

How Should the US Respond to the European Refugee Crisis?

During the past year, the on-going civil war in Syria has sent a flood of refugees migrating to European countries in hopes of finding a better future. According to the UN, nearly 9 million Syrians have been displaced by the war, including more than 4 million who have fled the country. The exodus from war-torn Syria should never have become a crisis. It was long in the making, easy to foresee, and eminently manageable by Europe and the international community.

Thus far, only a fraction of the funding needed for even basic care has been raised. If education, training, and other essential needs are included, the annual costs are at least €5,000 (\$6000) per refugee, or €20 billion (\$24 billion). EU aid today to Turkey still amounts to just €1 billion (\$1.2 billion). In addition, the EU and others should help create special economic zones with preferred trade status in the region, including in Tunisia and Morocco, to attract investment and generate jobs for both locals and refugees.

A number of Middle Eastern countries (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain) have also accepted Syrian refugees and refugees from Iraq. Over the past two years Syria's neighboring countries have hosted a huge portion of the refugees from Syria (Turkey—nearly 2 million, Lebanon—over 1 million, Jordan—over 500,000, Iraq—nearly 250,000, Egypt—close to 100,000). The inability of neighboring countries to absorb the large numbers of refugees from Syria, the overflowing and inadequate living conditions in refugee camps and the promise of better economic opportunities in parts of Europe have prompted many Syrians in the past year to migrate outside the Middle East.

Around half a million people from countries like Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan have fled to Europe so far this year. Many of those fleeing war and religious persecution want to make their way to prosperous countries like Germany who have a tradition of welcoming asylum seekers. 800,000 asylum seekers and refugees are expected to arrive in Germany this coming year as compared to a total of 755,000 asylum applications for all the EU for the year ending in June of 2015. Over the past year a host of countries around the world have offered resettlement to a specific number of Syrian refugees—Brazil (7,380), Australia (5,600), Canada (11,300), Sweden (2,700), Norway (9000), Finland (1,150), Switzerland (3,500), Ireland (650), UK (187), Spain (130), Belgium (475), Italy (350), Austria (1,500), and Germany (35,000).

The burden of sheltering, processing, and trying to assimilate this influx of Middle Eastern refugees has now pitted EU countries against one another and is testing the vision of Europe as a unified continent. German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, has said the refugee crisis "is one of the biggest challenges we have had in Europe for decades." The EU Migration Commissioner has suggested that some countries are thinking about the refugee crisis in a national way rather than in a European way. The EU set up a common asylum policy in 1999 with little idea of the real challenges facing them in the future. Consequently, many of the European countries have been unprepared to address the social and economic demands that the huge numbers of refugees are now bringing to them.

Germany, which has taken in by far the largest share of asylum seekers, is now pushing other European Union members to accept more refugees. In recent weeks more than 7,000 refugees have been stranded in Austria and other more eastern European countries

because of the backlog of asylum seekers pouring into western and northern Europe. Other European leaders are seeking to divert emergency funds to Syria's neighbors, including Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, in hopes that the refugees will be resettled in those Arab countries rather than migrate to Europe.

EU leaders agreed to meet in Brussels at the end of September to discuss long-term ways to tackle the dramatic influx of refugees who have been pouring into the region to escape the warfare in their country and to rebuild their lives in places with opportunities. Many of those fleeing their homelands are professional people with families who believe they can improve their family situations both financially and socially. Proposals to be considered at the Brussels meeting include deploying more EU border personnel, donating at least \$1.1 billion to international aid agencies to assist refugee camps near conflict zones in Syria, and discussing allotments for every country to accept a certain number of refugees.

U.S. Secretary of State, John Kerry, announced that the U.S. would significantly increase the number of worldwide migrants we take in over the next two years- accepting 85,000 refugees per year, up from 70,000, with that total rising to 100,000 in 2017. Most of that increase would be for refugees from Syria and from strife-torn areas in Africa. When asked why the U.S. couldn't take in more of these asylum seekers, Kerry cited the post-Sept. 11 screening requirements and a lack of funding from Congress, both primarily a result of the fear of possible terrorists entering our country.

There are provisions in the US Immigration and Nationality Act (INA) that pertain to refugees and asylum seekers as opposed to immigrants. Aliens seeking asylum must demonstrate a well-founded fear that if returned home, they will be persecuted based upon one of five characteristics: race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Unlike the difficulties the US has encountered dealing with legal and illegal immigrants coming into our country, the international response to the Syrian refugee crisis has been seen as a humanitarian issue more than an economic, social or political issue.

The operational and financial arrangements developed by the EU could be used to establish global standards for the treatment of asylum-seekers and migrants. Absorbing and integrating more than a million asylum seekers and migrants a year, requires mobilizing the private sector—NGOs, church groups, and businesses—to act as sponsors. This will require not only sufficient funding, but also the human and IT capacity to match migrants and sponsors.

In one sense, the US is insulated from this crisis—there is no easy way for immigrants from Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East to show up at our borders. In another, the US has been directly affecting the situation—politically, economically and militarily—in the Middle East for decades. What should our role be now with respect to the millions of people forced out of their homelands?