

TOUGH TIMES FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES IN EGYPT

Around 135,000 Syrians have registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Egypt. Estimates by UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations suggest that the Syrian refugee population in the country could be twice that number. Egypt's political upheavals, along with national policies that obstruct the work of humanitarian organizations, have left Syrian refugees there with little visibility or assistance outside the communities where they live. More international attention must be directed towards these marginalized populations. Egypt already has functioning systems in place for helping refugees. But those systems require additional support from donors, the national government, and Egyptians themselves if they are to meet the basic needs of people who have fled there.

BACKGROUND

Refugees International traveled to Egypt in April 2014 to investigate the situation of the Syrian refugees who have arrived since the conflict in their country began. Almost three million Syrians have departed Syria over the past several years, with the majority of them fleeing to adjacent countries. Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey all have enormous – and still growing – Syrian refugee populations that have been the main focus of the world's attention.

Lesser known is the situation of Syrian refugees in Egypt, where a trickle of arrivals turned into a flood in the second half of 2012. By the end of that year, their

numbers and needs were great enough that Egypt joined UNHCR's regional appeal for humanitarian aid to Syrians. But in spite of requests for assistance on their behalf, these refugees have attracted little attention and few resources. Funding shortfalls, combined with a number of restrictions that Egypt has imposed on local and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), mean that Syrians struggle with the daily demands of life, such as paying rent, buying food, and receiving medical care.

Initially, the Syrian refugees arriving in Egypt were warmly welcomed. Historical links between the two countries had created a sense of solidarity between Syrians and Egyptians. New Egyptian aid organizations

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The government of Egypt should lift the entry restrictions it has imposed on Syrian citizens.
- Donor countries to the Regional Response Plan for Syrians – particularly the United States, the European Union, and its member states – should specifically direct more resources to the United Nations Refugee Agency's operations in Egypt.
- Donor countries and development agencies should do more to support the country's public services in areas where refugees are living.
- The government of Egypt should allow already-registered international and local non-governmental organizations to expand their programming to include new projects for Syrian refugees. This should include permission for transfer of international funds for the NGOs.
- Countries with resident Syrian populations should permit and facilitate family reunification for Syrians.

sprang up to offer assistance to the refugees, and in general there was a high level of concern for the welfare of the new arrivals. As one person in Cairo told RI, with their own revolution still fresh in their minds, Egyptians were well aware that “that could have been us.”

The Syrians were not the first refugees to make their way to Egypt. For two decades prior to their arrival, the country hosted tens of thousands of refugees, mostly from Iraq and the Horn of Africa. The UN, international and local NGOs, and government services were already struggling to keep up with the needs of these refugees. The Syrians’ ability to find support is thus complicated by the fact that they have joined a sizeable refugee community already in Egypt. UNHCR and a limited number of partners now must respond to a refugee population that has more than doubled in a short period of time.

In the summer of 2013, a new wave of social and political upheaval in Egypt brought hostility toward resident Syrians in particular. Refugees told RI about Syrians being demonized in Egyptian media and Syrian children being attacked on the way to school. They felt increasingly vulnerable as reports poured in of arrests, detentions, and deportations.

SEEKING TO LEAVE EGYPT

Confronted with these difficulties, significant numbers of Syrian refugees – along with asylum seekers and migrants from Africa, and Egyptians themselves – have been embarking on unsafe boats from Egypt’s Mediterranean coast, desperately trying to find safety, work, and family members in Europe. The fact that some Syrians have been arrested, detained, or killed in the process dissuades few. They continue to feel insecure, doubt that it will be possible to return to Syria for many years, and do not see a productive or dignified future for themselves in Egypt.

One of the more alarming aspects of RI’s mission to Egypt was encountering so many Syrian refugees who had previously attempted to leave for Europe by boat or who were planning to do so in the weeks and months to come. Indeed, many refugees are focusing their energy and resources on the Mediterranean crossing, hoping to join family members or simply to start over in a country that seems to offer a more peaceful and productive life and greater opportunities for success. When asked, these Syrians said they were well aware of the risks involved in such journeys. But they considered them to be risks worth taking. As one UNHCR official told RI, “Even if only 50 percent of the refugees who leave by boat actually make it to Europe, it gives hope to all of the others.”

Though some say there is a “season” for such crossings– dictated by weather and sea conditions–they in fact happen more or less continuously, and from many different points on Egypt’s north coast. A number of Syrian refugees informed RI that they came to Egypt’s coastal cities specifically because of their intention to leave the country by boat.

During the first week of its visit to Egypt, RI’s team heard from numerous people that the weather was improving and that boat departures would begin again soon. During the second week, the team was in a meeting with an aid organization when several staff members excused themselves to respond to a report that a large family of Syrians had just been arrested while trying to leave the country by boat.

Anti-Syrian sentiment in Egypt may be waning, but humanitarians whom RI interviewed all expected the boat crossings to not only continue, but to increase. They note that it is not just young, energetic people who are boarding; Syrian families with small children are taking their chances alongside African migrants and Egyptian nationals. They are undeterred by the horror stories of those who went before. As it becomes more and more difficult to find support in Egypt, and as political conditions remain in flux, the Mediterranean crossing will continue to entice refugees.

SEEKING PROTECTION IN EGYPT

Although many of the refugees RI spoke to had taken flights directly from Syria to Cairo, others had arrived in Egypt after stays of varying lengths in other countries. When asked why they chose Egypt over a neighboring country, the responses were fairly uniform: Egypt did not require Syrians to have visas. By contrast, Lebanon was thought to be unstable or “too much like Syria,” while Jordan and Turkey were too expensive, and northern Iraq was seen as the refuge for Kurdish Syrians. A few people referred to family connections in Egypt, but in general the ability to cross the border without much difficulty, the comparatively reasonable cost of living, and the perceived higher degree of safety were the motivations.

The government of former President Mohammed Morsi was seen as sympathetic to the plight of fleeing Syrians. But as Morsi’s popularity waned, some Egyptians began to view Syrian refugees as supporters – or even agents – of the Muslim Brotherhood. After a military-backed government was installed in July 2013, the Egyptian authorities decided to handle the Syrian refugee influx as a national security issue, and they began requiring Syrians to have visas and a security clearance before entering the country. When Egypt put these measures into place, it effectively closed the door to fleeing

Syrians. Since that time, the registration of refugees already in the country has continued, but the flow of new arrivals from Syria has virtually stopped.

While Egypt has the right to manage its borders, denying entry to refugees is against the principles of the 1951 Refugee Convention, to which it is a signatory. As a demonstration of its continued solidarity with Syrians and with the other countries hosting them, Egypt should lift the entry restrictions that are preventing Syrians from fleeing and facilitate registration for legal status country-wide.

Registering with UNHCR and receiving a legal status in Egypt are both challenging for Syrian refugees. Initially, registration took place only in Cairo, and many refugees had to travel several hours to make themselves known to UNHCR. In response to this problem, UNHCR set up mobile registration units in areas where large numbers of Syrian refugees were living. This has improved the situation, although RI heard of many Syrians who are reluctant to register as they are concerned that their personal details will be given to the regime in Damascus, putting them at risk should they ever decide to return.

The process of applying for and renewing residence permits with the Egyptian authorities is also slow and complex. RI was told that it regularly took three or four months to obtain a permit that was valid for only six months, meaning that refugees are obliged to engage in a non-stop application process.

Another protection issue raised by many of the people interviewed in Egypt was that of gender-based violence (GBV). On the basis of the interviews undertaken by RI it is difficult to assess the extent to which Syrian refugees in Egypt are subject to gender-based violence. But while the scale of this problem is impossible to quantify, RI was repeatedly told that Syrian women are considered to be particularly attractive by Egyptian men and that they are less expensive to marry than local women. They are confronted with harassment and unwanted advances on a daily basis, and, as a result, many girls and young women are confined to their homes and are missing out on school and livelihoods activities. Therefore, UNHCR and its partners should continue to provide Syrian women's groups with specific guidance and training on this issue, drawing upon good practices developed in other urban refugee situations.

THE REALITIES OF DAILY LIFE

The UNHCR office in Egypt has been underfunded and understaffed for a number of years. With tens of thousands of new refugee arrivals since 2011, its ability to provide support to the most vulnerable of them is

being challenged.

Like Syrian refugees everywhere, the Syrian refugees in Egypt find themselves in an increasingly difficult position as the conflict at home drags on. They are running out of what little money and other resources they may have brought with them. Finding work that pays a living wage, even in the informal labor market, is also a major challenge in a country which has such a huge pool of unemployed young people and where foreigners require work permits that are rarely granted.

While their incomes are very limited, the expenditures of Syrian refugees are rising. The prices of food and rent have been rising steadily in recent years; many types of healthcare and medicine require at least a partial payment by the patient; and education requires money for school fees, supplies, uniforms, and transportation. Many refugees told RI about children who dropped out of school to get jobs to support their families, about people cramming themselves into overcrowded apartments in order to save on rent, and about serious medical conditions going untreated for lack of money.

In principle, Syrian refugees have access to Egypt's national health and education systems. However, these systems are already overburdened. Syrian refugees are dissatisfied with the quality of services they receive, and in some cases are resorting to setting up separate clinics and schools. While such initiatives are admirable and sometimes successful, expanding the Egyptian systems to accommodate more people – including refugees – would be a more efficient use of resources and would also provide tangible benefits to the people of Egypt. Donor countries and development agencies should do more to support the country's public services in areas where refugees are living – a task that goes well beyond the expertise and resources of humanitarian agencies.

The international community's response to the refugee situation in Egypt has been disappointing. At the time of writing, four months into 2014, the UN appeal for Syrian refugees in Egypt was only 9 percent funded. As a result, some humanitarian organizations are already reducing the support they provide and focusing on the most vulnerable. This invariably means that some people in genuine need will not get adequate help. As they contribute to the Syrian response plan, more donors must pay attention to Egypt in order to maintain the country as a place of genuine refuge, rather than just a stopping point on the way to Europe or points beyond.

SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES

One of the greatest concerns expressed by many Syrian refugees who talked to RI was reunification with family members. Those who are still in Syria are often prevented from leaving the country by whichever group – government or opposition – controls the local border crossings. Even if they get past that obstacle, these refugees would now need a visa and security clearance to enter Egypt, not to mention the money required to complete the journey.

Many Syrian refugees also have relatives who have moved to other regions. One woman whom RI met had a sister in one European country, children split between two other European countries, and a husband in the Gulf. Because of the visa restrictions placed on Syrians, they could not join her and she could not join any of them, despite their willingness to provide her with accommodation and cover her basic needs. She told us how difficult it was to be alone in Egypt at a time when daily life was becoming more problematic.

Bringing and keeping families together is a stated priority of humanitarian organizations everywhere, but for the Syrians, government policies prevent this principle from being translated into practice. Separated from their relatives, Syrian refugees find it harder to support each other, maintain a sense of their own identity, and hold on to the idea of themselves as a connected group of people. By facilitating family reunions, developed countries with resident Syrian populations could show solidarity with the refugees and at the same time relieve some of the pressure on Egypt and other refugee-hosting countries in the region.

READY TO HELP

Egypt has never enthusiastically embraced the international norms of refugee protection and solutions. Despite being an early signatory to the 1951 Convention and a member of UNHCR's governing board, the Executive Committee, the country has failed to establish domestic refugee legislation and has consistently refused to allow refugees to integrate into Egyptian society. The number of recognized refugees in Egypt has recently doubled, but there has been no corresponding increase in the capacity to support them, and the authorities have put unnecessary obstacles in the way of humanitarian organizations that are ready to help.

Registration requirements for humanitarian agencies are labor-intensive and take long periods of time to complete. International NGOs that are ready to set up programs for Syrian refugees in Egypt are not being approved for registration, and some previously granted

registrations have been revoked. The authorities have shut down a large number of new Egyptian charities that had sprung up in response to the needs of Syrians.

In addition, if licensed agencies wish to extend or shift the focus of their work to address the growing and changing needs of the Syrians, they are obliged to seek permission from the government before they can implement their new plans. Few of these proposals are currently being allowed. International and local NGOs that depend upon funds from abroad are also hampered by restrictions on the transfer of money to Egypt.

Because of Egypt's political turbulence, UNHCR has lacked a stable government counterpart with which it can work and on whom it can depend. While some ministries (like the Ministry of Education) have been helpful and supportive, others have been largely absent from any discussion of the refugee issue. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which has primary responsibility for the protection of refugees, has not focused adequate attention on the issue, while the Ministry of Social Solidarity (which registers NGOs) has been impeding the work of aid groups that operate independently of it.

Given the scale and likely persistence of the Syrian refugee situation, as well as the fragile nature of the country's institutions, Egypt needs all the help it can get. And yet humanitarian organizations that are ready and willing to provide additional support find themselves prevented from doing so. The government of Egypt must expand the space available to the humanitarian community for work with refugees. In doing so, the refugees would be better protected and possibly less inclined to embark upon hazardous journeys to Europe.

CONCLUSION

While the Syrian refugee crisis has attracted enormous international attention, the Egyptian dimension of it has been seriously and curiously neglected. It is essential that the needs of Syrian refugees in Egypt be addressed more thoroughly. As the conflict in Syria continues and the exile of refugees becomes more prolonged, refugees in Egypt will become impoverished and will resort to negative coping mechanisms to survive. Or they will do whatever they can to escape by boat, even knowing they could die in the process.

Daryl Grisgraber and Jeff Crisp traveled to Egypt in April 2014, visiting Cairo, New Damietta, and Alexandria.