



FPC Briefing: The Moral and the Strategic-The UK's Response to the Syrian Crisis

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It is approaching 5 years since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, which resulted in what has been described by UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres as the worst humanitarian crisis of the past four decades.¹ In the past four and a half years, an estimated 250,000 people have died in the conflict, some four million people have fled the country and a further seven million have been displaced internally.

While the conflict initially was borne out of the spate of protests that took the Middle East by storm in early 2011, the brutality of the Assad regime's response to popular protests meant that the conflict escalated quickly, quickly becoming intractable. When coupled with the emergence of ISIS in June 2014, life in Syria and Iraq became increasingly unsafe.

This briefing explores the roots of the conflict, along with considering the regional and international implications of its continuation. It concludes by suggesting that it is in the UK's long-term strategic interests to do more to help people and states affected by events across the Middle East.

The Syrian Conflict

The Arab Uprisings began in late 2010 with the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, Mohammad Bouazzizi. This act triggered a spate of protests across the region, highlighting tensions between regime and society. When the protests reached Syria, few thought that the regime of the young, seemingly reform minded Bashar al Assad would be seriously affected. However, the draconian response of the Assad regime meant that protests turned violent and quickly degenerated into a vitriolic and seemingly intractable civil war that has drawn in external actors such as Hizballah, Iran, and Gulf states. Actors involved in the conflict have used a range of brutal tactics in an effort to achieve a strategic advantage in the conflict. In particular, the Assad regime has continued to use barrel bombs – despite regime protestations to the contrary – an indiscriminate weapon said to have resulted in the death of 11,000 civilians.²

The human cost of this conflict quickly became clear. The death of 250,000 Syrians with four million people forced out of the state and seven million people displaced internally stresses the severity of the situation. The collapse of the Syrian state means that basic welfare infrastructure is lacking and that the state is barely able to provide for those affected. Clearly then, life in Syria is incredibly difficult and those seeking to leave the state were not doing so out of choice; rather, to avoid an increasingly brutal and intractable conflict.

In neighbouring Lebanon, 1,113,941 people have crossed the border to escape the fighting,³ resulting in the streets of Beirut being filled with mothers and children from Syria. Prior to the influx of Syrian refugees, the population of Lebanon was just over 4 million, with a delicate balance between Sunni, Shi'a and Christian manifesting in the confessional political system. The influx of refugees will impact dramatically upon the Lebanese economy, with the

¹Chris Green, UN: World faces largest refugee crisis in decades, Independent, November 2014,

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/un-world-faces-largest-refugee-crisis-in-decades-9839339.html>

²Channel 4, Syria: living under the horrors of barrel bombs in Aleppo, June 2015, <http://www.channel4.com/news/barrel-bombs-syria-assad-aleppo-deraa-idlib-civilian-deaths>

³UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response, September 2015, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

humanitarian aid for Lebanon only 13% funded, according to Guterres.⁴ In Turkey, as of late August, the number of Syrian refugees stood at 1,938,999, with the Turkish government suggesting that many of these will be permanent.⁵ While the number of refugees in Jordan is much lower, totalling somewhere in the region of 650,000, over 500,000 of them had crossed into the Hashemite Kingdom by 2013 as a consequence of the civil war.

The situation across the border in Iraq is equally bleak, which demonstrates the desperation of the estimated 200,000 Syrian refugees in the country to avoid the fighting in Syria. Despite the hope that many Iraqis felt following the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the incursion left a vacuum that was immediately filled by militias that propagated sectarian agendas. In setting up Iraq's first truly representative democracy, the government of Iraq was dominated by Shi'a Muslims, historically persecuted by the various regimes ruling Iraq since its formation at the end of the First World War. The Coalition Provisional Authority and ensuing governments of Nouri al Maliki and Haider al Abadi all continued to pursue agendas driven by sectarian interests, providing fertile ground for recruitment to ISIS.⁶ As a consequence of the instability in Iraq, some 2.25 million people have been internally displaced within Iraq, in the region of 7% of the Iraqi population.

Clearly, the ramifications of this crisis for states in the region are catastrophic. Economically, states face huge costs to provide shelter and electricity for the number of refugees that have, in many cases, quickly and seriously changed the demographics of a state. As of August 24th, neighbouring states that took in refugees required \$4.53 billion of aid to facilitate this, but have only received \$1.67 billion. Despite their involvement in intensifying the conflict in Syria, none of the Gulf Co-Operation Council countries have taken in refugees from Syria.⁷ As seasons begin to change, more needs to be done before people in temporary shelter have to face the harsh realities of winter in a region that in recent years has experienced snowstorms, torrential rain and flash floods.⁸

Traveling to Europe

Yet the situation has attracted attention for events closer to home. The International Organization of Migration has reported that thus far, in 2015, more than 350,000 migrants were detected at the borders of the EU. In the whole of 2014, this number was 280,000.⁹ The UN reported that of this number, 160,000 had fled Syria to Greece by July 2015, most by sea.¹⁰ Estimates suggest that to cross to Europe illegally, it would cost \$4-6000 per person, meaning that only those with access to money are able to do so.¹¹ After crossing the Aegean from Turkey to Greece, the flow of people continues through Macedonia, Serbia, Hungary and onto northern Europe, where several states have offered to take in large numbers of refugees.

⁴The Guardian, **One million Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon, UN says, April 2014**, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/03/million-syrian-refugees-registered-lebanon-un>

⁵UNHCR *ibid*.

⁶ This is explored in more detail in a forthcoming book co-authored with Stephen Royle, *The Origins of ISIS* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

⁷ Amnesty International, *Facts & Figures: Syria refugee crisis & international resettlement*, December 2014, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/12/facts-figures-syria-refugee-crisis-international-resettlement/>

⁸ Daily Telegraph, **Winter storms, snow, torrential rain and flash floods hit the Middle East** <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/worldnews/9791269/Winter-storms-snow-torrential-rain-and-flash-floods-hit-the-Middle-East.html>

⁹ BBC News, **Why is EU struggling with migrants and asylum?**, September 2015, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24583286>

¹⁰ UNHCR, **Numbers of refugee arrivals to Greece increase dramatically, August 2015**, <http://www.unhcr.org/55d32dcf6.html>

¹¹ Liz Sly, **As tragedies shock Europe, a bigger refugee crisis looms in the Middle East**, *Washington Post*, August 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/as-tragedies-shock-europe-a-bigger-refugee-crisis-looms-in-the-middle-east/2015/08/29/3858b284-9c15-11e4-86a3-1b56f64925f6_story.html?postshare=5641441313635556



While the British press had previously portrayed refugees as migrants, reflecting a dehumanising narrative that was prominent across British and European politics, the publication of photographs of the young Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, who drowned in the Aegean Sea, along with his brother and mother, was the turning point. The moral arguments for providing humanitarian support to the refugees were clear, as was the need for an urgent response. A groundswell of public support meant that 260,000 people signed a petition calling on the government to do more to help people affected by the crisis, with 250,000 signing The Independent's petition.¹²

In response, the Prime Minister reversed his earlier position of not providing asylum to more Syrian refugees. Cameron correctly states that Britain has a "moral responsibility" to support those affected by the Syrian crisis and offered to provide settlement to thousands of Syrian refugees, also pledging a further £100 million to support those in the region, with £60 million to go to those still in Syria and the remainder to go to those in camps in neighbouring countries.¹³ Yet, in comments made on *The Andrew Marr Show*, the Chancellor, George Osborne appeared to be suggesting that the foreign aid budget could be used to support refugees in the UK.¹⁴ This raises further questions about compliance with OEDC obligations, along with Cameron's assertion that the UK will provide more aid to regional camps. The Prime Minister is wrong, however, to state that Britain will only provide help to those in camps on the Syrian border. Given the scale of the crisis, more must be done to support those across Europe, for both moral and strategic reasons.

Strategic Interests

In addition to the moral imperatives, there are also strategic interests at stake in responding to the crisis, both in Europe and in the Middle East. Much like the recent Iranian nuclear deal, which, to the creatively minded, offers opportunities for innovative solutions to several of the Middle East's woes,¹⁵ resolving the humanitarian crisis can also serve a secondary goal. The Prime Minister is correct to stress that in the long term, bringing peace to the Middle East is the only viable solution – indeed, peace in Syria is what many refugees are calling for, so they can return to their homes. However, this task has eluded many far more creative and influential global leaders than him.

For the past year I have bemoaned the lack of a coherent, powerful counter narrative against ISIS, perhaps best summed up by a failure to refer to the group's name consistently in the UK, let alone internationally.¹⁶ Counter narratives, as defined by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, are "attempts to challenge extremist and violent extremist messages, whether directly or indirectly, through a range of online and offline means."¹⁷ Yet counter

¹² See: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-34139798> and <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/refugees-welcome-100000-sign-independent-petition-calling-for-britain-to-take-its-fair-share-10484931.html>

¹³ William Schomberg, **UK to increase Syria refugee aid by 100 million pounds: Cameron, Reuters, September 2015**, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/04/us-europe-migrants-cameron-aid-idUSKCN0R41M720150904>. Of course, there are questions about how this aid would be provided in Syria, to which areas and how.

¹⁴ **Guardian, Refugee crisis: thousands arrive in Germany amid calls for renewed action in Syria - as it happened, September 2015**, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/live/2015/sep/06/thousands-of-refugees-arrive-by-train-and-bus-in-germany-live>

¹⁵ Given the intractable nature of the conflict, it is clear that a settlement cannot be achieved with Assad still in power. With the burgeoning rapprochement between Iran and the West, perhaps a transition to a post-Assad Syria can facilitate the beginnings of a diplomatic solution to the crisis. Clearly, this does not resolve the ISIS problem, but it could provide a starting point to develop an anti-ISIS coalition.

¹⁶ Debates over whether to call the group ISIS, ISIL, Islamic State, IS, *daesh*, so-called Islamic State or any of the other derivatives has not helped matters. While France refers to the group by the derogatory term *daesh*, the BBC has refused to do the same because of the time it would take to explain this to viewers.

¹⁷ Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve, Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism, Institute of Strategic Dialogue, 2013, <http://www.strategicdialogue.org/CounterNarrativesFN2011.pdf> Two of the more powerful counter-narrative



narratives are difficult to create and manage and, given the interaction of numerous actors and grievances, it is often difficult to target all the moving parts that are inherent within the ideology of groups such as ISIS. Perhaps then, there is another way.

In a powerful article for The Independent, Charlie Winter sets out a powerful strategic justification to complement the humanitarian justification for action.¹⁸ Winter suggests that “heartlessness towards refugees is the lifeblood of jihadist groups like ISIS”. He correctly notes the difficulty of developing a counter narrative against the ISIS threat, but suggests that perhaps there is a different way of responding, by rejecting a key premise of the ISIS appeal, namely the narrative of victimhood.

In a section worth quoting in full, Winter argues that

By focusing on the perceived inaction of the international community, they can “prove” that the “Crusaders” are sided with the “Nusayris” (a derogatory term for Assad’s supporters), that this is all one big conspiracy, a global “war on Islam”. This way, not only do they manage to sell themselves as the least worst option, they can broaden their appeal to a much wider, non-jihadist audience: people at the end of their tether who are willing to try anything for a modicum of stability. Politicians may wax lyrical about upholding human rights and providing hundreds of millions of pounds worth of aid, but when it comes to refugees and they appear disinterested, at best, and hostile, at worst, they just come across as heartless. This perceived heartlessness is the lifeblood of jihadist groups.

There are two key points in this that are worth unpacking: first, the failure of the international community to respond to the civil war – and failure of the Responsibility to Protect – the Syrian people who fought against Assad are framed as being forgotten by the international community. As the conflict approaches its fifth year and Assad continues to use barrel bombs against his own population, it is hard to argue against this position. Second, the perceived hypocrisy of Western states, who, despite espousing the need to uphold human rights, when faced with a crisis of such severity, there is little interest in responding to it. This only serves to fuel the narrative of victimhood at the heart of ISIS’s appeal. In seeking to counter the appeal of the group, responding to crises in a manner driven by humanitarian concerns, the power of the victimhood narrative will be eroded.

It is also in the international community’s interests to facilitate an end to the conflict in Syria. Much like Afghanistan in the 1980s, Syria has become an ‘international finishing school’ for terrorists.¹⁹ The number of foreign fighters travelling to join ISIS is in the tens of thousands, which poses a number of questions for security services across the world. Resolving the Syrian conflict could also go some way to diminishing the sectarian conflict that is engulfing the Middle East.²⁰

What is clear is that there is no quick or easy fix to this problem. The people who have left Syria will be unable to return home in the near future. They will require support in myriad forms, but most immediately will require food, shelter and medical assistance; we should

campaigns are the Trojan T shirt http://adsoftheworld.com/media/dm/exitdeutschland_trojan_tshirt and Average Mohammad <http://www.averagemohamed.com>

¹⁸ Charlie Winter, **Heartlessness towards refugees is the lifeblood of jihadist groups like Isis, September 2015**, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/heartlessness-towards-refugees-is-the-lifeblood-of-jihadist-groups-like-isis-10484687.html>

¹⁹ Guardian, **Iraq and Syria are 'finishing schools' for foreign extremists, says UN report, April 2015**, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/02/iraq-and-syria-are-finishing-schools-for-foreign-extremists-says-un-report>

²⁰ Particularly in Iraq and Yemen.



not forget that they have fled a war zone and that many will be suffering with posttraumatic stress disorder. A huge number of these people are children, who will also require education and support during their formative years. Longer term, the failure to ensure that these needs are met could also create grievances that may result in challenges to international security in the future.

Ultimately, there is a need to respond to this crisis in a multifaceted way. A diplomatic resolution to the crisis must be found, to prevent further catastrophe. In the meantime, more support is required to assist states that are currently housing refugees from Syria. There are strong humanitarian imperatives for providing support for those affected by the civil war, but there are also strategic reasons for doing so.

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