



American ideals. Universal values.



The Syrian Refugee Crisis and the Need for U.S. Leadership

Executive Summary

February 2016

ON HUMAN RIGHTS, the United States must be a beacon. Activists fighting for freedom around the globe continue to look to us for inspiration and count on us for support. Upholding human rights is not only a moral obligation; it's a vital national interest. America is strongest when our policies and actions match our values.

Human Rights First is an independent advocacy and action organization that challenges America to live up to its ideals. We believe American leadership is essential in the struggle for human rights so we press the U.S. government and private companies to respect human rights and the rule of law. When they don't, we step in to demand reform, accountability, and justice. Around the world, we work where we can best harness American influence to secure core freedoms.

We know that it is not enough to expose and protest injustice, so we create the political environment and policy solutions necessary to ensure consistent respect for human rights. Whether we are protecting refugees, combating torture, or defending persecuted minorities, we focus not on making a point, but on making a difference. For over 30 years, we've built bipartisan coalitions and teamed up with frontline activists and lawyers to tackle issues that demand American leadership.

Human Rights First is a nonprofit, nonpartisan international human rights organization based in New York and Washington D.C. To maintain our independence, we accept no government funding.

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COVER PHOTO: Thousands of Syrian's cross into Yumurtalik, Turkey, fleeing the advance of ISIS into Kobani, Syria. © John Stanmeyer/National Geographic Creative/Corbis

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Executive Summary

We believe that America can and should continue to provide refuge to those fleeing violence and persecution without compromising the security and safety of our nation. To do otherwise would be contrary to our nation's traditions of openness and inclusivity, and would undermine our core objective of combating terrorism.

Bipartisan group of former U.S. National Security Advisors, CIA Directors, Secretaries of State, DHS Secretaries, and Retired Military Leaders, December 2015

Poised to enter its sixth year in March 2016, the conflict in Syria has displaced more than 11 million people. About 4.7 million have fled the country, the vast majority to neighboring states. About 100,000 refugees and migrants—half of them Syrians—fled to Europe by sea in January and February 2016 alone. More than 3,800 perished at sea in 2015. This is a humanitarian disaster. The failure to effectively address the humanitarian crisis has spiraled into a threat to the stability of the region surrounding Syria, the cohesion of the European Union, and the national security of the United States. On February 11, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton B. Carter announced U.S. backing of a NATO mission to stop the smuggling operations that transport people to Europe's shores, or to “stem this tide” as Secretary of State John F. Kerry said a few days later. With the outcome of the limited two-week “cessation of hostilities” in Syria in doubt, the conflicts within the country—and therefore the refugee crisis—offer no promise of abating.

According to the United Nations, there are more than 60 million people displaced in the world today—the highest numbers since World War II—and Syrians account for the greatest number of

these uprooted people. In 2014 and 2015, the international community failed to fully meet appeals for humanitarian aid and resettlement for Syrian refugees. Without sufficient support, the strain on the frontline refugee-hosting countries—including Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey—increased sharply. Across the region, governments and relief agencies cut food assistance, access to medical care and other essentials, deepening the suffering of refugees, who are generally prohibited from working legally in these states.

In the absence of adequate responsibility-sharing by other countries, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey imposed restrictions that denied entry to Syrian refugees and made it more difficult for those who had succeeded in fleeing to neighboring countries to remain in the region. As the Syrian government's Russian-backed attacks on Aleppo intensified in February 2016, tens of thousands of Syrians fled to the Turkish border, only to be barred from entering. At the same time, roughly 20,000 Syrian refugees have been stranded in a remote desert area at Jordan's border, which has been largely closed to refugees during the last two years. Beginning in January 2015, Lebanon implemented border restrictions that generally bar Syrians and initiated onerous registration requirements for remaining in the country that most refugees cannot meet. Not only do such border restrictions violate international law, they leave some Syrians trapped in a war-ravaged country. Prohibitions on entry, stay, and work also push refugees to seek protection outside the region.

As conditions in—and access to—frontline countries has sharply declined, many Syrians have embarked on dangerous journeys to Europe.

More than one million refugees and migrants—about half of them Syrian—traveled by sea to Europe during 2015. While the continent is hosting far fewer Syrian refugees than the frontline states, the numbers are nonetheless significant, and the arrivals of refugees and migrants—along with the lack of responsibility-sharing, absence of orderly registration and security screening procedures, and the effort of right-wing extremists to exploit the issue—is creating conflict both within and between European countries.

After World War II, the United States helped establish an international system grounded in the shared conviction that people fleeing persecution should never again be turned back to face horror or death. And since then, the country has often been a leader on refugee-protection, and has been *the* global leader on refugee resettlement. In response to the Syrian refugee crisis, however, it has failed to lead. While the United States has been the largest donor to humanitarian appeals, a February 2016 “fair share” analysis by Oxfam concluded that it had contributed only 76 percent of its fair share to humanitarian appeals for the Syria crisis and only 7 percent of its fair share of resettlement places to Syrian refugees.

In September 2015, Secretary of State Kerry announced that the United States would resettle “at least 10,000” Syrian refugees during the 2016 fiscal year, a modest pledge given the scale of the crisis and the capacity of the United States. Then, in late 2015, following the terrorist attacks in Paris, the resettlement of Syrian refugees became the target of intense political debate. Some politicians and members of Congress pushed for a halt to resettlement of Syrian refugees, saying they questioned whether security vetting was adequate, and some even proposed shutting out

all Muslims. Human Rights First researchers traveling in the region learned that this rhetoric was reverberating on the frontlines, sending the wrong message to U.S. allies in the region and to refugees themselves, some of whom gave up hope of waiting for resettlement and instead decided to head to Europe.

A bipartisan group of former U.S. government officials, including ones with national security and humanitarian expertise, called on the United States in a September 2015 letter to resettle 100,000 Syrian refugees, over and above the worldwide refugee ceiling of 70,000. Such a commitment would, they said, “send a powerful signal to governments in Europe and the Middle East about their obligations to do more.” Christian and Jewish faith leaders have also called on the United States to resettle Syrian refugees, as has the Bipartisan U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, stating that, “The United States must continue to live up to our nation’s core values.”

By leading an effort to resolve this crisis, the U.S. government would not only live up to its ideals; it would also advance its own interests. Ryan Crocker, former U.S. Ambassador to Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, has explained that, “A U.S. initiative to resettle Syrian refugees in the United States affirmatively advances U.S. national security interests. Increased resettlement and aid helps protect the stability of a region that is home to U.S. allies.” In a December 2015 letter to Congress, a bipartisan group of former national security advisors, CIA directors, secretaries of state, and Department of Homeland Security secretaries likewise pointed out that “resettlement initiatives help advance U.S. national security interests by supporting the stability of our allies and partners that are struggling to host large

numbers of refugees.” They also pointed out that refugees “are vetted more intensively than any other category of traveler” and cautioned that barring Syrian refugees “feeds the narrative of ISIS that there is a war between Islam and the West.” They urged the U.S. government to reject “this worldview by continuing to offer refuge to the world’s most vulnerable people, regardless of their religion or nationality.” A copy of their letter is attached as an appendix to this report.

In January and February 2016, Human Rights First conducted research on the conditions facing refugees in the region surrounding Syria and the progress of U.S. resettlement processing. Researchers gathered information through interviews and meetings in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt. Our findings, detailed in this report, include:

- **Syrian refugees are increasingly at risk, and suffer sharply deteriorating conditions, across the region.** States have closed their borders, blocking civilians from escaping Syria, and imposed restrictions that make it difficult for many refugees living in the region to remain, prohibit most from working legally, and leave them in constant fear of detention and deportation back to Syria. These measures have also triggered a rise in child labor and early marriage of teenage daughters. In Jordan, half the refugee families have children as primary or joint primary bread-winners according to UNICEF. Under these conditions, many refugees cannot survive, much less rebuild their lives.
- **The lack of effective regional protection, exacerbated by the lack of assistance and insufficient orderly resettlement or visa routes for refugees, is driving many Syrians to embark on dangerous trips to Europe.**

Roughly half the refugees in Jordan were thinking of taking the dangerous trip to Europe given the lack of permission to work and insufficient assistance, according to a survey by CARE International. In Turkey primarily, and also in Jordan and Lebanon, we heard reports that refugees who had been struggling to survive for years in exile lost hope in waiting longer for potential resettlement and decided to instead take the dangerous trip to Europe.

- **The failure to adequately address the refugee crisis is harming U.S. national security interests, threatening the stability of frontline states bordering Syria and contributing to disunity in Europe.** In Jordan, Lebanon, and parts of Turkey, the large number of refugees is straining critical infrastructures—water, sanitation, medical care, education and housing, as well as economic and job markets. This is a threat to regional stability that the international community has failed to alleviate through sufficient assistance, development investment and resettlement initiatives.
- **Turkey’s January 2016 announcement that it will allow Syrian refugees to work, if effectively implemented, will be an important step towards improving protection for Syrian refugees that should be replicated by other states.**

U.S. resettlement processing centers and government agencies are working hard to try to meet U.S. goals for admitting Syrian refugees, and the number of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officers interviewing Syrian refugees is increasing. Still, a range of factors related to the processing of U.S. resettlement and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) cases are undermining American leadership and the ability of the United States to advance its humanitarian,

human rights, and foreign policy objectives. Our findings on U.S. resettlement processing, detailed in this report, include:

■ **U.S. pledges to resettle Syrian refugees have fallen far short of the necessary leadership**, given the scale of the crisis, the overall resettlement needs—which exceed 460,000—and the impact of the crisis on U.S. allies, regional stability, and U.S. national security interests. With its pledge to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees this fiscal year, the United States has agreed to take in only about 2 percent of the Syrian refugees in need of resettlement, which amounts to less than 0.2 percent of the overall Syrian refugee population of 4.7 million. This lackluster response has been particularly detrimental given the traditional U.S. role as the global resettlement leader.

■ **The United States government obtains significant amounts of information about, and rigorously vets, Syrian refugees resettled to the United States, who come primarily from Jordan and Turkey where they have been struggling to survive for years.** This vetting is the most rigorous of any travelers to the United States. It entails multiple interviews and involves numerous U.S. and international intelligence and law enforcement agencies, including the National Counterterrorism Center, the Department of Defense, and Interpol, which have extensive databases on foreign fighters, suspected terrorists, and stolen, false, and blank passports from Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. This vetting includes access to information provided by many other countries, including those in the region surrounding Syria.

■ **U.S. resettlement processing continues to be hampered by some bottlenecks, backlogs, and staffing gaps**, which undermine the United States' ability to meet its humanitarian, protection, and foreign policy goals. Despite significant U.S. efforts to step up resettlement processing, these backlogs and staffing gaps make it difficult for the United States to meet even its modest commitment to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees. As of January 31, one-third of the way through the fiscal year, the United States had resettled only 841 out of the 10,000 Syrian refugees it pledged to resettle by September 30, 2016. Processing deficiencies include:

- Backlogs due to insufficient DHS staff to review several thousand cases on hold in which no decision has yet been made
- Backlogs due to insufficient DHS and security vetting agency staff and prioritization to conduct follow-up inquiries on both refugee cases and cases of Special Immigrant Visa applicants who worked for the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan
- Lack of space at the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon which has long impeded U.S. resettlement from Lebanon
- Cuts in UNHCR funding that may limit its capacity to identify, review, and refer cases and lack of other avenues for referring refugee cases for resettlement
- Insufficient capacity to expedite protection and resettlement for refugees facing imminent risks of harm, including LGBT refugees

■ **Iraqi refugees and many Iraqis who worked with the United States military or other U.S. entities are also stranded in the region.** As of

January 2016, more than 50,000 Iraqis, including many who worked for the U.S. military and government, are caught in a backlog. Many have been waiting years to be brought to safety in the United States.

While the resolution of the conflicts within Syria must occur before significant numbers of Syrian refugees can safely return home (and even then there will be many Syrian refugees who cannot safely return depending on the security, political and human rights realities on the ground as well as the nature of their past persecution), there is much that the United States and the international community should do to help Syria's refugees. Secretary of State John F. Kerry pledged \$925 million in aid at the February 4, 2016 donor conference in London, the United States should pledge increased resettlement at a high level meeting in Geneva on March 30, 2016 and the United States will host a conference on the global refugee crisis in September 2016. However, as outlined in the full set of recommendations later in this report, the United States must lead a comprehensive global effort to successfully address the crisis.

In order to effectively lead, to press other states to do more, and to advance its foreign policy interests, the United States must significantly increase its own humanitarian assistance, development investment, and resettlement commitments. Specifically, the United States should:

1. Work with other donor states to fully meet humanitarian appeals and significantly increase U.S. humanitarian aid and development investments in frontline refugee hosting states. In particular, with Congress' support, the administration should substantially increase both U.S. humanitarian

assistance for Syrian refugees and displaced persons and U.S. development aid. The United States and other donors should expand and replicate initiatives that increase opportunities for refugees to work and access education, while also supporting refugee-hosting communities.

2. Champion the protection of the rights of refugees, including their right to work, access education, and cross borders in order to escape persecution. The U.S. president and secretary of state should redouble efforts to press states to allow refugees to cross borders to access international protection. The United States should also ensure that NATO actions, as well as any proposed "safe zone," "no fly zone," or similar endeavors, do not violate the human rights of refugees and migrants, including the right to flee persecution and seek asylum, and do not end up exposing civilians to dangers. UNHCR has cautioned that NATO's mission—to "close off a key access route" to "stem this tide," according to Secretary Kerry—should not "undermine the institution of asylum for people in need of international protection." Efforts to block people from crossing borders to secure protection often instead push them—and the smugglers who profit off migration barriers and human misery—to find other, sometimes riskier, routes.

3. Substantially increase the U.S. resettlement commitment. For fiscal year 2017, the U.S. government should, in addition to resettling refugees from other countries, aim to resettle 100,000 Syrian refugees, a commitment more commensurate with both the American tradition of leadership and U.S. national security interests. This commitment would be miniscule

compared to that of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and would amount to just over 2 percent of the overall Syrian population hosted by these and other states in the region and only about 21 percent of the overall resettlement need, estimated to exceed 460,000. This commitment would still fall far short of the U.S. “fair share” level of 163,392. Still, it would help push other countries to increase resettlement, visa, and other humanitarian admission places for Syrian refugees.

4. Address staffing gaps to reduce backlogs and bottlenecks in resettlement and SIV processing. DHS should immediately increase staffing and resources to resolve the several thousand Syrian resettlement cases waiting their turn for review in “no decision” hold. Over the next year, DHS should also increase the size of its refugee corps to meet U.S. admissions goals, and assure cases are not delayed waiting for DHS interviews. In addition, to prevent extended processing delays, the President should direct DHS and U.S. security vetting agencies to increase staffing and resources for SIV and resettlement cases. Congress should encourage and support increases in staff and resources. These backlogs undermine the reputation of these programs and the country’s ability to meet its commitments to U.S. allies, other refugee-hosting countries, and vulnerable refugees, including those facing grave risks due to their

work with the United States. Addressing backlogs would *not* undermine security; rather it would strengthen the effectiveness of U.S. processing. It is certainly not in the security interest of the United States to have delays in security vetting, which would potentially put off the identification of a person who might actually pose a security threat.

5. Appoint a high-level assistant to the president charged with refugee protection.

The world faces the largest refugee and displacement crisis since World War II. The president should appoint a high level official to ensure strong U.S. leadership of efforts—across U.S. agencies—to address the global refugee crisis, advance the protection of refugees at home and abroad, and coordinate effective and timely U.S. resettlement and SIV processing. This senior official should also map out a plan for effective transition of leadership on these matters to the next administration.

In the United States, the Syrian refugee crisis has—at least for the moment—fallen off the front pages. Yet its impact on people and the stability of key U.S. allies and refugee-hosting countries increases with each passing day, and year. It’s long past time for the United States to lead.

This report illuminates the challenges posed by the refugee crisis and explains how the United States, in conjunction with its allies, should tackle them.



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