Background

Over the past five years the Syrian conflict has taken a devastating toll on the Syrian people. The casualties are inherently difficult to record given the operational risks to international staff in Syria, so much so that the United Nations (UN) stopped counting the death toll after it reached 250,000. Other groups have reported death tolls between 250,000 and 470,000. The UN estimates that 13.5 million Syrians are in immediate need of humanitarian assistance (4.8 million of whom are trapped in areas that cannot be reached by aid agencies), 6.6 million people are internally displaced (more than half of the country’s population), and nearly 7.5 million children have been affected by the conflict (2.6 million of which are resultantly out of school). Where devastation and direct military engagement exists, Syrians have been forced to flee to neighboring countries. Turkey hosts the most Syrian refugees with a presence of approximately 2.7 million; in Lebanon the number is approximately 1.1 million refugees; and in Jordan the number is around 640,000 refugees. The large numbers of refugees have had a debilitating impact on these already underfunded governments, which have limited domestic resources. As a result, incidents of spillover violence and discrimination towards Syrian refugees are becoming more prevalent in the region.

From 2014 to 2015, the U.S. Congress introduced four resolutions, in addition to holding numerous hearings, on the crisis in Syria. Senate Resolution 384, which unanimously passed in the Senate in April 2015, calls for increased access for the delivery of humanitarian aid; issues a condemnation of violence; and accepts the principles of the 2014 UN Security Council Resolution on Humanitarian Access (UNSCR 1283). House Resolution (HR) 520 encourages the U.S. and the UN to suspend their recognition of the Syrian Government until there is a complete cessation of attacks on civilians. Additionally, HR 520 calls for increased access inside of Syria to facilitate humanitarian aid, which has been routinely blocked by the Assad regime. Most recently, Senate Resolution 361 was introduced in February 2016 and calls on each donor country to fulfill the United Nations pledging commitment to Syria to alleviate the Syrian peoples’ humanitarian needs.

Additionally, the White House announced President Obama’s decision to welcome at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in 2016, while urging an increase in the number of total refugees admitted to the U.S. to 85,000 in 2016 and 100,000 in 2017.

The Problem

Refugees

Many existing regulations and provisions related to anti-terrorism initiatives have made it increasingly difficult for individuals in the Middle East North Africa region to resettle in the U.S. Recently, partly at the urging of Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL), the Obama Administration eased the “material support” language of immigration regulations to enable greater Syrian eligibility for entry into the U.S. Since the start of the Syrian conflict in 2011 through Fiscal Year 2015, the U.S. admitted 1,883 refugees - a miniscule number compared to our allies in the Middle East and Europe that built programs to take in hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees over the next two years. Since October of 2015, after the White House commitment to increase the number of Syrian refugees admitted to the U.S., 1,285 Syrian refugees have been resettled in the U.S., bringing the total number of Syrian refugees resettled in the U.S. since the outbreak of the conflict to 3,168.
Syrian refugee resettlement enjoyed Congressional support, if not urgency, for the past two years. However, there have recently been concerning attempts to overturn that support. The House Armed Services Committee held a May 2015 hearing during which Syrian refugees coming to the U.S. were portrayed as a serious national security threat. Using fantastical language to insinuate that any increase in refugee resettlement is a “federally funded jihadi pipeline,” some members of Congress targeted the screening process, claiming it fails to address these concerns despite the fact that refugees are one of the most intensely vetted groups allowed into the U.S. Not only is resettlement restricted to the most vulnerable - mainly women and children - it is also a closely monitored process. The vetting process for Syrian refugees to the U.S. begins with registration by UNHCR followed by an extensive screening process carried out by multiple U.S. government agencies. Efforts by some members of Congress to slow down or end the resettlement of refugees must be addressed. More must be done to provide Syrians opportunities for resettlement.

Aid

In December 2014, the UN Security Council adopted resolution 2191 that renewed an earlier resolution allowing for delivery of humanitarian assistance across borders and conflict lines in Syria, with or without authorization from the Syrian government. The resolution specifically targets areas held by the opposition, where aid travels and is delivered through border crossings in neighboring Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan. Although the Syrian government initially warned against such deliveries, the UN has been able to conduct some cross-border deliveries and provide aid to besieged cities like Aleppo, Homs, and districts of Damascus. In light of recent dynamics in the conflict, the UN will likely struggle to deliver much needed humanitarian aid and assistance to Syrians living in ISIL-occupied territories or in government besieged areas. For example, the UN has not been able to deliver aid to the areas of Raqqa and Deir al-Zor, both occupied by ISIL. The UN relies on cross-collaborative arrangements with other humanitarian organizations, such as the Syrian Arab Red Crescent, and smaller, tribal communities to get aid to these ISIL-controlled areas. Absent a strategy for the UN and its member states to deliver aid to these areas, Syrians living under ISIL’s occupation are at risk of disease, malnutrition, and starvation.

The struggle to deliver aid to Syrians living inside the country and neighboring countries has only been exacerbated by the UN’s growing funding gap—a result of decreasing donor commitments with an increase in the number and severity of humanitarian crises. The World Food Programme was forced to stop providing food to over 360,000 Syrian refugees in neighboring countries because of the need to focus on those in extreme need of assistance. Of its $4.5 billion appeal for Syria alone in 2016, only 7 percent of the UN’s funding needs have been met to date, forcing many Syrians who have no other choice to migrate to Europe in search of resources. Free healthcare for Syrians in refugee camps ended in 2014, placing the burden of medical care costs on refugees. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees Fillipo Grandi, “the magnitude of this particular crisis shows us unmistakably that it cannot be business as usual.”

The United States continues to be the largest single humanitarian donor to the crisis. In late September 2015, the U.S. announced it will provide an additional $419 million in humanitarian assistance for Syrians within the country, and in refugee camps or settled in the Middle East. The increase puts U.S. assistance to the humanitarian crisis at $4.5 billion total since 2011. A portion of the increased aid will support the countries that have taken in the most Syrian refugees: $29 million for Turkey, $75.5 million for Lebanon, and $44 million for Jordan.

Moving Forward
• Implement and provide adequate support for the immediate, direct delivery and deployment of humanitarian relief and assistance by all humanitarian organizations and aid agencies across all borders to reach Syrians in need.

• Amend rules to resettle Syrian refugees who have engaged in no wrongdoing and pose no threat to the U.S. by:
  
  • Extending recently announced exemptions to cover refugees who provided insignificant and limited assistance through routine transactions and had contacts with listed or designated groups;

  • Permitting exemptions on a case-by-case basis to anyone who voluntarily provided non-violent assistance to a Syrian armed opposition group not designated or listed as a terrorist organization.

  • Committing to the resettlement of 100,000 Syrian refugees, giving priority to particularly vulnerable subsets of this group; this includes victims of torture, victims of gender-based violence, individuals at risk of religious persecution, and women and children. In recent history, the U.S. has resettled nearly 180,000 refugees from Vietnam, 170,000 from the former Yugoslavia, and 100,000 from Iraq and Myanmar.