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## *Europe Must Take on its Share of the Syrian Refugee Burden, but How?*

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While peace talks between Syria's government and opposition bump along in Geneva, battles rage on the ground and the death toll and the refugee wave rise. Europe wants its voice to be heard in the talks, but can it keep its eyes — and borders — closed to the men, women and children fleeing Syria? How can Europe better respond to the human and political disaster looming on its external border?

The conflict began when, three years ago, a handful of children wrote anti-regime slogans on the board of their classroom in the southern town of Deraa. This event triggered an implacable spiral of repression and protest and the conflict in Syria has now forcibly moved 7 million people from their homes, including 4.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 2.5 million refugees who have fled abroad.<sup>1</sup> As in all refugee crises, the vast majority of those who do not get trapped inside the country find themselves stuck on just the other side of the border. The bulk of Syrian refugees is sheltered among four of Syria's five neighbors: Lebanon, the main receiver where more than 900,000 refugees are registered with UNHCR and where many others have not been registered; Turkey and Jordan each of them with close to 600,000 refugees; and Iraq with around 220,000 refugees. Israel, which is at war with Syria, has, to date, kept its border closed.

1. Numbers are continuously increasing. Regular updates are provided: for IDPs by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) at <http://www.unocha.org/crisis/syria>; for refugees in countries neighbouring on Syria by the UN Refugee Agency at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>; and for refugees in the EU by Eurostat at <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/database>.



**Table 1. Flows of Syrian refugees into Syria's neighboring countries and Europe (2011-13)**

Destination / year	2011	2012	2013	03.15.2011 - 12.31.2013
Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt (1)	15,455	491,651	1,799,882	2,301,533
EU 28 Member States (2)	6,450	20,810	42,480	69,740
Syrians smuggled by sea to Greece and Italy (3)	947	8,509	18,972	28,428
EU 28 / Total %	29.4	4.1	2.3	2.9
Smuggled by sea / asylum claims %	14.7	40.9	44.7	40.8

1) UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response*, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>. At the time of writing (10 Feb 2014), the total number of registered Syrian refugees in the five countries was 2,430,100.

2) EUROSTAT, *Asylum and new asylum applicants by citizenship, age and sex. Monthly data*, <http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/population/data/database>.

3) Italian Ministry of Interior and Greece Police records.

Other refugees have travelled further away and to destinations where they have relatives or friends. Thus some 135,000 Syrian refugees are currently hosted by Egypt, and tens of thousands find themselves in the Maghreb countries. By contrast, Europe's response to the refugee crisis has been limited and uneven. Moreover, it has been constantly outpaced by events on the ground and riddled with obstacles, as shown by Table 1.

First, Europe has only taken in a small part (2.9 percent) of the overall Syrian refugee population. Between March 2011 and December 2013, the 28 Member States (MS) of the European Union (EU) received 69,740 asylum claims from Syrian citizens and made 41,695 positive decisions. These numbers are not small in absolute terms, but they represent just a fraction of the 2,301,533 Syrian refugees that Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt sheltered over the same period.

Second, European nations have responded to the refugee crisis in an uneven fashion. Only two states took two thirds of all asylum seekers accepted by the 28 Member States: Sweden and Germany with respectively 23,110 and 20,700 claims received and with 11,495 and 16,610 positive decisions. A

third state, Bulgaria, deserves a mention as it has received 4,545 claims since the beginning of the crisis, 70 percent of them arrived in the four months between August and November 2013 (at the time of writing data for December 2013 are not available for Bulgaria). Another nine states received between 1,000 and 3,500 claims each and the remaining 16 states fewer than 1,000, including Lithuania and Austria which did not receive a single asylum seeker from Syria.

Third, while asylum opportunities offered to Syrians in Europe have grown, these opportunities have not kept up with the war. Before the uprisings, there had always been a regular flow of Syrians seeking asylum in Europe. When the refugee crisis gained momentum in the second half of 2011, pre-existing flows simply amplified so that the EU28 received almost one third of the Syrian refugees in the first year of the crisis. But Europe did not open the door to refugees in proportion to their flight from Syria and its share of the overall refugee flows fell from 29.4 percent in 2011 to 4.1 percent in 2012, to a measly 2.3 percent in 2013.

Fourth, obstacles that Syrian asylum seekers meet on their way to the EU have increased. Indeed, there



is a striking discrepancy between two facts. On the one hand, the vast majority of Syrian asylum seekers who are able to lodge a claim in the EU are granted refugee status or temporary protection (86.7 percent of positive decisions in 2011-13), which is a sign of openness. On the other hand, the number of Syrian refugees who turn to smugglers to reach Europe has soared since the beginning of the crisis, something which is, of course, a sign of closure. The ratio of Syrians smuggled by sea to Greece or Italy, compared to those regularly seeking asylum in the EU28, has jumped from 14.7 percent in 2011 to 40.9 percent in 2012 and 44.7 percent in 2013.

Put in other terms, 44.7 percent of those who sought asylum in Europe last year were only able to reach the territory of a Member State—a legal obligation for claiming asylum—by putting their lives at risk at sea with smugglers. That their number jumped from 947 in 2011 to 8,509 in 2012 and 18,972 in 2013 must be interpreted as a response to obstacles set up by Greece and Bulgaria at their land-border with Turkey, be those obstacles police patrols or wire fences. Greece is a case in point. In the three years since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, Greek police and port authorities have arrested 16,211 Syrian refugees smuggled by sea, almost all of them trying to reach another European destination, as Greece has a reputation for not granting asylum to Syrians (25 cases of positive decisions for 1,015 claims received).

Europe is currently discussing burden-sharing, or ‘responsibility-sharing’ between those Member States that are exposed by geography to irregular entries, and those that are not. While this discussion will be crucial to improve the Common European Asylum System, its results will come too late to address a refugee crisis that risks undermining or even overturning fragile states in the Middle East. The current situation is grim and the near future promises to see the conflict get, if anything, worse.

Countries of first asylum in the Eastern Mediterranean are under extreme strain due to the massive influx of refugees and the pressure they exert on housing, food, water, schools, hospitals, etc. not to mention security and the social order. It has to be remembered that the Syrian refugee crisis comes just after the Iraqi refugee crisis of 2006-2009, which had displaced around two million Iraqi citizens towards the very same countries: Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt. In addition, the two crises come in countries where the vast majority of the world largest and longest-standing refugee population, namely the Palestinians, still live.

None of these countries, and not even Turkey, regards itself as country of durable settlement for new refugees. Three of them – Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq – are not party to the Geneva Refugee Convention. They do not grant proper refugee status to those fleeing violence in neighboring countries, but instead give refugees an ill-defined denomination as “guests”. These “guests” are sometimes generously hosted and protected, but most of the time they are denied all the basic rights that would make settlement an option (work, access to services, etc.), even though history shows that guests may wait a lifetime and never return home. And, indeed, there is a widespread sentiment that many Syrian refugees will not easily return to Syria once security is restored.

Beyond economics, the social equilibrium and the political stability of the countries of first asylum are put at risk by the massive influx of Syrian refugees. It has to be borne in mind that nations are not the only lines structuring this part of the world. Religious and ethnic communities which span nations are also of paramount importance. Those fleeing Syria, be they Sunni Arabs, Shia Arabs, Christian Arabs, Muslim Kurds or Syrian Palestinians, naturally find shelter within their community on the other side of the border. With numbers growing their mere presence can become a trigger fanning dormant tensions



alight. Moreover, camps and informal settlements sheltering the refugees might easily become hotbeds for terrorist organizations.

Unless the Geneva peace talks bring a miracle, the situation in Syria will continue to deteriorate. In the coming months, new refugees will cross the border and those who have left Syria will stay where they have found shelter. It is very likely that tensions will keep growing in the countries of first asylum. Can the world, and in particular Europe, afford any further political deterioration in the Middle East? It is high time for Europe to find a proper response to the current refugee crisis and consider sharing the burden of the crisis more effectively with the countries of first asylum. What burden should be shared —the refugees or their cost— remains to be seen.

Burden-sharing could consist of taking more refugees currently hosted in the Arab countries and Turkey into the EU. Various tools already exist for this, such as: resettling more of the refugees currently hosted in countries neighboring on Syria; delivering asylum or humanitarian visas in European embassies in the Middle East to avoid obstacles set up at the EU's external border; exempting Syrian citizens from visa requirements while the conflict is active; or using the existing channels of family reunification for legal entry into the EU.

While all these solutions must be seriously explored and, as far as possible, implemented, it is important to remember that: not all Syrian refugees can be admitted to the EU (they are too numerous); not all of them would want to go to Europe were they offered a place (e.g. families with children who are to be taught in Arabic); and what is good for individuals may do harm to the society of origin (for example, if those admitted to Europe happen to be those most needed to rebuild Syria once the war there ends).

Burden-sharing must also mean solidarity with countries of first asylum so that there is the determi-

nation to jointly bear the costs of the refugee crisis. Through which actors should humanitarian aid be channeled in order to best serve the refugees themselves and at the same time prevent their presence generating social and political tensions? In addition to the usual recipients —international organizations, NGOs and governments— municipalities and local administrations should be targeted, for they are tasked with helping the daily lives of people and are ideally placed to bridge the gap between refugees and their hosts.

Just as the Syrian peace talks in Geneva take place against the backdrop of Switzerland voting for immigration quotas, the Syrian refugee crisis reaches Europe during the deepest economic crisis since World War II, with citizens' income plummeting, unemployment soaring and public opinion lumping asylum seekers and irregular migrants together. However, Europe must open the door wider to Syrian refugees for the sake of its defining values. For the sake of regional security in the Eastern Mediterranean, it must open its cash till wider, too, so as to be able to give humanitarian aid. In both instances there is the duty to inform EU citizens about the need for asylum and international solidarity, but no politician seems ready to take on that particular task.



## Migration Policy Centre

The Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute, Florence, conducts advanced research on global migration to serve migration governance needs at European level, from developing, implementing and monitoring migration-related policies to assessing their impact on the wider economy and society. The Migration Policy Centre is co-financed by the European Union.

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