



THE WORLD'S REFUGEE CRISIS: AN OVERVIEW

THE GLOBAL PICTURE

In 2015, the world witnessed the largest number of people forced to flee their homes in recorded history. Globally, there are 19.5 million refugees and 38.2 million more people displaced within their own countries, according to the U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). If these people were grouped into a country, it would have the 24th largest population in the world.

UNHCR reports that the top five countries people are fleeing are Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and South Sudan. The largest single source is Syria, with some 4.6 million refugees. Nearly 90% of Syrian refugees are living in neighboring countries like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, and over half of them are children. The United States has agreed to accept just 85,000 refugees in 2016, including a minimum of 10,000 Syrians.

A PROFILE OF U.S. REFUGEES

In 2015, the three leading countries of origin for refugees resettling in the U.S. were Burma, Iraq, and Somalia. The remaining top 10 countries are Bhutan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iran, Syria, Eritrea, Sudan, and Cuba.² Over the last 40 years, the largest groups of refugees have come from the former Soviet Union, Vietnam, and the former Yugoslavia – but these immigrants fall off our social radar today because of how extensively they have integrated into our society.

Refugees to the U.S. range from university professors and doctors to people who never had access to a formal education. Refugees are women, men, children, and the elderly. People who come to the United States as refugees had full lives in their homelands, and will have full lives here. Being a “refugee” is not an identity in itself – it is a temporary condition resulting from forced displacement, usually related to political violence. Although their lives have been drastically disrupted, refugees in the United States bring a wide range of strengths, skills, and contributions to our society and the economy.

The U.S. Refugee Resettlement Process

Refugees who come to the United States go through a long and rigorous process that typically takes a minimum of 18 months, but can drag out for years. They must first be screened and selected by the UNHCR for referral to the United States, then go through a second screening with the U.S. Customs and Immigration Services (USCIS). In addition to interviews with both the United Nations and USCIS, they must pass a series of background checks, undergo a medical exam, and receive cultural orientation – all before landing on U.S. soil.

Refugees whose applications for U.S. resettlement receive approval from USCIS are matched with a local resettlement organization that facilitates their orientation to the United States. They receive 90 days of government-sponsored services such as food, housing, and employment help, and may be eligible for benefits for a longer period of time. Typically, refugees are expected to quickly become self-sufficient contributors to U.S. society by working and paying taxes, and by learning English and attending school. This 4-minute video released by the White House provides a deeper look at the refugee screening process: whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/11/24/watch-heres-what-refugee-screening-process-looks

Refugees from Central America

Tens of thousands of families and unaccompanied minors have come to the United States from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, seeking safety at our southern border. While the Department of Homeland Security continues to refer to them as “illegal aliens,” the truth is that they have every legal right under U.S. and international law to request asylum. However, the situation families fleeing from violence in Central America find once they reach the United States is very different from the circumstances of resettled refugees.

Although in most cases Central American families will face the same risks as resettled refugees if they are forced to return to their country, the United States holds them for weeks or even months in family detention centers. Central American families who enter the U.S. first and then request permanent protection from persecution in their home country are technically “asylum seekers” rather than refugees, because they were not first screened and approved before entering the country. As a result, they have to go through adversarial court proceedings to prove their case, and even if they are released from detention, they do not have permits to work (they can apply for employment authorization 6 months after filing for asylum). They don't have access to the basic support services resettlement agencies provide, or even a lawyer to assist them through the extremely complicated legal process to qualify for protection, unless they are able to find pro bono legal aid or are able to afford a private attorney.

The U.S. State Department has partnered with the UNHCR to begin in-country screening for families and individuals seeking refugee resettlement from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in 2016. While this is a positive step toward providing a safer method to reach the United States for families in danger, the program is not yet underway as of April 2016. At the same time, the U.S. government continues to force families and unaccompanied minors who are already here to go through rapid court hearings in order to expedite their processing. This often means that these families and individuals are not represented by a lawyer and lose their cases, only to be quickly deported. Latino asylum-seeking families already in the United States deserve the same community support as resettled refugees, and that is why UUSC has taken care to include Central American asylum seekers in our refugee toolkit.

SYRIA & THE CURRENT REFUGEE CRISIS

2016 marks five years since the start of the Civil War in Syria, which has since been fueled by the involvement of several nations, including the United States. In addition to the 4.6 million refugees who have fled the country, an estimated 7.6 million Syrians have been internally displaced within their own country. As the world scrambles to respond, with much of the focus on conditions refugees encounter in Europe, Turkey, and the Middle East, we must remember that the real “refugee crisis” is that millions of people’s homes have been destroyed and they are not safe in their own country. The impact on industrialized nations beyond Syria’s borders is not the heart of the crisis.

Although the media has labeled current events as the “Syrian refugee crisis,” the reality is that only about half of all refugees arriving in Europe are from Syria. Refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Eritrea make up another 40%. It is also often forgotten that Syria was previously a major host country for refugees: 1.3 million refugees, primarily Iraqi and Palestinian, made their homes in Syria before the war. They have now been displaced for a second time, and face additional barriers at European borders.

Nine out of every ten refugees from Syria are currently living in neighboring countries like Turkey (2.7 million), Lebanon (1 million), and Jordan (0.6 million).⁷ The Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan, founded in 2012 on what used to be barren desert, has a population of nearly 80,000. Refugee camps have always been intended to be a temporary crisis response, but they are increasingly becoming long-term shelters in the place of permanent solutions for resettlement or a safe return home.

The majority of refugees in neighboring countries live outside of camps. Some have family members or friends who have offered them a place to stay. Others have found work in the informal sector in order to pay rent for housing in urban areas, since Jordan and Lebanon do not allow work permits for refugees. In places where there are no official camps, many families have set up makeshift settlements lacking clean water and sanitation.

The United Nation’s Syrian Refugee Response Plan has only received 40% of the needed funding from its member states as of March 2016, and as a result, food rations have been cut. In Lebanon, the food budget for refugees is now only \$13 per person per month – less than 50 cents a day.

Over 1 million refugees sought to reach Europe during 2015. Over 95% of them made the life-threatening journey by attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea. At least 3,770 people died. While most deaths occurred on the journey from northern Africa to Italy, more than 800 died in the Aegean Sea, crossing from Turkey to Greece. In 2014, the European Union suspended full-scale maritime rescue operations, based on the theory that their presence encouraged more risk-taking. This proved to be dangerously wrong; refugee journeys by sea steadily increased, and so did the deaths. The European Union’s new rescue operation is now run by Frontex, the European border agency; it prioritizes deterrence over search and rescue.

As media attention increased awareness of the treacherous, often fatal journeys being taken by so many, refugees arriving in Europe during 2015 encountered an outpouring of compassion and generosity from the public – though not nearly enough to meet their basic needs. At the same time, they faced increased xenophobia and fear from most governments and some segments of the population. Though attention has shifted toward other news, the struggles of many people seeking asylum in Europe continues. German Chancellor Angela Merkel welcomed refugees with open arms at first, but eventually even Germany restricted the arrival of new refugees, saying that the rest of the European Union needed to do their part as well. By early 2016, the Balkan route being used by Middle Eastern and Afghan refugees to reach northern Europe had been effectively sealed off by a series of border crackdowns in Croatia, Serbia, Hungary, and Macedonia. This has left tens of thousands of people stuck in Turkey, Greece, and other key points along the route, where they face the possibility of violent attacks at closed borders, with insufficient access to shelter, food, water, medical facilities, psychosocial support, or legal assistance.

In March 2016, a controversial deal was struck between the European Union and Turkey to deport any refugees arriving at Europe’s borders. But as long as home is not a livable option, people will continue to find routes to escape to safety. This applies just as much to asylum seekers who come to the United States through our Southern border as it does to Syrians and other Middle Eastern refugees. A comprehensive response requires not only the acceptance of more refugees in the West and increased aid for Syria’s neighboring countries, where 90% of refugees remain. It must also address the root causes of forced displacement, including a committed effort to establish peace through diplomacy, an approach that requires addressing the role the United States has played in both the Middle East and Central America.

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

Increasing the refugee cap in the United States and our financial commitment to global humanitarian aid for refugees isn't just the right thing to do – it is also a way to take responsibility for the role we have played in destabilizing the regions from which people are escaping, and contributing to the rise of the refugee crisis. Our concern for the humanitarian challenges facing millions of refugees compels us to better understand, oppose, and educate others about the impacts of U.S. foreign policies that have caused so many to flee their homes.

Many refugees currently seeking shelter in Europe are escaping the lasting effects of U.S. wars and occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as the continued conflict in Syria. As of June 2015, the UNHCR has reported that these wars and occupations have caused more than 13 million people to become displaced within their own countries, or to seek safety in other nations. It is also now widely documented that the United States' 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq created conditions that gave rise to ISIS, known increasingly as Daesh, which is escalating violence in Iraq, Syria, and beyond. In the first half of 2016, the United States government spent \$68,000 an hour (\$1.6 million per day) on warplanes targeting ISIS, including bombing in Syria, as part of its war against terrorism. At the same time, Russia has been bombing rebels in Syria who are fighting the Bashar al-Assad regime.

Phyllis Bennis, senior fellow at the Institute for Policy Studies, explains: "The Syrian conflict is simultaneously a civil war – pitting a brutal government against a multitude of political and military opposition forces – and a proxy war in which a host of outside powers are fighting for various regional and global hegemonies. And all of those overlapping wars are being fought to the last Syrian." The consequences of U.S. foreign and economic policies in Latin America have also led many to escape violence closer to home. U.S. intervention has fueled war and violent conflict in Central America since the 1950s, when the United States engineered the overthrow of democratically elected Guatemalan president Jacobo Arbenz in order to protect U.S. corporate interests. U.S. drug war funding has intensified conflicts among police, soldiers, and drug cartels, with more and more everyday citizens caught in the crossfire. After a 2009 military coup against Honduran President Manuel Zelaya, the United States applied international pressure to recognize the new government even while it used the military to quell uprisings. Violence has risen in Honduras since that time, and the country achieved infamy as the "Murder Capital of the World" for counting over 80 murders per 100,000 citizens. That number led the world for four years until it was surpassed by neighboring El Salvador in 2015 when that country's murder rate rose to 104 murders per 100,000 citizens. Fearing the exodus of refugees escaping from this violence in Central America, the United States has contracted with Mexico to carry out immigration enforcement on our behalf by providing over \$100 million a year for Mexico to strengthen its own southern border and detain Central Americans in transit to the United States.

Now is the time for the United States to demonstrate moral courage. This country was founded as a place of refuge for those fleeing religious persecution. It's a fundamental part of our national identity to be a safe haven. As a country, we can acknowledge our mistakes, take concrete steps to address their consequences, and support efforts for peace, diplomacy, and security in these regions while providing a haven to as many refugees and asylum seekers as we can.

UUSC'S REFUGEE CRISIS PARTNERS

With your support, the UUSC-UUA Refugee Crisis Fund has distributed over \$645,000 to these carefully selected grassroots partners along the European migration route:

Jordan: challenging refugee exploitation through legal and rights awareness

The Arab Renaissance for Democracy (ARDD) Legal Aid is raising legal awareness and empowerment through trainings and research. Syrian refugees in Jordan navigate the risks they face due to discrimination, lack of formal recognition, and heightened vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. WAQE3 for Community Development offers free counseling and legal literacy sessions for Syrian refugees to help them understand their rights and responsibilities and avoid exploitation while living in Jordan.

Greece: ensuring decent reception conditions

UUSC is partnering with the Greek nongovernmental organization PRAKSIS to provide immediate transportation assistance and survival kits to newly arrived refugees and their children on the Greek island of Lesbos.

Serbia: providing comprehensive mobile assistance along the transit route

The Asylum Protection Center (APC), our partner in Serbia, enlists a team of aid professionals who travel in a camper vehicle alongside shifting migration routes to provide a comprehensive array of services, including legal support, humanitarian aid, psychosocial counseling, and language interpretation.

Croatia: offering support for long-term resettlement

UUSC is partnering with the Center for Peace Studies (CPS), which spearheads the Welcome Initiative, a collaborative effort of 50 organizations dedicated to refugee resettlement and the provision of immediate humanitarian support.

Hungary: facilitating family reunification

With our support, UUSC partner the Hungarian Helsinki Committee (HHC) is working to provide full financial and legal support for refugee families who have been torn apart by war and are navigating the family reunification process.



Slovenia: providing humanitarian protection at the Croatia-Serbia border

Magna Children at Risk operates medical humanitarian projects – including medical, surgery, psychological, and nutritional programs for children and their families – in two refugee camps at the Croatia-Serbia border.

United States: promoting positive dialogue, refugee integration, and public policy

In Southern California, with UUSC support, the Arab American Civic Council is launching a “Refugees Welcome” initiative that supports the resettlement and integration of Syrian refugees in that area. The Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition (MIRA) is working with UUSC to improve the public and political conversation – and influence public policy – related to refugees in Mass. In Indiana, UUSC is partnering with Refugee Exodus to provide critical care to Syrian refugees while also refuting the anti-refugee sentiment that caused Refugee Exodus a loss of vital financial support.

Both UUSC’s Refugee Crisis and Migrant Justice programs are currently expanding, and this document may not reflect the latest additions to UUSC’s partners.

UUSC’S MIGRANT JUSTICE PARTNERS: SECURING RIGHTS ALONG THE CENTRAL AMERICAN MIGRATION ROUTE

In addition to our refugee rights partners in Europe and the Middle East, UUSC’s Rights at Risk Program includes a migrant justice strategy to support migrants and refugees from Central America and Mexico, and to address root causes of the violence that threatens them at home and throughout their journeys.

El Salvador: Regional strategies for protecting survivors of violence

With UUSC’s support, Foundation Cristosal in El Salvador is establishing a database to measure the impact of forced displacement across the Northern Triangle. Other efforts to support long-term policy development include fifteen strategic litigation cases with the potential for setting precedents that would compel the state to recognize its responsibilities to survivors; and the development of durable long-term solutions allowing for safe and successful return to their places of origin or – where this is not possible – integrated resettlement elsewhere.

Mexico: Upholding the rights of migrants and asylum seekers in transit

In **Mexico City**, the Scalibrini Mission for Refugees and Migrants (SMR) will accompany refugees and migrants who are victims of crime through the legal process, providing psychosocial support, social work assessments, in-kind assistance, and legal aid. In **Guadalajara**, With UUSC support, FM4 Paso Libre is expanding its existing migrant shelter to offer 24-hour-a-day service to give additional respite to migrants as well as protection from the dangers of harassment, abuse, extortion, and ill treatment they might otherwise suffer from gangs and authorities. At the U.S.-Mexico border, UUSC is partnering with the Kino Border Initiative to document, expose, and counter the systematic abuse of migrants and recent deportees by Mexican authorities.

United States: Decriminalizing migration and protecting the right to asylum

Within the United States, UUSC is supporting CIVIC in San Francisco, Calif., to build capacity for self-advocacy among detained migrants and asylum seekers. CIVIC is starting a national 24/7 hotline for immigrants in detention to connect with family members, receive attorney referrals, and build cases to challenge their detention.

In **Tucson, Ariz.**, No More Deaths is documenting the impact of abuses by the Border Patrol’s BORSTAR search and rescue unit that are fueling the missing persons crisis in the borderlands. In **Phoenix, Ariz.**, the Arcoiris Liberation Team is working to support LGBTQ+ migrants in detention through visitation, advocacy, and solidarity building. And in **San Antonio, Texas**, UUSC continues to strengthen its partnership with RAICES by supporting pro bono legal services for women and children asylum seekers in detention, sending volunteers through the UU College of Social Justice, and collaborating on advocacy campaigns.

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