

The RCLF Minute, Issue 3

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Syrian Refugees: Driving the Need for a Political Resolution.

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The Syria refugee crisis is occurring against the backdrop of the largest refugee and displacement crisis since World War II, as conflict and famine have driven people from places like Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Myanmar, Honduras, South Sudan, Yemen, Somalia, northern Nigeria, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to the United Nations, there are 60 million people displaced in the world today and the international community is not prepared to handle these numbers. Humanitarian organizations are already strained and are ill-equipped to meet the needs of the displaced. The consequences of population displacement are increasingly complex and it is unclear which country is responsible for addressing them. Wealthy, developed countries have become increasingly reluctant to host refugees and underdeveloped nations who are forced to host refugees due to their geographic proximity to conflict zones, lack the resources to manage them. These conflicts need diplomatic and political resolutions to ensure that positive peace can occur, but no country has been willing to lead this effort.

As the Syrian civil war enters its eighth year, no reasonable end is in sight. In March 2011, the Arab Spring came to Syrian when pro-democracy protests erupted in the southern Syrian city of Deraa after the arrest of teenagers who had painted revolutionary slogans on a school wall. Security forces opened fire on the protestors, which triggered nationwide unrest with protests demanding regime change. The heavy-handed response of President Bashar Assad's security forces facilitated the descent into civil war. Opposition groups armed themselves initially to defend themselves but began attacking Syrian government forces. Rebel groups were formed, and the fighting reached Damascus by 2012. The conflict has taken on sectarian tones that have put the country's Sunni majority against the President's Shi'a Alawite sect, and was further complicated when ISIS entered the arena.

The conflict has drawn in a number of major regional and world powers, though their interests in the survival of President Bashar al-Assad and the various rebel groups vary. In 2015, the Army of Conquest, or Jaish al-Fatah in Arabic, entered the Syrian conflict as a loose alliance of armed rebel groups joined together to fight the Syrian government military forces. The alliance joins together several mostly Islamist factions, which include al-Nusra Front, Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya, and rebel factions that have received covert arms from the US and its allies.¹ The Gulf countries have been large supporters of the Army of Conquest. Saudi Arabia has been a major military and financial supporter of rebel groups with Islamist ideologies and has joined

¹ "A Look at the Army of Conquest, a Prominent Rebel Alliance in Syria." The New York Times - Breaking News, World News & Multimedia. Last modified October 1, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/02/world/middleeast/syria-russia-airstrikes-rebels-army-conquest-jaish-al-fatah.html>.

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the US-led coalition air campaign against ISIS. Saudi focus has been to counter Iran's role in the conflict.

Qatar's position has been at odds with Saudi Arabia because of its support for the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. While Saudi Arabia has to ensure that it does not support opposition groups that can then destabilize the Kingdom, Qatar does not have any concerns about its internal stability because its internal dynamics are not currently impacted by sectarian divisions. The lack of concern about sectarian tensions, has allowed Qatar to be more flexible in its approach to Syria. Unlike Qatar, Bahrain's concerns over its own Shia majority population is at the forefront of its thinking regarding its policy in Syria. Bahrain, cognizant of its own experience with a Shi'a uprising in 2011, has called for reconciliation between warring factions in Syria. Kuwait's position has also been one of reconciliation, as it treads carefully not to awaken extremist forces within its own borders. Kuwait has provided a great deal of humanitarian aid to the civilian population within Syria.

On September 30, 2015, Russia's Parliament approved President Putin's request to military intervene in the conflict. This was Russia's first military intervention in the Middle East in decades. While Russia has officially stated that it has intervened to defeat ISIS and terrorist groups, the Russian military has hit rebel groups backed by the CIA. By receiving help from Iran and Russia, the tide has turned in Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's favor and he continues to retain his grip on power. Iran has reportedly invested upwards of \$6 billion dollars a year in the Syrian civil war and has provided the Syrian government with military advisers, subsidized weapons, as well as oil transfers. In protecting the Assad regime, Iran is hoping to maintain Syria as the main transit point for Iranian weapons to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

Russia's actions in Syria in September 2015 have not only protected President Assad from being removed from power but their military intervention was enough to ensure that Assad's government regained much of the territory that was previously lost to the rebels. The willingness of the Russian government to commit its military forces to the Syrian conflict has made Russia the most influential player in Syria. Russia maintains a close relationship with Iran, Turkey, and Israel and is helping to negotiate an understanding between Iran and Israel regarding their role in Syria.² The United States and European players such as France and Britain continue to play a role in the Syrian civil war but their role is primarily driven by their mission to fight and defeat ISIS in the Syrian theater. Throughout the Obama administration and now during the early years of the Trump administration, US policy on Syria has not yet been clearly defined.

² Pavel K Baev. "Russia Stumbles in the Fog of Syrian War." Brookings. Last modified February 21, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/21/russia-stumbles-in-the-fog-of-syrian-war/>.

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Location name	Source	Data date	Population
Turkey	Government of Turkey, UNHCR	12 Apr 2018	63.4% 3,578,246
Lebanon	UNHCR	31 Mar 2018	17.6% 991,165
Jordan	UNHCR	7 Apr 2018	11.7% 661,859
Iraq	UNHCR	31 Mar 2018	4.4% 248,382
Egypt	UNHCR	31 Mar 2018	2.3% 128,507
Other (North Africa)	UNHCR	15 Mar 2018	0.6% 33,545

Source: UNHCR

At the center of this conflict is the Syrian civilian population. Estimates of the total dead are not available as comprehensive monitoring by international players has not occurred; however, in March 2018 the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights estimated that about 511,000 have been killed in the war.³ UNHCR estimates that 13.1 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in Syria, 6.1 million are internally displaced persons, and 5.6 million are registered refugees.⁴

The vast majority of the Syrian refugees have settled in the Levant region causing a strain on social resources such as education, electricity, water, sanitation, and healthcare. Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan have proportionally taken in the largest share of refugees, and their social welfare systems are now overwhelmed and overburdened by the influx of Syrian refugees within their borders. Despite the generosity of these host countries, they simply do not have the resources to address the needs of the refugee population. According to UNHCR, in Lebanon 70 percent of Syrian refugees live below the poverty line and in Jordan, 80 percent of Syrian refugees are below the national poverty line.⁵ While Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan have maintained an open-door policy towards the Syrian refugees, the scale of the crisis, has led to polarization and a growing sense of insecurity amongst the local population and the refugees. Measures need to be in place that would grant refugees work authorization and greater access to schools and health care, in order to create a path of self-reliance for the Syrian refugees.

In 2016, King Abdullah II of Jordan warned that by hosting a such a great number of Syrian refugees his country was at a “boiling point” and that the lack of sufficient international support was exacerbating the situation.⁶ In Jordan, Syrian refugees are also competing with Palestinian

³ "Syrian Observatory Says War Has Killed More Than Half a Million." U.S. Last modified March 12, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-observatory-says-war-has-killed-more-than-half-a-million-idUSKCN1GO13M>.

⁴ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Syria Emergency." UNHCR. Last modified April 2018. <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html>.

⁵ "2017 Planning Summary: Subregion Middle East." UNHCR Global Focus. Last modified 2017. <http://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/pdfsummaries/GA2017-MiddleEast-eng.pdf>.

⁶ "The Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Need for U.S. Leadership." Human Rights First. Last modified February 2016. <https://www.humanrightsfirst.org/resource/syrian-refugee-crisis-and-need-us-leadership>.

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refugees who have long been in the kingdom. In 2013, Jordanian Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh said, “Jordan is not the place to solve the problems of Israel, and it has made a clear and explicit sovereign decision to not allow the crossing into Jordan by our Palestinian brothers who hold Syrian documents. Receiving those brothers is a red line because that would be a prelude to another wave of displacement, which is what the Israeli government wants.”⁷ This highlights the role that the refugee crisis plays in the tensions between Israel and Jordan. There is also growing tension between the refugees and the local population as the “influx of refugees has driven down wages while simultaneously increasing rent and unemployment, which rose from 14.5 percent to 22.1 percent between 2011 and 2014 in areas with high concentrations of Syrian refugees.”⁸

While Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt have hosted large numbers of Syrian refugees, the Gulf Arab countries, have refused to open their borders to the Syrian refugees. The role of the various Gulf Arab countries in the Syrian conflict is complicated, as they arm and support rebels that are at times working in opposition of one another despite uniformly working in opposition to the Syrian military forces. Arab countries of the Gulf region including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are not signatories to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees nor have they signed on to the 1967 Protocol. This is significant because it signals that these countries, despite their wealth and close proximity to Syria, as well as their shared common language and culture, have not put in place the legislative or administrative procedures that would facilitate Syrian refugees to settle within their countries. These countries have argued that they are hosting large numbers of Syrians but refer to them as “Arab brothers and sisters in need” and not refugees; however, this claim is disputed by a number of international groups such as Amnesty International.⁹

The six Gulf states have responded to the Syrian refugee crisis by providing substantial financial donations. Saudi Arabia in particular, is the largest donor of humanitarian aid in the region and in April 2018 the Kingdom signed an agreement with UNHCR to aid Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In 2013, Saudi Arabia also committed to providing Jordan with \$10 billion to help manage the refugee crisis. While they have invested billions of dollars in supplies and weaponry to oust the Assad regime and in humanitarian relief, the wealthy Gulf states have not altered their policy on hosting the refugees within their borders. The Gulf states are concerned that allowing Syrian refugees to permanently take residence within their borders would present a demographic and security threat.

⁷ "Saudi Arabia to Aid Jordan with Syrian Refugees." The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com. Last modified January 1, 2013. <https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Saudi-Arabia-to-aid-Jordan-with-Syrian-refugees>.

⁸ Caryl, Christian. "If You Think Europe Has a Refugee Crisis, You're Not Looking Hard Enough." Foreign Policy. Last modified February 2, 2016. <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/02/the-weakest-links-syria-refugees-migrants-crisis-data-visualization/>.

⁹ "Syria's Refugee Crisis in Numbers." Home | Amnesty International. Last modified September 4, 2015. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/09/syrias-refugee-crisis-in-numbers/>.

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Despite not allowing them to enter as refugees, Syrians are allowed to settle in Arab Gulf countries if they are able to successfully obtain either a visa or a residency permit. This is extremely difficult and time consuming to do as Syrians who have fled their countries do not have proper documents and resources to go through the process. Sudan, Algeria, Yemen, Djibouti, and Mauritania are the only other Arab nations that have allowed Syrians to legally enter without a visa. As a result, all five nations host significant numbers of Syrian, as well as Iraqi and Yemeni, refugees. Unfortunately, as undeveloped nations, these countries do not have the infrastructure and administrative procedures in place that would allow for an accurate assessment on the numbers of Syrians within their borders. Arab refugees from the aforementioned conflict areas are also competing for access to health care, employment, and education with sub-Saharan economic migrants who are in Sudan, Djibouti, Mauritania, Algeria, and Yemen, as well as the local population.

Europe as a whole, is proportionally hosting far fewer Syrian refugees than the headlines would indicate, given Western European capacity to host refugees. However, the numbers are substantial and even the perception of a large number is enough to have consequences for the political and security environment of Europe. In 2015 alone, Europe received more than 1 million refugees and migrants, about half of them Syrians. These individuals fled by sea to Europe and NATO has responded by launching a mission to counter the smuggling operations, successfully closing many of the sea routes. European countries are under pressure to host Syrian refugees and the topic has shifted the political landscape in much of Europe. Nationalism, coupled with xenophobia are on the rise in parts of Europe including Germany, France, Greece, Italy, and Austria.

The greatest example of the political consequences of hosting large refugee numbers can be found in Germany's experience. In the Fall 2015, German Chancellor Angela Merkel announced Germany's 'open-door policy' and the suspension of the Dublin Procedure for Syrians, declaring "Wir schaffen das" or "We can do this."¹⁰ Germany aimed to take in 1.1 million refugees from war-torn parts of the world including Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq. By the end of the 2015, Germany had managed to open over 1,000 refugee centers to house the influx of refugees as their asylum papers and security checks were processed. By the end of 2016, Germany had managed to process 890,000 refugees. However, Merkel experienced tremendous political backlash as a result and her 'open-door policy' haunted her during her reelection campaign. Merkel responded by implementing a policy to speed up deportations of failed asylum seekers, especially Afghans, back to their country of origin. Despite Merkel's success in the election, Alternative for Germany (AfD) party successfully entered the Bundestag (the German parliament), by running on an anti-immigrant platform, as the third largest party.

¹⁰ Deutsche Welle (www.dw.com). "Two Years Since Germany Opened Its Borders to Refugees: A Chronology | DW | 04.09.2017." DW.COM. Accessed April 24, 2018. <http://www.dw.com/en/two-years-since-germany-opened-its-borders-to-refugees-a-chronology/a-40327634>.

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The Syrian refugee crisis is just one example of the overwhelming global migration situation and it exemplifies how spillover effects from war are not contained regionally, but rather impact the global community. The global reaching consequences of the Syrian refugee crisis drives the need for international cooperation in order to resolve the crisis. A peace agreement between the numerous warring factions is the only long-term solution that'll address the violence that has driven the displacement in the first place. Syria already has an example in its neighbor Lebanon, who signed the al-Taif Agreement in 1989, effectively ending the Lebanese civil war.