

How Syria's neighbours and the European Union are handling the refugee crisis

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Abstract: *The Syrian refugee crisis is shaping up to be the largest of its kind since the Second World War. Large numbers of Syrians are fleeing persecution and the gross violations of human rights that have characterized a civil war already raging for four years. The spillover effects are far-reaching and cannot be ignored by the international community. The present article plans to examine how the most affected countries are coping with the influx of refugees inside their borders. How does the European Union fare in comparison with Syria's neighbours? Is the EU the best place for Syrian refugees?*

Keywords: asylum policies, European Union, humanitarian crisis, Syrian civil war, Syrian refugees

Introduction: Overview of the Syrian conflict

The Syrian Civil War describes the on-going armed conflict that has rattled the country since the Arab Spring. The international repercussions and the complexity in delineating the combatants have generated various characterizations in the media, from a “proto-world war” to a proxy war between Russia and the United States. The situation presents a high degree of sophistication, in that it is caused by two parallel conflicts that take place in the same territory, sometimes involving overlapping factions.

At the heart of this terrible unrest lies the in-fighting between the rebel groups, backed by the U.S., Turkey and various Arab nations, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Syrian government, supported by Russia, local militias, Iran and Hezbollah. Simultaneously, the second tier pits ISIS against a range of nominal allies that actually oppose each other in the first conflict: the United States and its allies, the Kurds, Russia and the Syrian government. This circumstances

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construct a veritable hornet's nest, as potential for further complication is high: Turkey is dissatisfied with the U.S. aiding Kurdish fighters and has been bombing them in her own territory, even though all three are theoretically allies in the fight against ISIS; Russia has been coordinating air strikes against the United States and her allies, in order to aid the Syrian government, while Iran and Saudi Arabia are on opposite sides of the fence, with the former fighting against the rebel groups supported by the latter.¹

The origins of the conflict date back to the spring of 2011, when government forces clashed with protesters demanding democratic reforms and the release of political prisoners. The demonstrations quickly escalated into violence, with the protesters asking for President Bashar al-Assad's resignation and the Syrian army retaliating with attacks on civilians.² Part of the Syrian population later organized themselves into various rebel factions, including the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council, spawning a fully-fleshed insurgency against the government.³ Various sources state that the Syrian authorities intentionally released and armed imprisoned jihadists, so that the rebels would lose credibility in the eyes of international actors.⁴

The gross violations of human rights that have been documented over the course of the Syrian conflict have garnered large-scale international condemnation. Numerous fact-finding missions carried out by organizations such as the UN, Human Rights Watch or the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons have gathered evidence for the repeated use of sarin or chlorine gas by

¹ Sergio Peçanha, Sarah Almukhtar and K. K. Rebecca Lai, "Untangling the Overlapping Conflicts in the Syrian War", *New York Times*, 18th October 2015, available at http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/10/16/world/middleeast/untangling-the-overlappingconflicts-in-the-syrianwar.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&module=photo-spot-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news&_r=0, accessed on 15th November 2015.

² "Syria protests: Rights group warns of 'Deraa massacre'", *BBC News*, 5th May 2011, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-13299793>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

³ "Syrian rebels: Too fragmented, unruly", *Hurriyet Daily News*, 1st September 2012, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-rebels-too-fragmentedunruly.aspx?pageID=238&nID=29158&NewsCatID=352>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

⁴ "Assad regime set free extremists from prison to fire up trouble during peaceful uprising", *The National*, 21st January 2014, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/syrian-rebels-too-fragmented-unruly.aspx?pageID=238&nID=29158&NewsCatID=352>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

the Syrian army against the civilian population.⁵ Needless to say, the use of industrial chemicals as weapons is an inhumane practice and is banned by the Chemical Weapons Convention, of which Syria has been a signatory since October 2013.⁶ The Syrian government is also reported to have used barrel bombs in rebel-controlled regions; the use of such weapons in populated civilian areas constitutes a violation of the UN Convention on Prohibitions or Restrictions on the Use of Certain Conventional Weapons.⁷ The massacre of its own population has been combined with attacks carried out against journalists⁸, sexual violence⁹, unlawful killings, torture, arbitrary arrest and violations of children's rights. However, rebel groups have also been accused of engaging in abuses such as unlawful killing, use of improvised explosive devices, torture and ill-treatment, kidnapping and hostage taking and violations of children's rights.¹⁰

When human rights abuses at such a scale are involved, it is customary for the international community to take steps to distance itself from the offending events and, later, to impose sanctions, regardless of how it affects the parties involved.¹¹ In this particular case, Russia and China have vetoed Security Council

⁵ Diana Al Rifai, "Tracking Syria's deadly toxic chemical attacks", *Al Jazeera*, 18th April 2015, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/04/tracking-syria-deadly-toxic-chemical-attacks-150417065804006.html>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

⁶ Human Rights Watch, *Syria: Chemicals Used in Idlib Attacks. Security Council Should Act Decisively to Establish Responsibility*, 13th April 2015, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/13/syria-chemicals-used-idlib-attacks>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

⁷ Jonathan Marcus, "Syria conflict: Barrel bombs show brutality of war", *BBC News*, 20th December 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25466541>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

⁸ "Syria Conflict: Journalists killed in missile attack", *BBC News*, 10th December 2014, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2015/04/13/syria-chemicals-used-idlib-attacks>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

⁹ Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict, *Syrian Arab Republic*, 23rd March 2015, available at <http://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/countries/syrian-arab-republic/>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

¹⁰ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Independent International Commission of Inquiry established pursuant to resolution A/HRC/S-17/1 and extended through resolution A/HRC/Res/19/22, *Periodic Update*, 24th May 2012, pp. 4 – 5, available at <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/SpecialSession/CISyria/PeriodicUpdateCISyria.pdf>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

¹¹ Christian Năsulea, Beatrice Nicolle Crețu, Diana Florentina Spînu, "How Sanctions on Russia Impact the Economy of the European Union", presented at the *22nd International Economic Conference – IECS 2015 "Economic Prospects in the Context of Growing Global and Regional Interdependencies"*, Sibiu, Romania, 15th – 16th May 2015.

Resolutions which would have condemned the systematic violations of human rights and threatened Syria with economic sanctions;¹² because of this, official action at UN-level in regards to the Syrian crisis has been blocked. The EU has responded to this state of affairs by imposing travel bans and asset freezes on persons deemed responsible for enforcing acts of violence against civilians, an arms and oil embargo and financial sanctions.¹³ Similarly, the United States have imposed penalties on the Assad regime, including financial and trade sanctions, as well as targeted sanctions against specific individuals and entities supporting human rights abuses in Syria.¹⁴

However, these restrictive measures have hardly lead to the de-escalation of the crisis or to viable peace negotiations. A major destabilizing factor in the area is the Islamic State, an off-shoot of al-Qaeda's Syrian wing that broke off in 2013 and in 2014 declared a caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Presently, it is said to control half of Syrian territory, mostly in the less-populated eastern regions, captured from rebel groups.¹⁵ ISIS (or ISIL, IS or *Daesh*, for it goes by many names) consists of thousands of Sunni extremists, responsible for war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and the destruction of cultural heritage sites. Its goals are to establish a global caliphate through excessively violent means, in order to

¹² James Reinl, "Syria's war and veto-wielding UN powerplays", *Al Jazeera*, 30th September 2015, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/09/syria-war-veto-wielding-powerplays-150930064603153.html>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

¹³ European Union External Action Service, *Fact Sheet: The European Union and Syria*, Brussels, 5th February 2015, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2015/09/syria-war-veto-wielding-powerplays-150930064603153.html>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury, *OFAC FAQs: Other Sanctions Programs*, available at http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/faqs/Sanctions/Pages/faq_other.aspx, accessed on 15th November 2015.

¹⁵ "Factbox: Array of combatants deepens complexity of Syria's civil war", *Reuters*, 29th June 2015, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/29/us-mideast-crisis-syria-combatants-factb-idUSKCN0P91LA20150629#qMp7o6EjkeFcqYJP.97>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

further their extremist ideology,^{16 17} and it has been listed as a designated terrorist organisation by the U.S.¹⁸ and many individual countries, as well as the EU.¹⁹

The four years of civil war have come at an important human cost: it is estimated that the Syrian death toll reaches almost 300,000 people, including over 115,000 civilians.²⁰ The latest figures published by The UN Refugee Agency in November 2015 show 4,287,293 registered refugees,²¹ while the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that, as of July 2015, there were at least 7.6 million internally displaced people in Syria²² out of a population of 22 million (according a 2014 estimate by The World Bank).²³ This means that nearly half of Syria's population have been forced to flee their homes.

The humanitarian implications of the crisis are staggering. There are currently 2,181,293 registered Syrian refugees in Turkey (Nov. 2015),²⁴ 1,075,637

¹⁶ Tzavi Khan, "FPI Fact Sheet: Understanding ISIS", *The Foreign Policy Initiative*, 18th November 2014, available at <http://www.foreignpolicyi.org/content/fpi-fact-sheet-understanding-isis>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

¹⁷ "Syria and ISIS committing war crimes", *The Guardian*, 27th August 2014, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/27/syria-isis-war-crimes-united-nations-un>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

¹⁸ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Terrorist Organizations*, available at <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

¹⁹ Council of the European Union, *Council conclusions on the EU regional strategy for Syria and Iraq as well as the ISIL / Da'esh threat*, 16th March 2015, available at <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/03/16-council-conclusions-eu-regional-strategy-for-syria-and-iraq-as-well-as-the-isil-daesh-threat/>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²⁰ Chris York, George Bowden, "Syria Civil War Death Toll Paints a Horrifyingly Complex Picture", *The Huffington Post UK*, 31st October 2015, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2015/10/31/syrian-civil-war-death-_n_8440378.html, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²¹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, 15th November 2015, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²² Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, *Syria IDP Figures Analysis*, available at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/figures-analysis>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²³ The World Bank, *World Development Indicators: Syrian Arab Republic*, available at <http://www.internal-displacement.org/middle-east-and-north-africa/syria/figures-analysis>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²⁴ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Turkey*, 3rd November 2015, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

in Lebanon (May 2015),²⁵ 630,776 in Jordan (Nov. 2015),²⁶ 245,134 in Iraq (Nov. 2015),²⁷ 127,681 in Egypt (Oct. 2015),²⁸ 26,772 in North Africa (Oct. 2015), while the total number of Syrian asylum applications in Europe has reached 681,713 as of Oct. 2015²⁹ (data offered by The UN Refugee Agency).

Syria's neighbours

The following section of the paper discusses the manner in which Syria's neighbouring countries have handled the refugee crisis and the policies they have implemented in that regard.

Presently, **Turkey** shelters the highest number of refugees in the region. Over the course of the crisis, Turkey has been praised for its welcoming policies and the high standards of its refugee camps, significantly better than neighbouring host countries: sanitary conditions, plumbing, powerlines, playgrounds, schools, adequate housing and security and even satellite dishes. Moreover, the word chosen to refer to Syrians fleeing the atrocities in their home land has been "guests", instead of the customary "refugees".³⁰

However, Turkey's approach in managing the crisis was based on the assumed temporary nature of the situation. Since there seems to be no end to the conflict in sight, the ever-increasing wave of refugees is starting to take its toll on Turkish infrastructure and resources. So far, Turkey has shouldered most of the

²⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Lebanon*, 3rd October 2015, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²⁶ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Jordan*, 15th November 2015, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=107>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Iraq*, 15th November 2015, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Egypt*, 31st October 2015, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=8>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

²⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, 15th November 2015, available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>, accessed on 15th November 2015.

³⁰ Mac McClelland, "How to Build a Perfect Refugee Camp", *New York Times*, 13th February 2014, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/16/magazine/how-to-build-a-perfect-refugee-camp.html?_r=1, accessed on 16th November 2015.

financial burden, amounting to US \$5 billion as well as the administrative responsibility, since the refugee camps are not managed by the UNHCR, but by Turkey's own Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), staffing the camps with Turkish civil servants.³¹

Part of the refugees currently reside in 22 camps, dispersed in south-east Turkey, close to the Syrian border, but their overall capacity has been exceeded. As a result, others have settled in urban centres, resorting to Turkish relatives and working on the black market to make a living. This has proven to be a challenging issue for the authorities, who are trying to prevent illegal activities, wage deflation, exploitation and growing resentment among Turkish nationals towards Syrian refugees entering the labour market.

Turkey is currently in need of better integration policies to keep up with the increasing demands of the rising number of refugees, many of whom aren't even registered, preventing them from accessing any sort of government assistance programmes.³² Furthermore, the prolonged nature of the crisis and the realities on the ground have rendered part of the Turkish legal framework obsolete: officially, its restriction of the 1951 Geneva Convention grants asylum rights only to Europeans, while the 2006 Settlement Law limits the right of settlement to people of "Turkish descent and culture".³³ In order to cope with further arrivals, Turkey will have to modernize.

Meanwhile, **Lebanon** is host to 1 million registered refugees, a disproportionate number compared to its 4 million population. Lebanon is known for its economic problems, especially for its poverty levels and inadequate public services, which have naturally exacerbated when faced with the unanticipated mass exodus of Syrians. The majority of refugees live in cramped accommodations, in informal tent settlements or other types of makeshift shelters constructed from scraps³⁴, prey to unforgiving weather conditions and disease. Aid workers

³¹ Ahmet İçduygu, *Syrian Refugees in Turkey. The Long Road Ahead*, Migration Policy Institute, April 2015, p. 1.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 8.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

³⁴ Belen Fernandez, "Syrian refugees in Lebanon: Whose breaking point?", *Middle East Eye*, 13th October 2015, available at <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/syrian-refugees-lebanon-whose-breaking-point-1832663622>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

encounter logistical issues in reaching those in need or have to grapple with insufficient resources,³⁵ as well as the shortage of clean water.³⁶

In addition to the lack of resources or infrastructure, the Lebanese government has imposed policies meant to hinder and further victimize an already vulnerable group of people. Syrians registered with the UNHCR are now required to pay a fee of US \$200 and to provide proof of housing commitment, a certification from a village leader that the landlord owns the property on which they are to reside, as well as a notarized pledge to not enter the workforce. Naturally, many refugees are unable to fulfil these conditions and fear abuses, arrest or detention.³⁷ What's more, as of January 2015, Lebanese authorities are no longer accepting Syrians without a valid visa, thus renouncing the open-door policy they have enforced since 1943.³⁸ Lebanon has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention either.³⁹

Neither is **Jordan** a signatory of the above-mentioned treaty; however, the government refers to Syrians fleeing the destruction of their homes as “refugees” and is committed towards improving their well-being and offering a safe environment, despite the country's own economic troubles.⁴⁰ Syrian refugees in Jordan have either settled in the Za'atari, Marjeeb al-Fahood, Cyber City and Al-Azraq camps (20%) or live in the urban areas of the north (80%).⁴¹ Nevertheless,

³⁵ Nour Samaha, “‘We are slowly dying here’: Syrian refugees suffer in storm-hit Lebanon”, *Al Jazeera America*, 8th January 2015, available at <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/1/8/lebanon-storm-refugees.html>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

³⁶ Heather Murdock, “Water Shortages in Lebanon Devastate Syrian Refugees”, *Voice of America*, 23rd December 2014, available at <http://www.voanews.com/content/water-shortages-lebanon-syrian-refugees/2571595.html>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

³⁷ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Quarterly snapshot*, January – March 2015, p.1.

³⁸ Michael Pizzi, “In Syria's war refugees, Lebanon sees echoes of Palestinian crisis”, *Al Jazeera America*, 6th January 2015, available at <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/1/6/lebanon-syria-refugees.html>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

³⁹ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *2015 UNHCR country operations profile – Lebanon*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486676.html>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

⁴⁰ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *2015 UNHCR country operations profile – Jordan*, available at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486566.html>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

⁴¹ Migration Policy Centre, *Syrian Refugees. A Snapshot of the Crisis – In the Middle East and Europe: Jordan*, available at http://syrianrefugees.eu/?page_id=87, accessed on 16th November 2015.

Jordan is facing the same issue of a previously-assumed temporary situation turning into a protracted state of limbo: the ongoing nature of the Syrian conflict means that the refugees currently on Jordanian territory will require more than immediate and transitory aid. The need to provide the refugees with the means to earn their own livelihood and allow them work permits in order to further their social integration will have to be reconciled with the high levels of unemployment and potential hostility from the local population at the idea of Syrians ‘stealing’ their jobs.⁴²

Initially, Jordanian authorities allowed refugees free access to facilities such as public schools and hospitals, however, the strain on their public resources has been considerable and they now charge them the same amount of money uninsured Jordanians are required to pay. The unsettling economic climate and the insecurity generated by falling wages, the rise in unemployment and the levels of poverty have generated practices such as child labour, gender-based violence and early marriage amongst refugees.⁴³ Similarly, concerns over extremism and the inability to absorb so many has resulted in higher scrutiny of incoming refugees and a downturn in admissions.⁴⁴

The phenomenon of displaced Syrians seeking refuge in **Iraq** is an ironic reversal of the situation between 2003 and 2011, in which Iraqis were fleeing their homes to neighbouring Syria. Now, they are forced to return, even though Iraq is also plagued by ISIS attacks and has lost territories to their self-proclaimed caliphate. Syrian refugees have currently relocated to the north of Iraq, near the Syrian border, in regions such as Irbil, Duhuk and Nineveh.⁴⁵ Life in Iraqi camps is tainted by the unavailability of water, poor sanitation and hygiene, diseases such as

⁴² Daoud Kuttab, “What Jordan Needs to do for its Syrian Refugees”, *The World Post*, 28th September 2015, available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/daoud-kuttab/jordan-syrian-refugees_b_8203898.html, accessed on 16th November 2015.

⁴³ Satchit Balsari, Josyann Abisaab, Kathleen Hamill, Jennifer Leaning, “Syrian refugee crisis: when aid is not enough”, in: *The Lancet*, vol. 385, no. 9972, 14th March 2015, p. 942.

⁴⁴ Josh Rogin, “U.S. and Jordan in a Dispute Over Syrian Refugees”, *Bloomberg View*, 6th October 2015, available at <http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2015-10-06/u-s-and-jordan-in-a-dispute-over-syrian-refugees>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

⁴⁵ Michael Martinez, “Syrian refugees: Which countries welcome them, which ones don’t”, *CNN*, 10th September 2015, available at <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/09/world/welcome-syrian-refugees-countries/>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

diarrhoea, measles and meningitis, overcrowded tents, poor quality of life and severe weather conditions.⁴⁶

Egypt is mostly seen by refugees as a stepping stone to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea. Although Syrians who come to Egypt seem to be in a better financial situation than those who flee to border countries such as Turkey, Jordan or Lebanon, since they can afford the flight ticket, living in Egypt presents its own financial and social issues. Refugees are often forced to settle in slums, have difficulty in finding jobs and supporting themselves and are viewed as pariahs by the local population.⁴⁷ In order to obtain an employment permit, refugees must first possess a residency card.⁴⁸ Egypt does not have any refugee camps, which is why most of them live in urban areas, but must overcome great hurdles in order to find any sort of housing.⁴⁹

Generally speaking, the strategies Syria's neighbouring countries have adopted in order to deal with the refugee crisis were predicated on short-term solutions, in the hopes that the fighting in Syria will soon abate and that the displaced civilian population will be able to return home. However, the ongoing nature of the conflict has now rendered these policies obsolete. Living in specially-designated camps or in urban accommodations for an indefinite period of time, with no prospects of advancement or social integration in sight, is not a viable option for refugees, nor is it for the countries in which they settle. The resources of host countries and international organizations are not inexhaustible and cannot be relied upon indefinitely; refugees must be given a chance to become self-sufficient by accepting them into the labour market and implementing relevant social, cultural and integration policies.

⁴⁶ Médecins Sans Frontieres, *Iraq: Poor living conditions in Domeez camp put health of Syrian refugees at risk*, available at <http://www.msf.ie/article/iraq-poor-living-conditions-domeez-camp-put-health-syrian-refugees-risk>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

⁴⁷ Ola Noureldin, "Syrian refugees in Egypt despair at dire conditions and see Europe as their only hope", *International Business Times*, 22nd September 2015, available at <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/syrian-refugees-egypt-despair-fellow-arabs-make-europe-their-only-hope-1520699>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

⁴⁸ "Syrian refugees in Egypt: The Assad family", *Al Jazeera*, 12th March 2015, available at <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2015/03/syrian-refugees-egypt-assad-family-150305081343481.html>, accessed on 16th November 2015.

⁴⁹ Plan UK, *Concerns over Syrian refugees in Egypt*, available at <http://www.plan-uk.org/media-centre/concerns-over-syrian-refugees-in-egypt/?frommobile>, accessed on 16th November.

The European Union

As Syria's neighbouring countries are finding it more and more difficult to cope with (what now seems to be) the largest refugee crisis since World War II,⁵⁰ the European Union has seen an influx in the number of refugee arrivals. Syrian refugees who make the trip to Europe can usually only do so by very dangerous means and at great cost: they have to rely on smugglers and unsafe boats filled to the brink to attempt the crossing and the results are often devastating. As a matter of fact, the Mediterranean is home to the deadliest migrant routes in the world: approximately 2,000 refugees have lost their lives trying to reach Europe in 2015 only.⁵¹

In an attempt to prevent refugee deaths and fight against human trafficking, Italy ran the search and rescue Operation Mare Nostrum during October 2013 – October 2014, but later suspended it because of lack of funds. The European Union refused to extend it and replaced it with its own Operation Triton, much smaller in scale and focused more on border control than search and rescue missions. As a result, there has been a sharp increase in refugee deaths at sea.⁵²

Many refugees are choosing Libya as their starting point in their journey to Europe because of the country's political instability and lack of involvement by the coast guard⁵³ and subject themselves to the mercy of human traffickers in order to reach Italy. Other routes include arriving in the Greek islands of Kos, Chios, Lesbos and Samos via Turkey or reaching other northern EU countries using the dangerous Western Balkans route.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Ben Norton, "A guide to the worst refugee crisis since WWII", *Mondoweiss*, 9th September 2015, available at <http://mondoweiss.net/2015/09/refugee-crisis-since>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁵¹ AFP, "More than 2,000 migrant deaths in the Mediterranean in 2015, says monitoring group", *The Telegraph*, 4th August 2015, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/italy/11782584/More-than-2000-migrant-deaths-in-Mediterranean-in-2015-says-monitoring-group.html>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁵² "The worst yet? Another boat capsizes between Libya and Italy as Europe debates migration policy", *The Economist*, 19th April 2015, available at <http://www.economist.com/news/europe/21648896-another-boat-capsizes-between-libya-and-italy-europe-debates-migration-policy-worst-drowning-yet>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁵³ "Why Libya is springboard for migrant exodus", *BBC News*, 10th April 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-32386370>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁵⁴ "Why is EU struggling with migrants and asylum?", *BBC News*, 21st September 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24583286>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

The much-criticised Dublin regulations state that asylum seekers must remain in the first EU member state they enter and that they can be returned to that same country if they travel someplace else.⁵⁵ This puts undue strain on EU border countries such as Greece⁵⁶ and Italy⁵⁷, which receive the greatest numbers of arrivals by sea. Hungary is also struggling to cope with the wave of refugees, as a Schengen border state.⁵⁸

In an attempt to cope with the exodus of the Syrian population, the Justice and Home Affairs Council voted to impose a series of refugee quotas for each member state. The plan aims, in a two year timeframe, to resettle 120,000 of the refugees most in need of international protection – vulnerable groups such as rape victims and unaccompanied children.⁵⁹ For instance, according to the relocation quotas, Germany is to receive 17,000 refugees, France 13,000 and Spain around 8,000. Refugees are to be fingerprinted and then relocated to an EU country, taking into consideration family connections and language skills; each member state will receive 6,000 euros per refugee in aid from EU funds. However, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark have opted out of this decision, while Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania voted against.⁶⁰ All the same, Denmark has independently decided to take in an extra 1,000 refugees; Ireland plans to resettle another 2,900 and the UK 20,000.⁶¹ Even so, the agreed-upon number is

⁵⁵ Harriet Grant, John Domokos, “Dublin regulation leaves asylum seekers with their fingers burnt”, *The Guardian*, 7th October 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/07/dublin-regulation-european-asylum-seekers>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁵⁶ “Migrants crisis: Greece sends first refugees to Luxembourg”, *BBC News*, 4th November 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34720063>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁵⁷ Kavitha Surana, “Italy quietly rejects asylum seekers by nationality, advocates say”, *Al Jazeera America*, 19th October 2015, available at <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/10/19/italy-quietly-rejects-asylum-seekers-based-on-nationality-advocates-say.html>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁵⁸ Nick Thorpe, “Migrant clashes leave Hungary bitterly divided”, *BBC News*, 17th September 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34280460>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁵⁹ “Migrant crisis: Migration to Europe explained in graphics”, *BBC News*, 9th November 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34131911>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁶⁰ Council of the European Union, *Council Decision establishing provisional measures in the area of international protection for the benefit of Italy and Greece*, Brussels, 22 September 2015, available at <http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-12098-2015-INIT/en/pdf>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁶¹ “Migrant crisis: Why EU deal on refugees is difficult”, *BBC News*, 25th September 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34324096>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

small in comparison to the number of refugees currently residing on EU soil or to those hosted by Syria's neighbouring countries.

However, even countries which were, at first, enthusiastically accepting refugees, like Germany (previously estimated to take in 800,000 refugees in 2015, far exceeding its quota), are now starting to reconsider their response to the crisis, as a result of mounting pressure from anti-immigrant groups. Hungary has even resorted to constructing a razor-wire fence along the border with Croatia and Serbia to keep out refugees. Following Hungary's example, more member states such as Croatia, Slovenia, Austria and Bulgaria are considering the border fence solution.⁶²

Momentarily, European authorities are scrambling to find proper accommodation for refugees, as the few camps and altered centres, sports halls or disused school buildings prove to be insufficient or inadequate. Some refugees live under the open sky and struggle with the onset of hypothermia and pneumonia, as well as the incoming winter. The route through the Balkans is particularly perilous, as humanitarian response from European institutions is severely lacking and the only available aid is given by volunteers and the UNHCR, in the form of outdoor survival packages, food and medical assistance. Countries like Germany, France and Sweden are also unprepared for the mass flow of refugees, many of whom are living in woeful conditions, with no access to clean water, sanitation facilities or heating.⁶³

Under EU law, there is a distinction to be made between 'asylum seekers' and 'refugees'. An asylum seeker submits a formal request to be granted refugee status and is not accepted as a 'refugee' until the Member State's legal procedures are satisfied.⁶⁴ The definition for 'refugee' is given by the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, of which all Member States are signatories:

⁶² Emma Graham-Harrison, "Still the refugees are coming, but in Europe the barriers are rising", *The Guardian*, 31st October 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/31/austria-fence-slovenia-wire-europe-refugees>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁶³ Julian Borger, Andrew MacDowall, Amelia Gentleman, Kate Connolly, David Crouch, Frances Perraudin, Sofia Papadopoulou, "Winter is coming: the new crisis for refugees in Europe", *The Guardian*, 2nd November 2015, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/02/winter-is-coming-the-new-crisis-for-refugees-in-europe>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁶⁴ The European Council on Refugees and Exiles, *Refugees in the EU*, available at <http://www.ecre.org/refugees/refugees/refugees-in-the-eu.html>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

“any person who, owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”.⁶⁵

Refugees are granted asylum in the EU if they can prove to the authorities they are fleeing persecution and the life-threatening consequences of conflict in their home country. According to EU regulations, asylum seekers have the right to obtain food, first aid and shelter in the reception centre.⁶⁶

Asylum seekers and refugees can also benefit from important EU instruments to advance their social and cultural integration, such as the European Social Fund (ESF), the Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived (FEAD), the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The ESF concerns itself with broadening opportunities for employment and can be accessed either when asylum seekers become officially recognised as refugees or after a period of 9 months after they have applied for asylum. Individual Member States decide if asylum seekers and refugees should be eligible for FEAD and in some countries like Sweden, Belgium and Spain, they already have access to this mechanism, which entails short-term material assistance and (once they have applied for asylum) social inclusion. ESF and FEAD funding can be used to support training, counselling, social and health services and labour market integration policies. At the same time, AMIF can help refugees in the first stages of integration, when they first arrive in the host country, via language and civic education courses and promoting better reception conditions, while the ERDF can also be relied upon to secure funding for inclusive development projects, such as housing infrastructure or programmes aimed at reducing spatial and educational isolation.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, Geneva, Switzerland, 1951, chapter I, article 1, section A, paragraph 2.

⁶⁶ “Why is EU struggling with migrants and asylum”, *BBC News*, 21st September 2015, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24583286>, accessed on 17th November 2015.

⁶⁷ European Commission, *Factsheet: EU support for better management of integration of asylum seekers and refugees*, Brussels, 25th September 2015, available at http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-15-5717_en.htm, accessed on 18th November 2015.

Overall, the EU's integration policies are better than what Syria's neighbouring countries have to offer, which is why, in theory at least, the European Union seems an attractive destination for Syrians seeking refuge from the violent crimes perpetrated in their home country. However, at the moment, Member States seem woefully unprepared and even unwilling to contribute in some productive manner to solving the crisis. Their refusal to take in refugees or to accept the quotas is surprising, considering the fact that refugees make up only a small percentage (estimates indicate 0.37%) of the total EU population;⁶⁸ their assimilation should not pose so many economic issues. What's more, their integration could constitute a boost to the economy, as they are allowed to enter the workforce, and invigorate the labour markets of countries with aging populations.

Conclusions

Generally speaking, the European Union has more resources at its disposal and, theoretically, more to offer refugees than Syria's neighbouring countries, which have been struggling more acutely with the spillover from Syria's civil war. To answer the question posed at the beginning of the present article, the EU *should* be the best place for Syrian refugees, given the current conditions, but, although it has more available resources and fewer refugees to care for, it falls short of expectations. The EU is comprised of 28 member states, yet Turkey, a sole nation, has proven itself more capable in handling the refugee crisis, despite the numbers in her management far exceeding those of the EU.

At the time of writing, the Paris Attacks of 13th November are still fresh in our collective consciousness and it is too early to discern the effects this latest ISIS-backed terrorist act will have on the issue of Syrian refugees and EU asylum policies. It is important to note that the refugees currently on European soil are innocent of these crimes, statement backed by the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker.⁶⁹ It now falls to the European Union to decide

⁶⁸ Massimiliano Cali, Samia Sekkarie, "Much ado about nothing? The economic impact of refugee 'invasions'", *Brookings*, 16th September 2015, available at <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/future-development/posts/2015/09/16-economic-impact-refugees-cali>, accessed on 18th November 2015.

⁶⁹ Gabriele Steinhauser, "EU Leaders Say Refugee Policy Won't Change", *The Wall Street Journal*, 15th November, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/eu-leaders-seek-coordination-against-isis-after-paris-attacks-1447581670>, accessed on 18th November 2015.

whether to further support a vulnerable group of people fleeing similar displays of brutality or to fall prey to fear and misplaced xenophobia.

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