



Refugee Crises in the Middle East: A Shared Responsibility

May 18, 2016

Casa Italiana, Washington DC

Remarks for Session III: International Community and US Government Response
to Refugees from the Middle East

by Simon Henshaw

Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary, Bureau of Population, Refugees & Migration,
US Department of State

Thank you, Shelly, for outlining the dimensions of the worst displacement crisis the world has witnessed since World War II.

Every day the global repercussions of the Syrian crisis – and the conflicts that fuel it seem to widen and deepen.

We will not relent in pushing for humanitarian access for all those in need and a political settlement that can finally put an end to this catastrophic war.

In the five years that it has raged, it has killed hundreds of thousands of Syrians, displaced half the population, and driven nearly five million men, women and children into exile.

Its effects have been felt far beyond Syria's borders.

Lebanon is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, one already roiled by political, demographic, and sectarian pressures and a fragile economy. One in five people living in Lebanon is a refugee from Syria.

In Jordan, nearly 80,000 Syrian refugees live in just one camp, called Za'atri. But the vast majority – more than 80 percent of refugees – live outside of camps, in poor neighborhoods, where water is scarce, social services are strained, hospitals are overcrowded and schools do not have enough classrooms.

Turkey now hosts nearly three million refugees and more Syrians than any other country. The Government of Turkey reports that it has spent billions of dollars providing shelter, health care, and other services. But life for refugees is hard, in part because most do not speak Turkish.

For many Syrian refugees, years of exile and frustration have whittled life down to a daily struggle for survival. Their savings are exhausted and many in cities and towns are falling deeper and deeper into poverty.

Fighting in Iraq continues to terrorize and scatter civilians as well.

Since January 2014, nearly three and a half million people have been displaced, many by the Da'esh rampage across a third of the country – its cruel fanaticism, and its quest to enslave, kill, and to erase history.

Nearly a third of Iraq's population urgently needs humanitarian assistance, including an estimated three million living in territory still held by Da'esh that aid agencies are rarely able to reach to provide protection and life-saving aid.

Our government is committed to aiding the millions of people swept up in these crises. Our nation has provided more humanitarian aid in response to the Syria crisis than any other nation. Total US contributions now stand at \$5.1 billion.

Last month Secretary of State John Kerry announced nearly \$155 million in additional humanitarian assistance to displaced and vulnerable Iraqis bringing the total US contribution to \$778 million since the start of Fiscal Year 2014.

The State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration provides most of this assistance by funding the work of International Organizations. These include the UN refugee agency (UNHCR), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF), among others. We also support non-governmental organizations that work in this field. The U.S. Agency for International Development also funds the World Food Program and other organizations that respond to emergencies.

These operations deliver essential life-saving assistance: food, shelter, medical care clean water and sanitation. They protect the rights of the displaced, care for survivors of sexual violence, reunify families, educate children and youth and help people gain the skills they need to be self-sufficient.

U.S. humanitarian leadership and diplomacy are indispensable. In crisis after crisis it has helped countries keep borders open and aid flowing. This has saved millions of lives.

Most displaced people who flee across borders stay in neighboring countries and hope to one day return home. The vast majority of Syrian refugees, more than 4.8 million Syrian men, women and children, remain in the region.

But like people anywhere, refugees need more than food and shelter. They need the chance to live in dignity, and they need a reason to hope.

Last year more than a million men, women and children crossed into Europe from the Middle East and North Africa. And more than four thousand lost their lives when their flimsy boats capsized or sank.

We believe empowering refugees to be productive and self-sufficient, to build a future where they are, can discourage dangerous sea voyages. We encourage host countries to allow adults to work and children to attend school, and are pleased that Syria's neighbors are moving to offer more legal work permits and enroll more Syrian children in public schools.

Secretary Kerry and other diplomats are working around the world and around the clock to stop violent conflicts, put an end to persecution, and make it safe for refugees to return home.

But today, conflicts often drag on for years. While we continue to work to end conflicts so that refugees can return home and continue to work to improve the conditions for refugees in countries of first asylum, for some refugees, especially the most vulnerable, resettlement to a third country may be the best option.

While less than one percent of all refugees world-wide are resettled, the need for resettlement opportunities has never been greater. Displacement has reached record levels, and the number of refugees able to safely return home has dropped to a thirty year low. The United Nations has estimated that close to half a million Syrians need new permanent homes away from the region.

The United States resettles more refugees than any other nation. Since 1975, Americans have welcomed over 3.2 million from all over the world. The refugees we resettle are the ones most in need of a safe home. They may belong to a persecuted religious or ethnic minority, they may be victims of torture, survivors of atrocities, women at risk or children with severe medical conditions that urgently need treatment. They may be activists or journalists who jeopardized their lives by championing human rights or simply telling the truth.

In response to the UN's call for more resettlement, we are expanding our program – increasing the numbers we will admit, from roughly 70,000 in each of the past three fiscal years, to 85,000 for this fiscal year. Of this total, we aim to admit at least 10,000 refugees from Syria.

Gearing up to do this has required an enormous effort and has been logistically challenging. We are committed to reaching President Obama's 2016 targets and have been working with our partners to build the capacity required, adding human and other resources.

The Departments of State and Homeland Security worked together to send additional staff to Jordan, and between February and April and the U.S. Customs and Immigration Service (USCIS) interviewed almost 12,000 applicants who had been referred by UNHCR for refugee resettlement in the United States.

We also restarted DHS refugee resettlement interviews in Beirut in February, and we expect to continue conducting these interviews regularly. Late last year we began processing refugee resettlement cases in Erbil, Iraq and this will continue as well.

We expect Syrian refugee arrivals to the U.S. to increase steadily throughout the fiscal year. Expediting admissions does not mean cutting corners or curtailing the robust security screening process. All applicants for resettlement remain subject to the same stringent requirements.

Refugees are the most thoroughly screened category of traveler to the United States, and Syrian refugees are subjected to even more screening. These checks involve multiple U.S. agencies.

The United States government is determined both to safeguard the American public and offer refuge to some of the world's most vulnerable people. We do not believe these goals are mutually exclusive.

As the President has said, "slamming the door in the face of refugees would betray our deepest values."

The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program has always relied on strong local support, and we are confident that American communities will continue to open their doors and hearts, as they have done for generations.

In the past, however much politicians argued over other matters, they agreed that we have a fundamental moral duty to protect innocent civilians scattered by crises. Our refugee admissions program has been a source of pride – not acrimony.

Behind the policy debates and statistics are real individual human beings, with stories, dreams, and lives that were shattered through no fault of their own.

And like those who have come before them, they will bring energy, dynamism, a desire to work hard and a deep appreciation for the blessings of safety and freedom our country offers.

Refugees reinvent themselves here, determine to seize opportunities and make a better life for their children. They start businesses, revitalize communities. They make our culture more vibrant and our nation stronger.

Thank you to all of you who have championed compassion over fear, and remind all of us of our fundamental duty to help others in their hour of need.

And along with you, I look forward to hearing more from Bob Carey, about steps the U.S. Government is taking to help communities across the country welcome and integrate refugees.