

Forced to Flee: The Syrian Exodus

Migration and Refugee Services/
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops



Background

In March, 2011 the Syrian government initiated a crackdown on demonstrators who were critical of President Bashar al-Assad and his leadership. Within a matter of a few months opposition to his government escalated into full scale rebellion that continues to seek his removal. During the intervening period the situation has continued to worsen as the fighting continues and various forms of persecution and threats to life and health persist unabated. By December 2012 more than a half a million Syrian refugees were living in the countries surrounding their homeland or in Northern Africa. More recent estimates claim that by early March 2013 over one million Syrians had fled the country, half of whom are children, and another two million remain internally displaced. Whereas some 3,000 Syrians were leaving the country every day in December 2012, just two months later that number had increased to approximately 8,000. Not only does it represent a significant humanitarian crisis but the large outflow of people leaving Syria for surrounding countries, including Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey and, more recently, Iraq, also poses a threat to regional security as refugees begin to strain the resources of these countries. The international community must do more to help alleviate the suffering of individuals and in doing so diminish some of the pressures that are slowly building in the surrounding region.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops Respond

In October 2012, the Catholic bishops of the United States initiated a fact-finding mission to the Middle East that focused on the plight of Syrian refugees in the region. During their



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visit, neighboring countries told the delegation that services to the refugees could be cut back or the refugee flow limited without more support from the international community. Given that the situation has only worsened since, the likelihood of cutbacks and restrictions on refugee protection has only increased. Vulnerable refugee cases, including women with children, the elderly and disabled, and unaccompanied children could suffer the consequences as protection falters and resources become more scarce.

Religious minorities, especially Christians, are also at extreme risk, as they were in Iraq. The delegation heard many stories from Christian families that they are being targeted in the conflict, similar to the persecution many of these groups experienced during the Iraq war. This persecution could worsen if the conflict dissolves into a sectarian and ethnic civil war. Some remain at risk in neighboring countries. To help deal with these problems, the bishops continue to advocate with government officials and policy makers for the following recommendations:



As the conflict in Syria continues and intensifies, more international support will be required to assist Syrian refugees to find durable solutions. To date, only about one-third of the UNHCR international appeal for Syrian refugees has been met. The resources of the receiving nations are being stretched and tensions between residents and the new refugees are rising. The United States has given approximately \$132 million for support to the refugees, but more will be needed as the refugee numbers continually rise. Of particular need are refugees residing outside of the camps, both in Turkey and Jordan.

The United States and other nations should consider resettlement for the most vulnerable refugee cases. As the conflict continues and vulnerable refugees—women with children, religious minorities, unaccompanied minors—become even more vulnerable, the United States and other nations should consider resettlement for certain refugee groups. UNHCR should consider this option as a durable solution and begin identifying refugees for possible resettlement.

The United States should urge neighboring countries to protect religious minorities fleeing the Syrian conflict. Christians and other religious minorities fleeing Syria remain in fear in neighboring countries and should receive special attention. Many are afraid to ask for protection from UNHCR for fear the information will be shared with the Syrian regime; others are afraid to go to organized camps for fear of further persecution by elements in the camps.

HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Refugee populations are in need of your assistance, both through material support when they arrive and continual advocacy efforts on their behalf. To learn more about this situation and how you can help advocating on behalf of Syrians and other refugee populations, please visit: <http://www.usccb.org/about/resettlement-services/how-to-help.cfm>.
- If you are interested in assisting MRS continue its important work with migrants and refugees, please consider making a donation to the National Catholic Migration Fund at www.usccb.org/mrs-ncf