

Canada's Audacious Refugee Response

Written by Madeline Otis Campbell, Dana Janbek and Melissa Wall

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MADELINE OTIS CAMPBELL, DANA JANBEK AND MELISSA WALL, MAR 2 2016

While American politicians spew anti-Muslim rhetoric and empty electoral theater, the Canadians are taking action. They are carrying out an impressive mission on behalf of the four million Syrian refugees now living in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Half of Syria's population has been displaced internally and externally since the beginning of the war in March 2011 and over 250,000 people have lost their lives. To make matters worse, these numbers keep on increasing. This Canadian intervention will not only save lives, but it may actually save young people from militarization in Syria's protracted civil war.

In a matter of days in late November, Canadian officials converted an airplane hangar on a Jordanian air base into a refugee processing site complete with biometric data collection stations, medical assessment posts, consular interviewing desks, a playroom, a prayer room, and a vast filing room complete with scanners, computers, servers, and wireless transmitters. In our latest research trip to Jordan this December to study the refugee crisis, we visited this impressive site and learned that teams of officials have been busy interviewing thousands of Syrian refugees for resettlement in Canada. The hum of Canadian action inside the repurposed hangar presents an almost indescribable contrast to America's torpid approach.

Here's how it works: Within one week, Syrian families are notified that the UN has referred their case to the Canadian government, transported to the airbase for processing, and then approved. These families travel on a charter flight to Canada in just weeks. In fact, the first plane carrying refugees from Jordan to Canada left a couple of days after our visit.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau personally welcomed some of the flights as they arrived in Canada, extending a promise of protection in Canada. In November 2015, Canada pledged to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees within three months. By February 2016, over 23,000 had successfully arrived.

In contrast to the Canadian immigration process, the same process takes years for those referred to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). And, that is in a good year: a year when the annual presidential determination for resettlement targets is matched by resources and support. Unfortunately, the effects of rancorous rhetoric threaten to delay the already lengthy U.S. refugee resettlement process further.

To be sure, the resettlement of Syrian refugees is neither the only solution to the external displacement of over 4.5 million Syrians nor is it every refugee's desire. Yet, the Canadian airlift is a crucial expression of global concern, a powerful response to a humanitarian crisis that is unparalleled in recent history.

Canada's initiative is particularly astonishing coming after months of dwindling aid to refugees in Jordan. As a result of "donor fatigue," for example, the World Food Program ended its most basic operation in Amman until the desperation of refugees heading to Europe again put Syrian refugees in the news.

The Canadian initiative repeatedly came up in conversations with refugees we visited in Jordan. Some refugees we met were excited about the possibility of starting a new life in a safe place; they had slowly come to terms with the sad fact that going back to home is not an option for them, and probably won't be for many years to come. Instead, they hope that moving to a third country will allow them to secure a stable future for their children.

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However, not all the refugees shared this enthusiasm. We often talk about Syrian refugees as a homogenous group of people with one outlook on life, but the fact of the matter is that they are a diverse group with different backgrounds, and varied hopes and dreams. One young man in Amman, Ammar, told us that he had no intention of resettling in Canada or any other country. Nevertheless, news of the airlift meant to him that people around the world are not only concerned about ISIS and Bashar Al-Asad, they are concerned about those displaced by their violence. For Ammar, Canada's program clearly shows that the world cares whether Syrians live or die.

Yet the conditions in Jordan are not easy for Syrian refugees. Left in a state of limbo facing dire food shortages, limited medical care, and possible homelessness, young refugees are among the most likely to return to Syria, potentially to join the armed conflict. Not only does resettlement offer an alternative, it also provides some relief to the countries that are impacted the most by the steady influx of refugees—namely Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon—and it demonstrates to all Syrians a level of commitment from the international community.

Being host to over 600,000 Syrian refugees (although the unofficial estimate puts this number at possibly over a million) has come with many challenges for the small country of Jordan. The influx of refugees has put tremendous pressure on Jordan's limited resources and has tested the economy and strained education and healthcare services among others. In the most recent news from the region, twenty-thousand Syrian refugees have been stuck at the border unable to make it through to Jordan. The Jordanian government is citing security concerns and economic challenges as the two reasons for this latest crisis. The country has been stretched to its limits and so have the refugees.

Nevertheless, for 25,000 "lucky" refugees from the region including Jordan, their move to Canada this winter will be their last. The work being done in an airport hangar is remarkable, but not because of the magnitude of the effort. It is remarkable because it demonstrates the strong political will needed in response to the largest humanitarian crisis in recent history. But Canada's efforts represent just one aspect in the multifaceted political solution that is needed to bring peace and hope to millions of Syrians, especially the youth, who may otherwise be vulnerable to militarization after years of conflict.

In stark contrast to the Canadian approach, the U.S. political climate shows partisanship impacting the possibility of a future for thousands of Syrian youth through resettlement, which is as important as any other U.S. effort designed to confront the Syrian civil war. The U.S. should waste no more time in resettling the 10,000 Syrian refugees that the president determined was the target earlier this year. Instead, the president should raise this target given the dangerous alternatives available to the refugees. It is in this country's national interest to assume leadership in this refugee crisis by offering protection to refugees through resettlement and by helping allies.

About the author:

Madeline Otis Campbell, assistant professor at Worcester State University, is the author of the forthcoming *Interpreters of Occupation: Gender and the Politics of Belonging in an Iraqi Refugee Network*.

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