

Realism and the Refugee Crisis

There are two key elements to addressing the flood of Mideast refugees into Europe. One is the immediate humanitarian crisis. The second is to undertake a realistic approach toward stabilizing the war-torn region, which will require Washington working with Moscow and Tehran, writes ex-CIA official Graham E. Fuller.

By Graham E. Fuller

The picture last week of the little Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi dead on the beach in Turkey is one of those iconic pictures whose intense human face forces deeper reflection, especially upon publics for whom distant tragedies tend to be statistics rather than specific human stories.

I wrote about the refugee crisis last April at the time when the media was filled with pictures of precarious boats on the high seas, being commandeered by European officials, or rescued from capsizing. I commented at that time that while a very real crisis is at hand for Europe, attention has been riveted almost exclusively upon the immediate situation.

That is natural enough, the situation cries out for immediate treatment. But this comes perhaps at the cost of longer-range analysis of the deeper sources of such problems; that is where the long-term heavy lifting by the international community will need to be done. There should be no doubt, this is a very real national security issue and thus should draw upon a significant portion of national security budgets, to much better end.

Europe, of course, is the immediate destination of this stream of refugees, and why not? For the Middle East and North Africa, Europe is the nearest region that possesses the wealth as well as functioning humanitarian values *and institutional structure* that can offer refuge. Europe has not had a whole lot of choice in the matter, but it is praiseworthy that many countries there, especially Germany, take this moral and humanitarian responsibility seriously.

But surely a much larger list of countries share deep responsibility for helping ignite these current humanitarian crises. In the first instance, the United States. It was Washington that launched the war that destroyed the Iraqi state and social structure, casting it into the present state of chaos and the outbreak of deadly sectarianism not present under Saddam Hussein.

Chaos in Iraq and its subsequent sectarian struggles and refugee flows directly impacted the Syrian crisis. Syria's ruler Bashar al-Assad bears the first and most immediate responsibility for the present brutal civil war there. But the

Iraqi jihadi movement instantly merged into the mounting violence in Syria and the formation of ISIS.

Yet Washington, which went on to contribute directly to organizing, arming, and training jihadi groups to fight in Syria against the Assad regime, disingenuously seems to absolve itself from responsibility for these consequences. Washington has so far grudgingly expressed willingness to accept only some 1,500 Syrian refugees.

Canada, another vast and wealthy country that also shares in supporting anti-Assad elements in Syria and the bombing of ISIS, is willing to accept even fewer refugees. The UK enthusiastically helped stoke the war in Syria, but will take only the most modest number of the resultant refugees as well. (I commend in this context the [New York Times article](#) by Canadian intellectual Michael Ignatieff on the broader dimensions of the problem.)

Libya, also visited by western "regime change" operations, presents many parallels and an equally urgent problem of African refugees by sea.

But European willingness to pitch in contrasts with uglier questions about the shortcomings of much of the Middle East itself in meeting humanitarian responsibilities on its doorstep. In fact, the less affluent states have accepted the most refugees: Turkey has accepted over two million refugees from over the border. Jordan, also on Syria's border, has accepted some 1.5 million, Lebanon perhaps one million.

But other, far wealthier Middle Eastern States in the Gulf have accepted virtually no refugees, all the more shocking because most of these states have directly funded one or another party in Syria's civil war. In fairness, however, we need to acknowledge that these Gulf states and Saudi Arabia have indeed made major financial contributions to international refugee organizations, perhaps some \$2.5 billion for the care and upkeep of the refugees so far. (And the US, miserly in accepting refugees, has contributed some \$2.8 billion in aid as well.)

But why, conspicuously, are the Gulf states not accepting any of the refugees into their countries? The answer has more to do with the delicate demographic and political state of the Gulf countries than with lack of financial generosity. The "natives" of the small Gulf states, usually the original tribal elements of the immediate locale, with sudden prosperity decades ago became minorities, often some 10 to 15 percent, in their own states; they employ large foreign labor forces to carry out most of the physical work and administrative tasks while the more privileged natives engage in commerce, governance or leisure. Most of the Gulf states are already intensely nervous about these

skewed demographics.

Perhaps a more important reason though is political: Syrians represent an educated and intensely politicized culture, a radical one at that, far too politicized for the Gulf rulers and the deeply non-politicized natives who fear rocking the boat in their petrol-rich societies; they feel they have too much to lose through any potential political agitation.

Politics is a luxury that Gulf natives are willing to forego in the interests of maintaining the welfare society their economy permits. Saudi Arabia is a much larger country and could physically accommodate large numbers of refugees, but shares similar fears about politicized immigrants, especially Syrians.

One final note: I believe the only realistic long-term plan for drying up the contagion of ISIS is the restoration of some degree of peace and order to both Syria and Iraq; ISIS thrives on the chaos and emotions of those struggles. Here it is vital for the broader international community to hammer out some agreement on restoring stability in both countries. Military operations will not do it; they only prolong civil war.

Two countries key to reaching some kind of political solution are Iran and Russia. Renewed western ties with Iran may now facilitate some chance of compromise. Russia too, with its own large Muslim population, has deep reasons to fear ISIS and to seek stability in the Middle East. But it will not sign on to another western/NATO-imposed solution designed to consolidate strategic western power at the expense of a Russian presence.

As long as U.S.-Russian relations are engaged in a zero-sum, winner-take-all strategic struggle in the Middle East, Russia will predictably drag its feet to counter U.S. efforts. Washington needs to ignore the now prevalent advice of its hawks on relations with Russia and accept the benefits of an "everybody can win" compromise settlement over Syria.

Such settlement is not easy to achieve, but without it nothing will happen except more deaths and more refugees.

Graham E. Fuller is a former senior CIA official, author of numerous books on the Muslim World; his latest book is *Breaking Faith: A novel of espionage and an American's crisis of conscience in Pakistan*. (Amazon, Kindle) grahamefuller.com
