

The Syrian Refugee Crisis: UK Response

I. The Syrian Crisis

The Syrian crisis is considered by many to be the worst humanitarian disaster since World War II. Inside Syria, an estimated 13.5 million people – more than half the country’s pre-war population, including 6 million children – are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance.ⁱ Of these, about 5 million are in hard to reach areas, with close to 600,000 people in besieged areas.ⁱⁱ About 80% of Syrians currently live in poverty, while the life expectancy, since the start of the crisis in 2011, has dropped by more than 20 years.ⁱⁱⁱ To respond to the Syrian humanitarian crisis, the UN appealed for \$7.73 billion for 2016, which was only about 50% funded.^{iv}

Threats from the Assad regime, ISIS and some other opposition groups have caused millions of people to flee the country. There are now nearly 5 million registered Syrian refugees – more than any single refugee population in the world – the majority of whom are currently living in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan.^v Children have been greatly affected by the crisis, with 2.4 million Syrian minors who are now refugees.^{vi} While the majority of Syrian refugees are in neighboring countries in the Middle East, over 1 million have applied for asylum in Europe, of whom 64% of Syrians applied for asylum in Germany and Serbia.^{vii}

The UK has a long history of protecting refugees, including the *Kindertransport* that rescued Jewish children and brought them to Britain during the Holocaust. In responding to the humanitarian need of Syrians, the Department for International Development (DIFD) has allocated a total of £1.8 billion to help address the crisis in Syria and across the region.^{viii} The UK has also promised to take in 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years and established a program specifically to resettle Syrians.

II. Syrian Refugees in the UK

One way Syrian refugees arrive in the UK is as asylum seekers. In the year ending in September 2016, there were 33,380 total asylum applications in the UK. Among those, 2,359 applications were from Syrians. Of the Syrians that applied,



2,102 were granted asylum in that year - a grant rate of 86%.^{ix} This is the highest rate among the top six nationalities applying for asylum in the UK.^x Given the geography of the UK relative to the European mainland, the numbers of asylum seekers in the UK are significantly lower than in countries such as Sweden or Germany. Britain received just 3% of all asylum claims in the EU in 2015.^{xi}

Another route for Syrian arrivals in the UK is as resettled refugees under the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPRS). In general, most refugees coming into the UK are resettled under the Gateway Protection Programme, but Syrians, as a particularly vulnerable population, are brought through a different scheme - the VPRS. The VPRS started in 2014 as a small-scale effort, with only three local authorities involved and 239 Syrian refugees resettled through September 2015.^{xii} In September 2015, then-prime minister David Cameron pledged to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020. He emphasized the importance of giving sanctuary to children, describing it as the “modern equivalent of the *Kindertransport*.”^{xiii}

As of December 2016, 4,162 Syrian refugees have been resettled in the UK as part of the VPRS.^{xiv} The program has emphasized those who are most vulnerable. Most of these refugees have been family groups of four to six members, 49% were children under the age of 18, and 55% were accepted for resettlement because they were survivors of torture and/or violence.^{xv} Those admitted under the VPRS are granted five years’ Humanitarian Protection with all the rights and benefits that are provided by that status, including access to public funds, the right to work, and the possibility of family reunion.^{xvi} They also have access to statutory services, such as health and education.^{xvii}

A recent development in resettlement in the UK is the Home Office’s Community Sponsorship Scheme, similar to the Canadian model for private sponsorship. It is an opportunity for government to work in conjunction with civil society to help resettle Syrian refugees. Faith communities, local community groups, businesses, universities, or even individuals creating their own sponsoring groups can apply to be community sponsors.^{xviii} The commitment is for one year (except housing, which must be secured for two years), with responsibilities including meeting the family at the airport, providing cultural orientation, providing housing, supporting access to medical and social services, English language tuition, and support towards employment and self-sufficiency.^{xix} While the Community Sponsorship Scheme will help resettle the 20,000 Syrian refugees promised by 2020, it will not increase the quota.^{xx}



III. Civil Society Response

The efforts of civil society have been crucial to the UK's response to the Syrian refugee crisis, in advocating for greater refugee protection and helping those who have resettled to integrate into British life. Organizations such as the Refugee Council, Save the Children, Refugee Action, Amnesty International, World Jewish Relief and others are at the forefront providing support and resources for refugees in the UK and providing humanitarian aid abroad. Citizens UK, an organization devoted to community organizing, established the Refugees Welcome campaign, which has been coordinating local efforts to welcome and support resettled refugees. The Movement for Reform Judaism, led by Rabbi Laura Janner-Klausner, has been a key participant in Citizens UK. In a great outpouring of support, about 90,000 people took part in the Solidarity with Refugees March in London in September 2015, urging the government to take stronger action to support refugees.^{xxi} A similar march took place again in September 2016.

As it has in many parts of the world, the faith community has played a major role in the civil society response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has been outspoken in his support for refugees. In July 2015, a Syrian family was housed on the grounds of Lambeth Palace, the residence of the Archbishop.^{xxii} In another effort by the Anglican Church, the Diocese of London commissioned Capital Mass to coordinate local and diocesan-wide responses into the immediate and long term needs as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis.^{xxiii} For Jewish leaders and organizations, the memory of World War II and the *Kindertransport* has compelled many to be at the forefront of the issue of Syrian refugees. The late Lord Weidenfeld, a Holocaust survivor who was supported by a Christian group in the UK during the war, rescued 150 Syrian Christians from Islamic State territory and brought them to Poland.^{xxiv} In the past year, World Jewish Relief raised nearly £944,000, impacting 17,500 refugees. They have also started a pilot program in Bradford to better integrate refugees into British society.^{xxv}

In September 2016, over 200 faith leaders in the UK – representing Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jains, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs, and Zoroastrians – signed an open letter to the Prime Minister calling on the government to offer sanctuary to more refugees. They wrote, “The best of this country is represented by the generosity, kindness, solidarity and decency that Britain has at many times shown those fleeing persecution.” In particular, the letter called for fair and humane family reunion policies.^{xxvi}

IV. Public Opinion

Much of the frustration that led to the United Kingdom's vote to leave the European Union in June 2016 was due to anxiety about immigration policy. However, according to a report by British Future, the vote to leave the EU "was not an endorsement to slam the door shut on refugees."^{xxvii} Stephen Hale, Chief Executive of Refugees Action, an organization that helps resettle refugees in the UK, said that while troubling, Brexit changes little when it comes to actual refugee law. Hale stated, "Refugee policy is shaped in London, not in Brussels. The decision about how well we support refugees in terms of integration is a matter for the UK, not Brussels. The number of Syrian refugees we choose to resettle is a matter for the UK, not Brussels."^{xxviii} However, British Future acknowledged that refugee protection and resettlement will likely be affected by the ensuing negotiations to leave the EU.

The Brexit vote shows that there is uneasiness around migration to the UK, but data on British public opinion provides a mixed picture of both fear and welcoming attitudes. While there is generally a mistrust of government to manage immigration, the British public is not interested in reducing immigration at all costs. For example, only 12% want to see a reduction of highly skilled workers immigrating to the UK.^{xxix} In terms of refugees, according to a BBC poll, 41% said Britain should accept fewer refugees from Syria and Libya. However, more than half of those surveyed (56%) supported refugees being placed in their communities once they had arrived in the UK.^{xxx} Islamophobia may be a factor influencing public opinion around many refugee populations, including Syrians. In a ComRes poll, more than half of British respondents did not agree that Islam is compatible with British values.^{xxxi} However, negative views of Muslims are lower in the UK than in other regions in Europe. Only 28% of British people hold unfavorable views of Muslims in the UK, according to a Pew study.^{xxxii}

While there are many fears regarding Syrian refugees, a TENT survey shows that the right messaging can have a major impact on attitudes towards refugees. 51% of UK respondents with mixed views on refugees said that better knowledge of what is happening in refugees' home countries would make them more accepting.^{xxxiii} When it comes to immigration, British Future has found that approximately 25% of the country is liberal on immigration and 25% is anti-immigrant. This leaves 50% in the "anxious middle" – those who have humanitarian impulses, but are fearful. With the right narrative and information, this 50% can be moved to shift their views.^{xxxiv}



V. Action Steps

There are many ways in which you can get involved in supporting Syrian refugees in the UK, from volunteering your time to promoting positive messaging about refugees. Here are activities you can take on today:

- Get involved now by visiting <https://www.gov.uk/helprefugees> to learn more about what you can do to help.
- Use media to speak out against anti-refugee rhetoric, xenophobia, and Islamophobia.
- Address the three great fears about Syrian refugees that can affect public opinion and impede sensible policies: economic impact, terrorism and Islamophobia.
- Promote community discussions and collective action to “welcome the stranger.” Learn more about how you can welcome refugees into your community: <https://www.refugees-welcome.org.uk/what-you-can-do/>.
- Engage religious leaders to convene a multifaith dialogue on the refugee crisis and use their moral authority to urge acceptance and condemn hatred. Read the interfaith letter to the Prime Minister: <http://interfaithrefugeeinitiative.org/>.
- Volunteer to help refugees settling in the UK. To learn more, visit: http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/how_you_can_help_us/volunteer.
- Use your personal and professional skills to address some of the greatest needs of Syrian refugees: language, legal aid, and trauma counseling.
- Encourage refugees to share their stories online by helping them set up a simple webpage or social media site.
- Engage in refugee resettlement in the UK. Learn about the Community Sponsorship Scheme: <https://www.refugees-welcome.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Community-Sponsorship-Guide.pdf>
- Urge your church, synagogue, mosque, temple or other community partners to provide housing, school supplies, groceries, transportation, clothing and other orientation needs.
- Employ refugees, support businesses run by refugees, and encourage businesses to hire refugees. Include them in your professional and civic associations. Everyone starts somewhere, and refugees that are working contribute to the financial well-being of their communities.



- Include Syrian refugee children on your local or school sports teams. This builds their confidence and helps them assimilate faster into their schools and the community.

How students can get involved:

- Encourage your school to create scholarships for Syrian students.
- Hold fundraising activities with your society or group at lunch.
- Do research/write a paper on the Syrian humanitarian crisis. Some suggested topics:
 - What are UK requirements and procedures for obtaining refugee or asylum status? How can they be made more efficient for Syrians?
 - Where are Syrian refugees being resettled? How are they being integrated into British society?
 - How have prior waves of Syrian immigrants fared in the UK? What can we learn from them about the future of new Syrian refugees?
 - Is there evidence that Syrian refugees are security risks?
 - How can myths related to Syrian refugees be debunked?
 - How does the UK deal with Syrian refugees as compared to Europe, Turkey, and the Middle East?
 - Where are the gaps? What are the lessons that each can learn from the other?
- Fulfill your service requirements by volunteering with Syrian refugee causes.

Gaps that can be filled by the philanthropic sector:

- Humanitarian Aid
 - UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, currently has a 44% funding gap to meet their target for 2016. Support organizations and NGOs that are working on the ground, in the areas bearing the brunt of the refugee crisis—Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Greece—to address the immediate needs of Syrian refugees: food, clothing, shelter and hygiene.
 - Support efforts that meet the specific needs of the most vulnerable groups, such as LGBT refugees, women and children—women and children make up about 80% of the Syrian refugee population.
 - Help support the cash economy in the refugee camps through microgrants that help Syrians start small businesses.

- Support cash card programs, such as those researched by the International Rescue Committee. These are proven to help keep children in school rather than working to support their families, maintain dignity and enhance nutrition. And, for every \$1 given to a refugee, \$2.13 circulates in the economy. Learn more:
<https://www.rescue.org/report/emergency-economies-impact-cash-assistance-lebanon>.
- Integration/Resettlement
 - There are currently more than 4,000 Syrian refugees in the UK. Support the organizations that are resettling refugees.
 - Encourage the formation of Welcome Committees to on-board Syrian refugees.
 - Sponsor a Syrian refugee family, providing housing, mentoring, and support for one year through the Community Sponsorship Scheme.
- Advocacy/Messaging
 - Support efforts that counter the misinformation and disinformation about Syrian refugees, responding to the three great fears that hinder sensible and humane policies: economic impact, terrorism, and Islamophobia. Research shows that with the right messaging, public opinion can shift.
 - Fund media projects that lift up Syrian voices.
 - Support advocacy efforts around specific policies regarding refugee processing and aid.
- Research
 - Support research initiatives, such as public opinion surveys on Syrian refugees and data that shed light on the contributions of Syrians in the UK.
 - Support a survey on the effectiveness of the refugee program that identifies areas for improvement in the resettlement process and integration efforts.
 - Fund research into alternative programs to resettle Syrian refugees, such as a private sponsorship program, which, if implemented, would be another opportunity for the philanthropic sector to get involved.
 - The faith-based community is in the front-line of on-boarding refugees. Support a survey of how faith-based institutions are responding to the Syrian refugee crisis and identify best practices that can be

disseminated to all those that are looking for **effective** ways to get involved.

- There is a dearth of longitudinal research on resettled refugees and their life trajectories in their new homes. Such data are an important foundation for rational public policy.
- Impact Investing Solutions
 - The tools of impact investing – converting financial returns into social returns – can help create structures and solutions for the processes that impede refugee resettlement. Impact investing can help:
 - Create better integration (The 5 pillars of integration are: home, job, education, language, trauma counseling).
 - Create better processes.
 - In the UK, about 70% of applicants for asylum are turned down. But after appeals, 50% of all asylum seekers are admitted. That indicates that there is a lot of time wasted in this process.
 - Voluntary deportations cost 1,000 GBP; involuntary deportations cost 11,000 GBP. This, too, indicates a problem with the process.
 - Create spaces for education, jobs, trauma counseling in the region so that there is less incentive to flee to Europe.

The Multifaith Alliance for Syrian Refugees (MFA), a project of the Tides Center in cooperation with JDC, is a coalition of more than 80 faith-based and secular organizations. Our mission is to mobilize global support to alleviate the Syrian humanitarian crisis, heighten awareness of the growing dangers of not responding adequately, and advance future stability in the region. MFA conducts crisis-related briefings in the U.S. and abroad, facilitates relationships between complementary partner organizations working to help Syrian war victims, and nurtures transformative people-to-people diplomacy in the region.

i <http://www.unocha.org/syria>

ii <http://www.unocha.org/syria>

iii <http://www.unocha.org/syria>

iv <https://fts.unocha.org/pageloader.aspx?page=special-syriancrisis>

v <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

vi <https://www.unicef.org/appeals/syrianrefugees.html>

vii <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

viii https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565394/DFID_Syria_Crisis_Response_Summary_01_11_2016.pdf

ix <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2016/asylum>

x <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-july-to-september-2016/asylum>

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- xi <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/britains-refugee-response-labelled-woefully-inadequate-1772016429>
- xii <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/The-Syrian-Vulnerable-Persons-Resettlement-programme.pdf>
- xiii <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-34171148>
- xiv <http://iomuk.org/4162-syrian-refugees-have-been-resettled-uk-one-year-iom-assistance>
- xv <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/The-Syrian-Vulnerable-Persons-Resettlement-programme.pdf>
- xvi <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme-for-syrian-nationals>
- xvii <http://www.resettlement.eu/news/first-syrians-arrive-uk-under-vulnerable-persons-relocation-scheme-vprs>
- xviii <https://www.refugees-welcome.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Community-Sponsorship-Guide.pdf>
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- xxi <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/sep/12/london-rally-solidarity-with-refugees>
- xxii <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jul/19/archbishop-of-canterbury-syrian-family-refugee-sponsorship-scheme>
- xxiii <http://www.capitalmass.org.uk/refugee-response>
- xxiv <http://www.timesofisrael.com/holocaust-survivor-repays-ultimate-debt-via-rescue-of-syrian-christians/>
- xxv https://www.worldjewishrelief.org/assets/000/000/567/Refugees_Research_Final_artwork_v2_lo_or_iginal.pdf?1473085443
- xxvi <http://interfaithrefugeeinitiative.org/>
- xxvii <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/What-next-after-Brexit.pdf>
- xxviii <http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2016/06/what-are-consequences-brexit-refugee-crisis>
- xxix <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/What-next-after-Brexit.pdf>
- xxx <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-35470723>
- xxxi <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsbeat/article/36346886/uk-attitudes-towards-islam-concerning-after-survey-of-2000-people>
- xxxii <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/07/22/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>
- xxxiii https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55462dd8e4b0a65de4f3a087/t/570686f622482ed0f69daf8f/1460045574113/TENT_2015Nov_CountryReport-UK.pdf
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