruled out a return to British politics.

In June, Miliband traveled to Cairo where he delivered the 2017 graduate commencement address and received an honorary doctor of humane letters degree at the American University in Cairo. *Cairo Review* Senior Editor Amir-Hussein Radjy interviewed Miliband on the AUC campus on June 10, 2017.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The world is facing, according to the United Nations, the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War ended in 1945. What are the reasons for the failure of the international response?*

◁ David Miliband, New York, Sept. 3, 2013. *Christopher Anderson/Magnum*

DAVID MILIBAND: I think you have to look at that in two aspects. One is the generators, the drivers, of refugee crises, and the other is the response to it. I think it's important not to forget that the refugee crisis itself is the product of civil wars that are going on for longer, [and] new civil wars that are starting, and so it's important—although I don't have any easy answers—not to forget that there is a crisis of peacemaking and peacekeeping, and peace-building. That is part of the original explanation for why we are living in a time of unprecedented flows of people, at least since the Second World War.

In terms of the response, I think there are two or three things that are especially important in understanding the gap between the needs of the refugees and the level of provision that's been made. First is the sheer scale of the needs—because although the amount that's being spent has gone up, the needs have gone up faster, so part of the growing gap between needs and responses is the sheer scale of the needs. Second of all, the world hasn't come to terms with the long-term duration of displacement of refugees, the fact that refugees are out of their own country for an average of ten years—twenty-one years in the case of refugees who've been out for at least five years—so the duration of displacement is an enormous challenge to the focus of a humanitarian system that traditionally has been about helping people survive rather than helping them thrive. I think that's the big shift we need to see in humanitarian policy.

I suppose the third element is that the traditionally big donors in the West have their own economic challenges that have led to a philosophy of quote-unquote "charity begins at home." I would say to people, you should be careful, while charity begins at home, it mustn't end at home.

CAIRO REVIEW: *So you think there is a fundamental shortcoming in the design of the global humanitarian system we have today?*

DAVID MILIBAND: Yes I do. The fundamental mismatch is that the system is designed for short-term displacement of people in camps who go home quite quickly. And the system therefore has an implicit or explicit assumption—that people will go back—but actually we are living in a world where displacement is long term, displacement is urban, and people don't actually go back. That means education, employment, become extra important. That's not what the humanitarian sector has been practiced in over the last forty or fifty years, and one of the changes we are trying to bring in at the IRC is to get better at those things.

CAIRO REVIEW: *More than 80 percent of refugees are hosted in poor or developing countries, whether in Africa, the Middle East, or elsewhere—what is the burden for these countries?*

DAVID MILIBAND: High. Although I don't like thinking only in terms of burden of refugees, especially when they are coming to Western countries. It ends up becoming a very zero-sum analysis. I am going from here to Uganda; Uganda has an extraordinarily positive attitude toward refugees. It gives them land, it gives the right to work, it gives them freedom of movement, but it's now got 1.2 million refugees. So you can call that a challenge, but in other words, the challenge is burden. It is tough.

Now, Uganda has shown you can turn refugees into employers, not just employees, they are productive contributors for the local economy. It's very important that the Western world gets reminded that, whatever the media coverage of eighty-five thousand refugees coming to the U.S. and resettling last year, or Germany dealing with a million asylum claims, which is a slightly different thing—the distinction between refugee resettlement and personally claimed asylum may not be where you want to go into detail here—the numbers are small, since some 80 percent are in lower-middle income, or poor countries. And I think that has prompted the World Bank to start to take their responsibility to states that are not poor, but are hosting refugees, are delivering the public good of refugee hosting. One of the brightest spots on the humanitarian horizon is the growing interest of the World Bank playing a role in respect to refugee-hosting countries.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What is the responsibility of wealthy countries in Europe and North America to take in refugees fleeing countries like Syria?*

DAVID MILIBAND: I think they are real responsibilities. I think it is important to applaud when countries give humanitarian aid, but it's also important to say that welcoming refugees is a substantive and symbolic act. The UN identifies only the most vulnerable refugees as being those who are suitable for refugee resettlement, and the fact that only 120,000 places or so were available for refugee resettlement last year is very damaging, both substantively and symbolically.

We're an international humanitarian aid organization that's also a refugee resettlement agency in twenty-six U.S. cities. We know the value of what refugees can bring to communities, and so I have no hesitation in saying it's not enough to be a good aid provider; you should be, richer countries, Western countries, should be good at welcoming refugees as well. And, by the way, that's not only for Western countries. That could apply to countries in the Gulf as well, who I would like to see sign the UN convention on refugees, and do their own part in not just accepting workers into their economies, but also taking in vulnerable refugees.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Do you see a role model in Chancellor Angela Merkel's open-door response to the refugee crisis?*

DAVID MILIBAND: You've got to say, a role model for what? She clearly showed a big heart in her decision, but remember we were dealing with the consequences of desperation. People were fleeing directly from Syria or from its neighbors, and paying all of their savings to smugglers, and ten thousand people have died en route to Europe. So I think that Angela Merkel did something very striking in 2015, but I think that she would probably say that there needs to be more coordination and planning between European and frankly with other countries as well. It's very important to applaud the big heart that she showed, but also important to say there needs to be a big plan.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Looking at the other side of the Atlantic, how is the Donald Trump administration affecting the International Rescue Committee's work in resettling refugees in America?*

DAVID MILIBAND: So far the impact has been limited. The president has announced he wants to reduce the number of refugees who are coming to the U.S. We resettled about thirteen or fourteen thousand last year. He was threatening for this year to cut the numbers, but because of the court cases that have been brought against his executive orders, that hasn't yet come through in the kind of swingeing cuts I think he hoped for.

Obviously we are concerned that something which was bipartisan and successful in America is going to become partisan and less successful—and that's a real pity. There's a symbolic aspect to it, there's a real domino aspect to it, as a result of America withdrawing its support for refugee resettlement. And we're hoping that Congress will be active in trying to persuade the administration that this is not just a false economy, but this is a false step, in taking—not really vengeance—but taking action against the most vulnerable, the most vetted population that comes to the U.S. I would say it's harder to get to the U.S. as a refugee than any other route. It's perfectly reasonable for any U.S. administration to review the security procedures, but there's no need for them to suspend the program as they are seeking to do in order to do so.

CAIRO REVIEW: *In the Middle East, you have extensive operations in Iraq and Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, and Yemen. What are your greatest challenges in the region?*

DAVID MILIBAND: I think it's worth flagging that we were set up in 1933 by Albert Einstein to rescue Jews from Europe, and today more than half of the world's refugees are Muslim. Now we see refugees as a cause irrespective of religion, and one of the most striking things to me is that now more than a quarter of our work is in the Middle East, and we found mainly a warm welcome for what we do. We don't discriminate on the grounds of religion, and as it happens we are a secular organization, and the refugees

don't ask too many questions about who it is delivering the aid, as long as it's high quality. It's also worth saying we've recruited very high quality local staff; most of our staff are local staff, not Americans or Europeans, so we have twelve hundred local staff inside Syria and they're Syrians—ditto in Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.

I think the challenges are to do with the presence of armed opposition groups in some of the areas where we work—we had eight hospitals bombed in Syria last year.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Who was responsible for those bombings?*
DAVID MILIBAND: I haven't got a list with me of where they were, but they were all in rebel-held areas, so there are basically two potential culprits for the bombings: it's either the Syrian government, the Russians, or both of them. So that, by any stretch of the imagination, is a major challenge. Secondly, the shifting conflict lines of the Syrian conflict have been very tough. For all aid agencies it's been very tough to get cross-line aid in. Thirdly, the scale of the burden in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, means there are quite a lot of administrative restrictions that are being brought in on the refugees and that obviously affects our work as well—so there's an absorption capacity issue.

CAIRO REVIEW: *One of out of four people in Lebanon now, I think, are refugees.*
DAVID MILIBAND: It's a lot of people. They're really trying, and we are trying to help them.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Your own parents were refugees. Could you tell us about your family's story?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Yes. My dad was a refugee from Belgium in 1940, he came to England when the Germans invaded Belgium, he came with his father. My mother spent the war hiding in Poland, and came in 1946, on her own actually. In a small way really, I'm repaying the debt for some of the people who helped my family along the way.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Your mother and father had a positive experience coming to the United Kingdom?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Yes, I think so, in the way that the UK made them who they were.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Do you think things have changed in that respect? Are people less willing to help today?*
DAVID MILIBAND: I think that these things go in flows. There's often a confusion between refugees and immigrants—and obviously there was much less immigration in the 1940s and 50s in Britain than there is today, including European migration. I don't

like to go with the idea that the British people or American people have become less compassionate. I think that these are times of economic stress in the Western world, and it hasn't helped—but I wouldn't want to say that there was less compassion. I think that the 40s were an extraordinary time—my dad came in 1940, my mum in 1946—it was a unique period when needs were that much more evident.

CAIRO REVIEW: *But it would seem, looking at the popular pressure on governments today in Europe and America, that Islamophobia has become a real problem in government policy toward refugees.*

DAVID MILIBAND: Now I didn't say compassion wasn't a problem today—I said I don't think that there was necessarily less compassion than there was. It's always been polarizing. Remember there was an anti-Catholic agitation in the U.S. in the 1950s. There's a history of animus toward refugees and migrants, and there's also a history of people welcoming them. There's always been polarization. I think that today there's obviously a new factor in the refugee equation—maybe less than in the immigrant equation, because looking at the U.S. the biggest concern is immigrants coming from South America and Mexico, that's not a Muslim issue, and the biggest concern in the UK is about immigrants coming from Europe. But there is a new factor in the refugee question which is to do with the fact that half, or just over half, of the world's refugees are Muslim, and obviously there are issues about the integration of generations of Muslim immigrants who have come to Western countries over the last thirty or fifty years. One has to be specific really, and one has to be careful about talking about Islamophobia across the Western world. I think there are particular examples of hate, but there are also particular examples of extraordinary compassion and outreach.

CAIRO REVIEW: *A lot of the conversation has become about the integration of Muslim communities, whether in Britain, whether in the United States, whether in France. Do you see integration as a real issue? And looking at Britain, are British Muslims accepted by British society, or do they have problems?*

DAVID MILIBAND: Your question makes my point about the need for specificity, because the truth about the UK example is that some British Muslim communities have integrated very well, and other British Muslims have not. And I think in that sense, one has to say, integration is always a process, always a challenge, and it's always ongoing. I think that the UK experience has some very positive examples, but it's also got examples where there hasn't been enough integration. There hasn't been enough language learning, there hasn't been enough shared activity, there hasn't been enough shared schooling, there hasn't been enough sharing of the workplace and integration at the workplace, and so one has to be open to that. There's not a legislative fiat that

can resolve all those problems, but it's right to use the word integration as the goal, because that connotes to me a contribution to society, but also a respect for the heritage of where people are coming, because it speaks to plural identities, not singular identity. I think Americans are much more comfortable with the notion of a hyphenated identity, even if by no means in all cases it is successful.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is there, out of that, not enough shared values? Would you describe that as a failure of multiculturalism in the UK?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Well, I think that multiculturalism is one of the isms that gets thrown around without proper specificity. Personally, I'm happy to speak openly about the benefits of a multicultural society and the challenges of building a multicultural society. I don't seeing the building of a multicultural society as an ism. It's not an ideology or theology.

CAIRO REVIEW: *It has policy implications. The classic example is contrasting the French Republic's model of assimilation with the British one of multicultural communities.*
DAVID MILIBAND: I don't think that either of them are an ism. I think that in the French case, the ism would a republicanism, and the demand that new arrivals shed their identity. One of the reasons that I said the goal is integration is that I think that integration is the right goal, and that assimilation is the wrong goal. Now, interestingly enough, I think assimilation requires you to think two things: one, that there is a singular identity to which people are arriving at, and second that they have to shed all their previous identities when they do so. Neither of them I think are true. There was a very good speech by Roy Jenkins when he became home secretary in 1966, which makes integration the goal for public policy, and I'm very comfortable with that.

I think that you're right, ironically, that the French quote-unquote "republican" effort has led, far from the most assimilated communities, to some of the most separate and balkanized communities, and that's something you want to avoid under any circumstance.

CAIRO REVIEW: *How do you explain homegrown terrorism in Britain inspired by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, such as in the recent attacks in Manchester and London?*
DAVID MILIBAND: First of all one has to have a degree of humility about this, because the reason why anyone would want to go and blow up fellow citizens of all religions, and citizens of all around the world, is obviously something that is far beyond the understanding of any of us. I think that, in addition to professing humility and explaining it, one has to accept or understand that there is a high degree of alienation and humiliation, on the one hand, among some of these people. It takes a high degree of alienation to go and blow yourself up. And, on the other, they are being

inspired by a strain of Salafist messianism that is very dangerous. One has to look at both sides of this.

CAIRO REVIEW: *You supported the 2003 invasion of Iraq when a minister in Tony Blair's cabinet. With hindsight, did that war create the current refugee crisis? Are the United States and Britain being held responsible?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Well, I think it was wrong, the war in Iraq, but I don't think it is the sole reason for the refugee crisis today. There were obviously no weapons of mass destruction, which was the reason the government took the decision to do so. I think that if you look at Iraq today, you can't understand it by ignoring the 2003 invasion, but you can't understand it if you only look at the 2003 invasion. And so it's a very consequential episode but not the only one.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is the doctrine of armed humanitarian intervention justified, given the results of these adventures since 2001?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Well in some cases it is, but if we've learned anything else over the last twenty years, it's that you have to win the peace, as well as win the war. The lesson of all of these successful or unsuccessful adventures, whether it be in Kosovo, in Sierra Leone, or Iraq, or Afghanistan, or Libya, is that if you don't have the goal of a political settlement founded upon the legitimate and credible sharing of power between different stakeholders in a community, then whatever your military effort, whatever your development effort, whatever your diplomatic effort, it won't work.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Is the Trump administration destroying the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or British and European confidence in American leadership?*
DAVID MILIBAND: I hope not. I hope the fact that President Trump didn't mention Article 5 ten days ago, but did mention it yesterday, tells the Russians not to play any games with Baltic states or any Eastern European states. NATO has been a very successful part of global security over the past seventy years, I would argue. America is the anchor of the global system in many ways, and certainly the anchor of NATO, and NATO is an alliance of values, and I think it would be tragic if it was undermined. I think that it's very important that the new administration sees that its words matter, because everyone's listening.

CAIRO REVIEW: *With Brexit, how do you see Britain's role in Europe and the world changing?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Well, I was very strongly against Brexit. I said it was the greatest single unilateral, voluntary renunciation of political power in world history,

but the British people didn't listen to me, and they voted for it anyway. It leaves major questions about how a medium-sized country, albeit one that's the seventh or sixth largest economy in the world, plays a role in foreign policy, and the danger is that Britain ends up without a foreign policy.

CAIRO REVIEW: *The stunning June 8 election results in Britain reversed Conservative Party fortunes and saw a surge in Labour's support. What's your reaction?*
DAVID MILIBAND: I think that it's good that Labour has more MPs, it's good that a brutal Brexit has been rejected, and it's good that young people voted in such numbers. But obviously one's got to have fears about the consequences for Brexit negotiations.

CAIRO REVIEW: *What do you expect from Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Anyone who predicts the future now, given the inability to predict the election results, is inviting derision.

CAIRO REVIEW: *Do you think the result, especially among the youth vote, vindicates Jeremy Corbyn's swing to the left, which I believe you were very critical of?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Yes, well—I think that he undoubtedly struck a chord with parts of the country, and that the commitment to relieve students of their tuition fee costs is, according to the commentators, one of the explanations for that, so I am happy to be generous about that, and obviously the challenge for all the political parties in Britain now is to figure out how to become majority parties, not just minority parties.

CAIRO REVIEW: *When will you be back in Britain, and active in British politics again?*
DAVID MILIBAND: Oh well—really the truthful answer to that is I don't know. I've got a job I'm really committed to, it's a job that is addressing some of the most challenging global crises, and it's actually making a practical difference. One of the things I've learned in my career is that it's important to combine an interest in ideas with an interest in making a practical difference.