

HIAS GUIDE: The Syrian Refugee Crisis



Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

What is the crisis?

There are 60 million people in the world who have been displaced by conflict or persecution, comprising a global refugee population larger than at any time since World War II. Eleven million are Syrians who have fled their homes because of war: 7 million are displaced within Syria and over 4 million are refugees.

Over 90% of Syrian refugees are in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, but these host countries simply do not have the funding to provide for such an overwhelming number of people. This has resulted in a lack of job opportunities and limited access to medical care and education. The United Nations' refugee agency (UNHCR) has only received 37% of the funding it requested to meet refugees' needs in these areas. The World Food Programme had to cut food assistance to one third of its recipients due to a lack of funding.

What does Europe have to do with it?

Given the desperate situation of many of the refugees currently hosted in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, many have been forced to flee for a second time. Many people have risked their lives in extremely perilous journeys, often through exploitative smuggling networks—across the Mediterranean and into Greece or Italy. Over 3,000 people died this year on such a journey. Those who survive then continue across Europe toward countries that will welcome them, most notably, Germany and Sweden. Sadly, some countries, such as Hungary, have tightened their borders to keep refugees from entering.

What is our own government doing to address the crisis?

The United States has provided significant humanitarian assistance to the region. Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, we have provided more than any other single country.

The U.S. has a proud history of offering refuge to those in need of safety and protection. Through our Refugee Admissions Program, the United States will resettle roughly 70,000 refugees from around the world in 2015. However, it can take years for an individual refugee to complete the entire pre-arrival process and come to the United States, which prohibits the program from functioning as a true rescue mechanism for those with acute needs. Consequently, to date, the U.S. has only resettled about 1,900 Syrian refugees.

While the United States government recently made an announcement that the U.S. would bring 85,000 refugees in 2016 and 100,000 refugees in 2017, these represent nominal increases to our

existing resettlement program. By contrast, HIAS and Refugee Council USA are calling on the U.S. to commit to bringing 100,000 Syrian refugees over and above our existing program. This is not an unprecedented ask – in 1980, the United States resettled over 200,000 refugees during the Indochinese boat crisis.

In light of this extraordinary crisis, HIAS believes that the U.S. government must do more to lend support to relief efforts in the countries that are hosting overwhelming numbers of refugees, and to live up to our historic reputation as a global leader in the face of such crises.

What is HIAS doing to address this crisis?

HIAS is leading a robust advocacy effort. The most significant impact that we can have right now is to ensure that the U.S. government steps up to help alleviate the crisis, and we are mobilizing the Jewish community to demand that the U.S. government take a leadership role. HIAS is also one of nine major U.S. resettlement agencies, working to integrate and welcome refugees into communities around the country.

It is critical that the crisis be addressed thoughtfully in stages. So HIAS is also considering our most effective role in Europe in the intermediate term. The current chaos throughout Europe grows in part out of the fact that refugees are trying desperately to find safe haven in select European countries. Once the dust has settled and refugees have “landed” in safety, HIAS will assess their needs and is prepared to bring our expertise—legal services, trauma counseling, and the identification of refugees in need of resettlement—to those most in need.

Why is this a Jewish issue?

We are told to care for the stranger 36 times throughout the Torah—to love the stranger, to welcome the stranger, to protect the stranger. This is not just a commandment but also a central Jewish value. Our forefather Abraham and foremother Sarah opened their tent wide and welcomed guests to take refuge in their home, providing them with food and drink and a place to rest.

As a people, this is also our story. From the biblical Israelites to the Jews of the Soviet Union, time and time again, we have had to flee our homelands in search of safety due to violence and persecution. Based on our values and rooted in our own history, we have a responsibility to respond to today’s refugees.