

Syrian refugees: 'Reset' needed in Europe's approach

Human Rights Comment

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Refugee reception centre in Sofia (Bulgaria)

Just over a year ago, I decided to follow the steps of Syrian refugees in Europe, to better understand what they were going through. At that time, I was worried that most European governments were reacting with indifference to the biggest refugee crisis facing our continent in over two decades. There were reports of Syrian refugees being pushed back, while others, having arrived in Europe, ended up in

detention. Turkey was the only country to have opened its arms to Syrians in need. Elsewhere in Europe, Germany, Sweden and Armenia had taken steps to receive a limited number of Syrians through resettlement and other forms of admission, while other countries were lagging behind. I concluded that Europe had failed to rise to the challenge and was neglecting this crisis.

The crisis widened and deepened in 2014

In the week spanning the passage from 2014 to 2015, more than 1 000 refugees, the majority of whom were Syrians, were rescued from two overcrowded “ghost ships” towed ashore in Italy. Their arrival caused alarm and prompted new promises that Europe would increase its efforts to primarily fight smugglers in the Mediterranean. Yet, the situation of Syrian refugees gives far more cause for alarm than that.

In 2014, the scale of the Syrian refugee crisis continued to grow exponentially. Syrians have become the largest refugee group in the world under the UNHCR mandate, the vast majority of them – over 3.8 million – still being hosted by Syria’s neighbouring countries. The number of Syrian refugees has by now exceeded 1.6 million in Turkey, 1.1 million in Lebanon, and 620 000 in Jordan.

However, these countries are now struggling to address the basic needs of Syrian refugees. Problems include overcrowded schools and health facilities, the strain on water, sanitation and electricity infrastructures, and the lack of adequate housing. Some 85% of Syrians in Jordan and Turkey live outside the refugee camps, many of them being forced by extreme poverty to resort to desperate coping strategies, including begging or exploitative work. Faced with serious economic difficulties, Lebanon has recently introduced entry restrictions for Syrians.

Beyond all hardships, the new, very young generation of Syrians is also confronted with the threat of statelessness. UNHCR [data](#) show that more than 50 000 Syrian children have been born in the neighbouring countries since the conflict started in 2011. Of these, around 70% may be without a birth certificate.

In Europe, in a positive move, several countries pledged in 2014 more resettlements as well as humanitarian and other admissions for Syrian refugees, Germany leading with 30 000. Although similarly generous gestures are needed from other big European states as well, this is a clear improvement from the total number of some 15 000 places pledged a year earlier. Also, despite the disparity in recognition rates, over 90% of the asylum claims made by Syrian refugees in EU member states received a positive decision in the first three quarters of 2014.

However, these numbers should not give rise to complacency. In fact, from 2011 until now, Europe, one of the globe's wealthiest regions, has received only around 6% of all Syrian refugees - some 210 000 persons in total, of whom 126 590 in 2014. Moreover, violent push-backs of Syrians have continued to be reported in 2014. Also, as the conflict in Syria approaches its fifth year, in many European countries recognised Syrian refugees are still left to fend for themselves, without adequate measures to facilitate their integration, despite the obviously long-term character of their forced displacement.

Increased protection, solidarity and integration are needed in Europe

As another year has passed in which more and more Syrians suffered the consequences of conflict in their country, all European states are urged to be more generous and assume their responsibility for providing effective protection to those in need. States' action in this area can be guided by the following recommendations:

- Policies and practices impeding the access of Syrian refugees, notably collective expulsions at land or sea borders, should cease. Non-entry policies and practices actually increase irregular migration and are grist for the mill of smugglers and traffickers.
- Syrian refugees should not be returned to countries whose asylum systems and economies cannot cope with increased numbers of refugees and are thus unable to provide adequate reception and protection especially to particularly vulnerable persons such as children.^[1]
- Europe must continue to respond readily and generously to UNHCR's appeals to support Syria's neighbouring countries. This should not only mean financial help: European states, especially the biggest and wealthiest, should show international solidarity also by taking in more Syrian refugees, through relocation and humanitarian admission, as well as other specific programmes.
- It is high time for European countries to step up the integration of Syrian refugees into their societies. Given the protracted nature of the Syrian conflict, many of these refugees are likely to remain in Europe and become citizens of their host countries. This is true also of countries like Hungary, Bulgaria or Serbia, which until now have seen themselves as transit countries. Integration policies should be overarching, covering human rights sensitisation and awareness-raising amongst the host communities and refugees, education, employment, housing, healthcare and other social services.
- Last but not least, no Syrian refugee child in Europe should be left without a nationality. Securing the future of Syrian children must remain a priority of Europe's response to the plight of Syrian refugees.

Nils Muižnieks

Useful documents:

- UNHCR, [Mid-year trends 2014](#), January 2015;
- UNHCR, [Resettlement and other forms of admission for Syrian refugees](#), 30 January 2015;

- UNHCR, Living in the shadows. Jordan home visit reports, January 2015;
 - Norwegian Refugee Council, International Rescue Committee, No escape. Civilians in Syria struggle to find safety across borders, November 2014;
 - Center for Middle Eastern Strategic Studies (ORSAM), Effects of the Syrian refugees on Turkey, January 2015.
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[1] Cf. 2014 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (GC) in Tarakhel v. Switzerland.