

2014: The Year 10 Million Syrians Became an Insignificant Statistic

Salwa Amor*

In mid-2014, the UN declared that the influx of Syrian refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs), and the ensuing human trafficking catastrophe, had led to the worst humanitarian refugee crisis since WWII. How does the current Syrian refugee crisis fit into the historical context of this previous tragedy, and has the international community and the world at large really learnt anything from past experience? This is the question we pose, and this is the answer we give: a comparison between Europe's response to the post-WWII refugee crisis and the current, second worst crisis of its kind, reveals that Europe has advanced in many ways. However, for victims of displacement around the world, Europe has yet to move on from the WWII mentality, which was characterized by indifference.



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The historical context of refugee tragedies

WWII resulted in millions of people from Poland to Germany becoming displaced or taking refuge in neighboring countries.

It was the magnitude of this crisis that gave birth to the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. At the time it was nothing more than a little known organization whose name was only ever mentioned amongst the refugees it was trying to aid. Today, it has a presence in every corner of the world, from Sudan to Haiti, with high profile patrons such as Angelina Jolie.

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If we had a time machine, we could transport ourselves eighty years into a future where a journalist sits on his or her desk, typing about the moment that changed the scope and plight of refugees for years to come. This is now. Our understanding of the refugee experience is at its second most significant moment in modern history, and current momentum can direct us either towards a more humane solution, or back into pre-WWII chaos and nationalist, far right attitudes.

In 1943 Relief and Rehabilitation Administration was set up (became part of the UN in 1945) to help refugees in areas experiencing Allied liberation. UNRRA went on to help almost eight million refugees in four years, until it ceased its work in Europe in 1947, and in Asia in 1949. In 1947 it was replaced by the International Refugee Organization (IRO), which in 1950 evolved into the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

At the end of World War II, Western Europe held more than five million refugee population, while an estimated ten to fifteen million prisoners of war, slave laborers and concentration camp survivors were left displaced.

Historian Ben Shephard looks at UNRRA's work with refugees in his book "The Long Road Home". Shephard observes that at the outset, UNRRA suffered from excessive bureaucracy, corruption and poor management, yet it still bore hope for millions.

The 10 million statistics that changed everything and nothing

In late 2014, the head of UNHCR, Antonio Guterres, told the BBC that they faced a “dramatic challenge” as the number of refugees in the world exceeded 50 million, the worst since WWII.

“Conflicts,” said Guterres, “are multiplying...and at the same time old conflicts seem never to die.” This leaves the UNHCR with its greatest challenge to date.

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According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a shocking ten million or more Syrians have been forced to leave their homes, with almost seven million internally displaced within Syria. Over three million have abandoned hope in their war torn country, choosing to seek refuge in neighboring countries. Turkey was the first country to host Syrian refugees back in 2011, mere months after the revolt turned deadly. Today, four years on, and the majority of refugees are in Turkey, with nearby Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq also providing shelter to countless families.

While issues have arisen in all host countries, it has been the European Union countries that have raised the loudest objections to housing Syrians. The EU has taken in a mere 150,000 Syrian asylum seekers with perhaps as many news headlines pointing out the weaknesses of the EU economy and its inability to host anyone other than their own citizens.

Europe looks the other way

The responses of European states have varied widely. The Scandinavian countries have become known amongst Syrians as the most compassionate, providing asylum for over 30,000 Syrians and counting, whilst the UK stands in stark contrast, having resettled a mere 24 Syrian refugees.

UNHCR has repeatedly called on the EU to provide 130,000 resettlement spots for Syrian refugees between 2013-2016, but it has received a slow and unenthusiastic response from all ex-

cept Sweden, which has provided asylum to all Syrian applicants since the beginning of the conflict.

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In late 2013, along the Lebanese-Syrian border, Syrian families lined up to try to enter Lebanon, trying to escape the ongoing bombardment of their neighborhood by government forces.

A United Nations Relief and Works Agency worker, Siham El Najmi waited to greet those who had fled Syria and had reached Lebanon, where she along with other UNRWA workers were ready to register the people fleeing as new refugees.

Siham recalls, "A mother was holding her two children's hands and when she reached the end of the Que. and it was her turn to be registered, she grabbed me and put each child's hand in one of my hands and when she made sure that I had a good grip on both her children, she collapsed."

This is not a rare phenomena, it happens often too many mothers fleeing war; it is a case of what psychologists refer to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which affects those who have witnessed or experience trauma, not during the incident but after it is long over. In the case of mothers in Syria, they cannot afford themselves the luxury of feeling the trauma as it happens - they must first get their children to safety before they can emotionally and in some cases literally collapse.

But what happens when almost four million children and their mothers and fathers are waiting to flee from war, seeking only a place of safety for their children - and find the borders of the world closed?

A sea of desperation

At the beginning of the crisis, Syrians looked to European countries not only as a home for refugees but also for humanitarian aid. When four years had gone by and those hopes were long

dashed, Syrians took matters into their own hands and began the long and dangerous journey across the seas.

Syrian human rights groups estimate that a record number of 3000 Syrians fleeing war have drowned on European shores.

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37-year old Palestinian Syrian refugee Salah boarded a fragile looking boat, saying, “I know the risk, but the world has turned its back on us - I don’t have any choice left but to try, for the sake of my family”. Risking death in order to find life seems to be the invisible message carried by each boat.

In the aftermath of WWII, those displaced by the war included millions of Estonians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Poles, Ukrainians, Russian and Polish POWs who had been enslaved and made to fight for Germany. They were left destitute and unable to return home, as they were seen as traitors by their respective countries. Russia closed the door on its POWs, with Stalin declaring, “We have no prisoners, only traitors”.

This left UNRAA with the overwhelming task of finding new resettlement plans in the form of host countries that would take the majority of refugees.

Western European countries were far from open to the idea of rehousing those left behind by the war, in fact, a look back at the media headlines of the time reveals a perception of refugees not too unlike today’s. One headline in The Daily Mirror screamed “Let them be Displaced!” – and indeed, displaced they were for many years to come.

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Just as the bleak, hungry, tired and destitute faces of Eastern Europeans staring beyond the black and white pictures taken of them while they lined up to be resettled after the Second World War provides us today with a glimpse of what life for displaced refugees looks like, so too the boats carrying hundreds of desperate families desperately trying to reach the shores of Europe will provide a snapshot of the repercussions of this refugee crisis in years to come.

The worst humanitarian crisis of our time

The Syrian revolution four years ago devolved into an armed conflict within the first year, after protestors were unable to maintain a peaceful stance against the government's brutal military crackdown. Few could have anticipated the events that followed. Ongoing air strikes have devastated much of Syria's infrastructure and caused the death of over 200,000 people, the disappearance of over 20,000 and the displacement of almost half of the country's population. Assad is neither willing nor required to end the humanitarian suffering that he has inflicted on his own people.

Assad's legacy is the second biggest humanitarian catastrophe since WWII, a tragedy to which he appears indifferent, along with his counterpart in Russia. Needless to say, with its military support and war vessels at Assad's beck and call, Russia has not offered refuge or humanitarian support to the millions of refugees fleeing the wrath of its war planes.

The issue of Syria and its ongoing war has serious implications for the stability of the entire region, from Iraq to Turkey; few neighboring countries have not been affected by the current crisis, directly or indirectly.

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The conflict showed few signs of finding resolution in

2014, and 2015 looks likely to see an even greater outpouring of Syrian refugees, desperate to escape the stagnating economy and find some sort of hope that their children have for any type of future.

The final months of 2014 saw hundreds of thousands of Syrian Kurds flee from the impending attack from the ever growing and seemingly unstoppable terrorist group ISIS.

Not even airstrikes have been able to halt ISIS, and the savagery of their acts of terror have led many analysts to predict that even greater numbers of Syrians will become displaced and seek refuge outside ISIS-controlled areas.

Turkey: a haven for over a million Syrians

Turkey has become the most popular place of refuge for Syrians. The official number of registered refugees in Turkey has reached a record one million, and it is clear from a glimpse at the hundreds of thousands of Syrians living outside of camps along the Syrian/Turkish border that Turkey is hosting a greater number of refugees than it can shoulder.

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Since the start of the conflict in 2011, thousands of Syrians have crossed back and forth over the Turkish border illegally, either to try to build a new life or simply to seek a short period of respite from the war before returning to Syria.

The 22 main government-run camps in Turkey are home to over 30 percent of the one million refugees. The remaining refugees are forced to live on handouts, and are often unable to make ends meet, leaving families destitute, sleeping in parks across Turkey and begging for baby milk, diapers, and food.

The Turkish government has yet to close its borders to the influx of Syrians, even though other neighboring countries such as Lebanon have done just that.

Turkey's generous accommodation of Syrian refugees has cost the government over 1.5 billion dollars, forcing Erdoğan to seek international support from UNHCR and other organizations. The

European University Institute and Migration Centre have carried out the largest research project on Syrian refugees to date, and emphasize the little reported fact that Syrians in Turkey are not legally refugees but 'guests', which means that they "do not have access to all the legal safeguards accorded to refugees elsewhere and those seeking permanent resettlement must look to a third nation".

Although it is a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, Turkey is not actually obliged to take any refugees who are not from the EU, making its response to the Syrian refugee crisis especially notable.

The Arab Gulf states: Six closed borders

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Syrian refugees no longer seek refuge in any of the six Gulf countries. Granted, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been two of the most outspoken Arab states against the brutality of the Assad regime, whether it is via government condemnations or by broadcasting news of Assad's crimes through state media outlets such as Qatar's Al Jazeera or Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya news channels. But other than unsuccessful attempts to arm and/or finance the rebels, such sound bites have become the only measure of support that Syrian refugees have come to expect from the Arab Gulf nations.

The future

Historians work with the benefit of hindsight, and history is often unforgiving to those who had the power and ability to transform millions of lives but, for political, economic or other interests unknown, did not.

In retrospect, in the post-WWII era, the international community had little capacity or experience when it came to dealing with the influx of displaced persons and refugees on its doorstep. Nonetheless, history books have been less than forgiving at the inaction of the former great powers.

While Turkey and Jordan have provided homes for Syrians, other countries have yet to open their borders – perhaps failing to anticipate how the future will judge this humanitarian blind spot.