

Canada's Resettlement of Syrian Refugees

Backgrounder

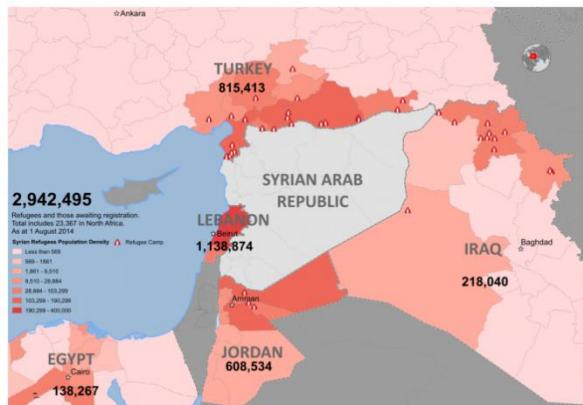
By the National Council on Canada-Arab Relations (NCCR)

Nov. 2014

How serious is the Syrian refugee crisis?

Security conditions for more than three million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and Iraq are rapidly deteriorating as their rights and protections are corroded under the weight of the protracted crisis and its spillover effects.

An additional 6.5 million are believed to have been forced to move within Syria's borders. In total, **10.8 million people** are in need of essential humanitarian support, of whom over 5 million are children.



Source: UNHCR as of Aug. 2014

All of Syria's neighbors have either closed their borders or imposed limits on how many refugees can enter their countries, exposing refugees to violence but **leaving them with nowhere to flee**.

Meanwhile, the World Food Program announced that as of Oct. 2014, a lack of funds is forcing the UN agency to cut back on food rations that are the only barrier to starvation for almost six million refugees and displaced people in Syria and the surrounding countries.

What's the impact on Syrian refugee children?

While about 1.5 million Syrian refugee children have fled the worst of the violence by leaving Syria, they remain at risk and in need of support.

- Syrian refugee children face numerous health threats: psychosocial stress, measles, polio, malnutrition and diarrhoeal disease.

- Over 50 per cent of Syrian refugee children are out of school, there is an increase in numbers of child marriages, and 1 in 10 children are engaged in labour (**200,000 children are in near-slave labour in Lebanon**).



Photo Credit: Jonathan Hynes

What's the situation in the current host countries?

While some 400,000 refugees live in over 35 refugee camps across Jordan, Turkey and Iraq, the majority of the three million refugees live in host communities. Many of these refugee families live in makeshift settlements and are exposed to harsh elements, putting them at increased risk of disease. The burden of meeting the basic needs of refugees is taking a massive toll on local services, natural resources and systems.

What about the Palestinian refugees in Syria?

Sadly, many of the 520,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria have become refugees a second time. Palestinian refugees from Syria are particularly vulnerable as they are not being offered the same protection and humanitarian assistance as other Syrian refugees. Human Rights Watch has documented that while fleeing violence in Syria, Palestinian refugees are denied entry or forced back by neighbouring host countries.

The 18,000 Palestinian refugees who are trapped inside the Yarmouk refugee camp, located in Damascus, currently face starvation, malnutrition and disease, as well as insufficient water supplies due to broken infrastructure. Humanitarian **access** remains inadequate.

Human Rights Watch has recommended that countries outside the region "consider accepting Palestinian

refugees from Syria... without prejudice to their right of return."

What has the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) requested of countries like Canada in terms of resettlement?

In Sept. 2013, the UNHCR called upon countries to admit 30,000 Syrian refugees through resettlement, humanitarian admission and other programs during the 2013-2014 period, with a focus on protecting the most vulnerable.

Since then the UNHCR has assessed that "the number of Syrian refugees who are in need of resettlement or other admission will grow. There are many who are very vulnerable and need an urgent response. There may be others who will be unable to return home in safety and dignity in the foreseeable future."

So, in Feb. 2014, the UNHCR asked countries to commit to admitting another 100,000 Syrian refugees over 2015-2016.



How has Canada responded to these UNHCR requests?

According to Chris Alexander, Canada's Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, "we are committed to protecting and resettling refugees who continue to suffer because of conflict and civil unrest. Canada continues to have one of the most generous immigration and refugee systems in the world. We welcome 1 out of every 10 of all resettled refugees globally."

Based on this existing policy, proud tradition and recent practice, Canada should have admitted 3,000 Syrian refugees by 2014 and would be expected to welcome another 10,000 by 2016.

Unfortunately, to date, Canada has struggled to process even the shockingly small number it has committed to:

200 Syrian refugees and another 1,100 refugees privately sponsored by community organizations and churches.

Surprisingly, no commitment has yet been made to the UNHCR request made nine months ago for resettling Syrian refugees in 2015-2016.

While Canada has generously committed \$353 million in urgently needed humanitarian assistance on the ground since 2012, this does not solve the resettlement needs of very vulnerable Syrian refugees, given the long-term nature of this crisis. Nor does it show solidarity with neighbouring host countries who are struggling to cope with the huge numbers of refugees they have received.



How does Canada's performance on resettling Syrian refugees compare to its past responses to similar crises?

This very slow and low-level response stands in stark contrast to Canada's historical and recent responses to similar crises. Recently, the Montreal Gazette editorial board called on Canada to "live up to its promise to help Syrian refugees".

The Globe and Mail asked "whether 1,300 is the best Canada can do. In the past, Canada has been much more generous. In 1999, Canada resettled more than 5,000 Kosovo refugees. In 1992, Canada resettled 5,000 Bosnian refugees. In 1979, Ottawa sponsored 4,000 Vietnamese boat people. The response to Syria seems paltry by comparison."

However, it is worth noting that in 1979, Canada went far beyond the initial government-assisted resettlement of 4,000 Vietnamese and other Indochinese refugees. It challenged Canadians to privately sponsor refugees by offering to match the number until 50,000 refugees was achieved. With overwhelming generosity from Canadians, along with supportive politicians, civil servants and programs, "Canada resettled 60,000 Indochinese refugees between 1979 and 1980, of which about 26,000

were government-assisted and 34,000 were privately sponsored.”

More recently, the Canadian government been fast and flexible in response to crises. According to a [Toronto Star analysis](#), fast-tracked admittance programs were quickly offered for Iraqi Christians suffering targeted attacks in 2007, Haitians reeling from the 2010 earthquake and Filipinos affected by the 2013 typhoon.

Strangely, [no similar programs](#), such as fast-track admission, family reunification or matching resettlement programs, have been introduced for Syrians.



How is Canada's performance compared to other leading Western countries on the Syrian refugee crisis?

To date, [Germany](#) has resettled 6,000, welcomed another 11,800 Syrian asylum seekers and promised to offer protection — in the form of renewable, two-year residence visas — to another 20,000 of Syria's most vulnerable victims. Programs for [Syrians with family members in Germany](#) have also been implemented.

[Sweden](#), a country with only about a quarter of Canada's population, has given permanent resident status to more than 30,000 Syrians. Since Sept. 2013, Syrians who have made it to Sweden and passed normal security checks are given permanent residence and are allowed to bring their immediate family members to live with them. More than 5,000 Syrians arrived in the first three months of the new policy and now Sweden welcomes 600 Syrian refugees each week.



What could Canada do to resettle more Syrian refugees?

1. **Commit to welcoming at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in 2015-2016** that are prioritized by the UNHCR for resettlement or humanitarian admission. The most vulnerable include: women and girls at risk, survivors of violence or torture, refugees with medical needs or disabilities, refugees at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, vulnerable older refugees, and refugees in need of family reunification.
2. **In addition, welcome Palestinian refugees from Syria**, as they are particularly vulnerable and are not offered the same protection or assistance offered to other Syrian refugees. This should not affect their right of return as per UNGA resolution 194.
3. **Ensure there is an appropriate mix of programs for admission** including a high level of government sponsorship supplemented by private sponsorship for resettlement as permanent residents. The UNHCR recommends additional approaches: resettlement as temporary residents, humanitarian admission programs, individual sponsorship, medical evacuation, or admission of relatives beyond existing family reunification programs, labour mobility and private investor schemes, student scholarships, or other programs.
4. **In addition to refugee resettlement programs, introduce flexible provisions to allow Syrian family members of Canadian citizens, permanent residents and accepted refugees to come to Canada, at least on a temporary basis**, as [recommended](#) by the Canadian Council for Refugees.
5. **Facilitate, resource and coordinate these programs rapidly and without delay.**

It is important that Canada does its fair share on all fronts to assist vulnerable Syrians fleeing violence. This will enhance our relations with the peoples and countries in the region and is consistent with our proud tradition of welcoming refugees and facilitating family reunification.