

16141 60 million refugees: a crisis that has outgrown its 65-year-old solution

By Prince El Hassan bin Talal of Jordan, *Los Angeles Times*, February 21, 2016

The number of refugees, asylum-seekers and other displaced persons exceeded 60 million globally last year. More than half of the refugees have been uprooted not for months, but for years.

It's clear that the international legal framework for responding to such crises — the 1951 Refugees Convention — is insufficiently comprehensive to deal with a situation of this magnitude and complexity. Created to respond to the 1 million Europeans displaced after World War II ended, the convention was the first treaty to codify legal rights for refugees. And while its scope was expanded in 1967, the framework does not extend to cover all those in need of protection.

For instance, it defines a refugee as someone unable to return to their country owing to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” Certainly not all those fleeing Syria meet these criteria. They are, however, fleeing violent conflict, state collapse and brutal extremism, and most would agree that they deserve international protection. Yet how, and how long, countries should shelter such persons are difficult questions — not only because they touch on the sensitive issue of state sovereignty, but because of the sheer number of refugees.

Further, while host states are required to accept and keep asylum seekers, there are no binding rules on sharing the financial burden. Donor states can (and do) scale back their aid once the emergency phase has passed, leaving hosts to struggle on alone. Jordan, for example, is sheltering 635,000 U.N.-registered refugees, but in 2015 Jordan's response plan received only 34% of the funding it needed.

The current refugee crisis in Europe has brought these challenges to the fore; in particular, it is clear that countries which enjoy wealth and safety do not want to host refugees in large numbers, nor forever.

New solutions are required that address the reluctance of traditional resettlement countries to absorb vast numbers of refugees permanently, as well as the frustrations of host states about unequal burden sharing.

These might include the notion of temporary protection. Research suggests that short-term migration can benefit both the individual and the destination country. These gains are not only economic. Migrants absorb civic and institutional norms that they bring back to their societies.

Temporary protection also overcomes the issue of stripping a society of the very people it needs most post-conflict. Those Syrians seeking a life in Europe are disproportionately educated and employable. From a utilitarian perspective, it is preferable that they repatriate when the war ends and contribute to reconstruction and state-building.

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