

Justice and Compassion – Responding to the Refugee Crisis in Europe

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“We will not and cannot ever return to live in Iraq again. We are not safe here in Turkey. We have no choice. We must try to get to Europe.”

A group of Yazidi refugee men from Sinjar Mountains in Iraq shared their fears with me under the shade trees in a refugee camp in southeast Turkey in July 2015. They are among the 4,000 refugees in the camp. It was less than one year ago that they were brutally attacked by Islamic State (IS) forces. Those who survived escaped to northern Iraq and southeastern Turkey with the help and protection of Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) forces. Many of their children and wives were abducted by IS forces. Their fate is unknown.



A Yazidi boy listens as refugee men tell tales of suffering

Children stood listening as the men shared stories of suffering, loss, torture and hopelessness.

At least 4 refugees from the camp have committed suicide in the past year. One man confided with me that he fears he too will be overtaken by desperation and take his own life.

The Turkish government has not given the Yazidi refugees any formal refugee status. The Yazidi refugees showed me letters from the Ankara office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), telling them when they would be interviewed to be registered as refugees. The earliest appointment we saw was scheduled for the year 2022.

They are certain that returning to their homeland will result in further suffering and death – if not now, then at some time in the future. They feel unwelcome in Turkey and that they do not have the option of staying long-term. Even if they were able to get permission to stay, they believe IS has people in the region who are bent on killing the Yazidi people. Yet because they are not able to register with UNHCR, they do not have access to the refugee resettlement program.

They are convinced they have no alternative but to try and enter Europe and gain asylum there.

The Global Refugee Crisis

These Yazidi refugees are among the 59.5 million forcibly displaced people in the world.¹ 1 out of every 122 persons alive today is either internally displaced, a refugee, or an asylum-seeker.² A staggering 42,500 people

¹ UNHCR Global Trends, 2014, page 2. Published June 2015.

² “Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase”, UNHCR, 18, June 2015. See <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.

are newly uprooted every day.³ 51% are children.⁴ Half are women and girls.⁵ The number of forcibly displaced people grew by 40% between 2012 – 2014.⁶

The world has identified three basic “solutions” to forced displacement.

Solution # 1: Refugees can return home. This requires that the causes of their displacement are resolved. But refugee producing conflicts are increasingly protracted. The UN has identified 33 such refugee producing crises, most of which have lasted more than 20 years with no end in sight. The number of refugees returning home hit a 30 year low in 2014 (126,800).⁷

Solution #2: Refugees can integrate into their country of refuge. The trouble is that 86% of the world’s uprooted people are hosted by developing countries.⁸ These countries cannot possibly be expected to absorb and integrate all of the people seeking refuge within their borders.

Solution #3: Refugees can be resettled to another country. 2014 was a normal year for refugee resettlement. About 105,200 refugees were resettled. That is less than 1% of the world’s growing refugee population. Over 99% of the world’s refugees were not resettled. 80% of those who were resettled were received by the US (73,000) and Canada (12,300).⁹ While resettlement is helpful to those lucky enough to be chosen, it is clearly not solving the problem of finding long-term refuge for the world’s forcibly displaced.

The average time of displacement is now 17 years.¹⁰ It is clear the “solutions” are failing. And so we find ourselves in an escalating global refugee crisis with no solutions in sight.

What Drives Asylum Seekers Across Seas and Deserts?

³ Ibid, page 2.

⁴ UNHCR Global Trends, 2014, page 3. Published June 2015.

⁵ Ibid, page 43.

⁶ Ibid, page 5.

⁷ UNHCR Global Trends 2014, page 20.

⁸ Ibid, page 2

⁹ Ibid, page 21-22.

¹⁰ “The forgotten millions”, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 22 January 2015. See <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/forgotten-millions>.

It is the lack of viable alternatives that drive uprooted women, children and men to risk crossing deserts and seas to seek refuge in the European Union (EU) and other industrialized countries.

The Mediterranean Sea

The Mediterranean is one of the great crossroads of the *Refugee Highway* – the well-worn routes forcibly displaced people travel in search of safety, peace and a normal life. The map (right) documents major routes to and across the Sea.¹¹

Sea crossings are extremely dangerous. Around 2,000 men, women and children drowned in the Mediterranean in the first eight months of 2015.¹²

As word has gotten out concerning the dangers of the Libya to Italy crossing, the sea migration route from Turkey to Greece has gained momentum. Nearly 160,000 men, women and children arrived in Greece between January – August 2015. Close to 50,000 migrants landed on the shores of Greek islands in July 2015 alone. Most of the people were from Syria.¹³

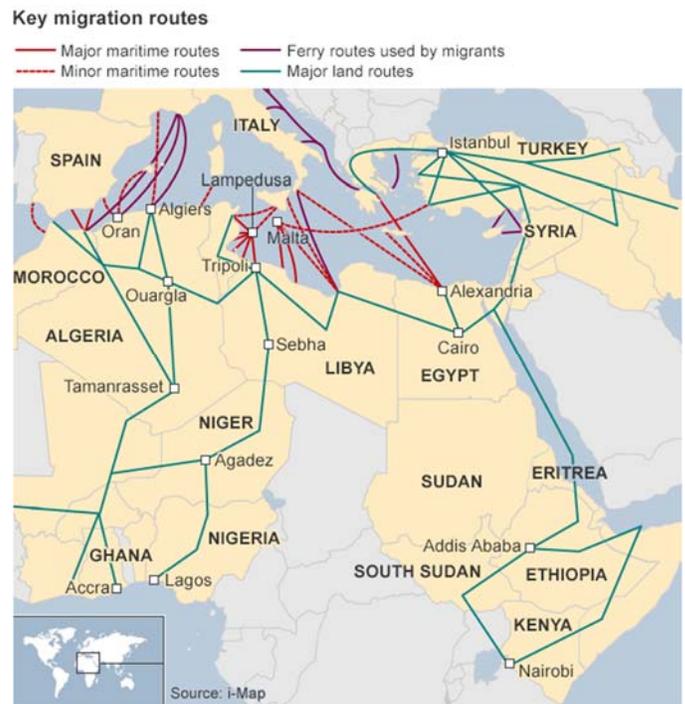
Land routes into the EU

There are also land routes by which desperate people seek to reach the EU, such as that highlighted in this map (right) showing the highway many migrants travel from Turkey to Germany.¹⁴

As with the sea routes, forcibly displaced people traveling by land often find themselves dependent upon criminal networks in their search for refuge.

Far from home on a desperate journey, they are easily exploited and sometimes robbed, abused, abandoned or worse.

The journey is both dangerous and dehumanizing.



¹¹ BBC News, “Why is EU struggling with migrants and asylum?”, 19 August 2015. Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-24583286>.

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

Who is travelling the *Refugee Highway* into Europe?

So far in 2015, the majority of migrants reaching Europe were from Syria, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Nigeria and Somalia.¹⁵ War and violence, failed states, rampant terrorism and oppression are well documented in these countries of origin.

Although often portrayed as “economic migrants” by media and politicians, there can be little doubt that the majority of these people are forced migrants in need of refuge.

Source: BBC News¹⁶

Where migrants using the three most popular routes come from

C Mediterranean



■ Eritrea 23,878
■ Nigeria 10,747
■ Other sub-Saharan countries 9,766

E Mediterranean



■ Syria 78,190
■ Afghanistan 32,581
■ Pakistan 6,641

W Balkan



■ Syria 28,749
■ Afghanistan 29,245
■ Kosovo 23,260

Source: Frontex

BBC

Developing a Response to the Refugee Crisis

While we may not be able to find any acceptable solutions to the refugee crisis, we have no choice but to respond. Justice and compassion must inform and shape our response.

Justice – Human Rights

When it comes to responding justly, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Article 14)¹⁷ and the *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* are international documents offering helpful clarification concerning how justice should inform our response to the refugee crisis.

Our response must recognize the right of people to seek asylum in our countries.¹⁸ We must not penalize asylum-seekers for crossing our borders without permission and/or personal documents.¹⁹ We must not permit the forced expulsion or return of asylum-seekers who have a credible fear of losing their freedom and/or life.²⁰ We must recognize the right of refugees to work, to have access to primary education, to have access to the legal system, and to have legal documentation necessary for travel.²¹ And we must recognize the need to share the burden of caring for asylum-seekers and refugees with countries that carry a heavier burden than others.²²

In light of the present refugee crisis, it is worth reiterating that the Convention specifically states that “*refugees should not be penalized for their illegal entry or stay*”, recognizing that people may find it necessary to violate immigration laws when seeking asylum.²³ This stands in sharp contrast to the commonplace assumption that asylum-seekers are “illegal migrants” because they are undocumented or crossed an international border without permission.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Introductory Note by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Geneva, December 2010, *Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees*. Page 2.

¹⁸ Ibid, page 3.

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Preamble to the *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, page 13.

²³ Ibid

As citizens and Christians, we need to actively promote these rights. We need to challenge public opinion and political action when they fail to clearly respect them. We must advocate for these rights on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees who generally do not have a voice or influence in their host country.

Compassion – Biblical Mandate

God clearly expects his people to treat foreigners with justice.²⁴ And the Bible says that God expects even more from us. He expects us to actively love and care for them.

Jesus commands us to love our neighbor²⁵ and to welcome the stranger²⁶. His words reflect the Old Testament commandment of God to love *“the foreigner residing among you”*²⁷.

The Bible is filled with practical ways that our care for asylum seekers and refugees can be demonstrated. Matthew 25:35-40 is a great starting point. Feed the hungry. Give drink to those who thirst. Invite them into our space (hospitality). Give clothing to those who need it. Care for those who are sick. Visit those in detention. These needs are common to many of the refugees and asylum seekers within our borders.

The Bible also tells us to *“provide the poor wanderer with shelter”*²⁸ and to include foreigners in our gatherings and worship services.²⁹

This is just a small sampling of Scripture demonstrating that God expects us to actively seek the welfare of refugees and asylum seekers.

These verses make some people uncomfortable. They may be tempted to think that this mandate does not apply to all foreigners – and especially not to those who cross borders *“illegally”*. This is reminiscent of the context in which Jesus told the story of The Good Samaritan.

The Good Samaritan

Jesus affirmed the divine expectation that we love our neighbor. An expert in the law, and therefore one who carefully weighed the meaning of words, once asked Jesus to define *“who is my neighbor”*. His intent was less to know who he was commanded to love, but rather to know who he was not required to love. Jesus answered with the well-known story about the Good Samaritan.³⁰

The story tells of a man on a journey. Apparently the road was dangerous and he was vulnerable. He was stripped, beaten and left half dead. A priest and a Levite saw the man, but didn't stop to help him. Another traveler saw the man. He interrupted his journey to give him medical care, and to transport him to a safe place where he could further care for him. Before continuing on his journey the next day, the traveler promised to cover any additional expenses related to the care of the man.

While there is much more to this story, it is important for us to note the similarities of the victim in the story with asylum seekers and refugees in our world today. They too are vulnerable as they travel a dangerous road.

²⁴ Some examples include Exodus 23:9; Leviticus 19:33,34; Deuteronomy 1:16

²⁵ Luke 10:27

²⁶ Matthew 25:35-45

²⁷ Leviticus 19:34, NIV, copyright 2011.

²⁸ Isaiah 58:7, NIV, copyright 2011.

²⁹ Deuteronomy 31:12

³⁰ Luke 10:25-37

Trauma, exploitation, robbery, abuse, physical suffering and death are all too commonplace on the Refugee Highway.

It is difficult to imagine that Jesus would tell us anything other than to follow the example of the hero in the story.

The Strategic Role of Churches

The UN High Commissioner for Refugees has asked faith leaders to be a part of the solution to the global refugee crisis by working to create “*space in the hearts and minds*” of people for refugees and asylum seekers.³¹ This is an essential part of a caring response to refugees and asylum seekers within society.

Churches are communities in which common misunderstandings and myths related to refugees and asylum-seekers can be debunked and corrected.³²

Churches also offer a strategic platform from which society can be influenced. Pastors and church leaders can draw teaching from the Bible to create such space in the hearts and minds of Christians.

There is no shortage of biblical material from which we can draw upon.³³ From the divine banishment of Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:23,24) to the final book of the Bible penned by John while in exile on the island of Patmos, stories of forced displacement run throughout Scripture. Josef, Hagar, Ishmael, Moses, Naomi, Ruth, Esther, David, Elijah, Nehemiah, Ezra, Daniel, Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Philip, Aquila and Priscilla, and many more biblical figures were forcibly displaced. Many well-known Bible stories are set in contexts of forcible displacement. It is often in these contexts that we find God to be at work in special ways. These stories can encourage Christians to anticipate God to be at work in the lives of forcibly displaced people today.

Developing a Just and Compassionate Response

The escalating refugee crisis requires a response. We are committed to justice and compassion as we respond to the crisis. The three solutions to the crisis are failing. There are no easy solutions. Now what?

Developing a Long-term Response Strategy

We must develop a long-term response strategy that:

1. Creates the possibility for people to recover from forced displacement
2. Minimizes the vulnerability of asylum seekers
3. Offers a long-term sustainable response to the refugee crisis
 - a. Decreases the uncontrolled flow of asylum seekers into Europe
 - b. Stops the dependency of asylum seekers upon criminal organisations and networks

Let's take a closer look at these objectives.

1. *Create the possibility of recovery from forced displacement*

³¹ High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges, Theme: Faith and Protection (12-13 December 2012), Chairman's Summary, by Antonio Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Page 3.

³² See “*10 Myths Concerning Refugees*”, available from IAFR at www.iafr.org/toolbox/articles-handouts.

³³ Some related resources include “*Why Christians Care About Refugees*”, “*Refugees in the Bible*”, “*5 Reasons Followers of Jesus Seek the Welfare of Refugees*”, “*What Local Church Leaders Can Do*”, and more. Available from IAFR at www.iafr.org/toolbox/articles-handouts.

Our ultimate goal is to see people who have been forcibly displaced *recover* from their displacement. This requires finding an environment in which their humanitarian needs are met for security, water, shelter, food and medical care. Recovery also requires overcoming the trauma and dehumanization of the refugee experience and finding healing, belonging, purpose, and hope as they seek a new normal for their lives as productive citizens.

Solutions and strategies need to be developed and implemented in ways that promote and not undermine the recovery process. The use of detention, separation of family, slow processes to determine asylum status, denial of access to employment, education, medical services, etc. can reduce resilience and hinder the potential for recovery.

2. *Minimize the vulnerability of asylum seekers*

The routes people are traveling in search of refuge are laden with danger. Our commitment to human rights and compassion compel us to minimize their vulnerability. This includes the pressing need to reduce their need to rely upon criminal human smuggling networks in order to find refuge.

The need for human smugglers would be greatly undercut if the resettlement option from refugee camps and centres was significantly increased. At present, less than 1% of the world's refugees are resettled in any given year. This is a key push factor behind the decision of desperate uprooted people to risk their lives in their attempt reach a country in which they hope to find refuge.

Imagine what might change if a significantly higher percentage of the world's refugees were resettled in any given year. Many who might otherwise be tempted to try and reach Europe to seek asylum may choose instead to seek temporary refuge in a camp and apply for resettlement.

This would go a long way in minimizing the vulnerability of asylum seekers and refugees. It would reduce the number of people seeking the services of criminal smuggling networks. It would lower the number of asylum applications in countries of destination.

3. *Develop a long-term sustainable response to the refugee crisis*

Present trends do not offer much hope that the numbers of forcibly displaced people will begin to decrease in the near future. UNHCR recently wrote that in 2014 “*worldwide displacement was at the highest level ever recorded...This increase represents the biggest leap ever seen in a single year...the situation [is] likely to worsen still further.*”³⁴

Even the most open societies within Europe are likely to suffer compassion fatigue if something isn't done to gain a sense of control over the number of people seeking asylum within their borders. But can this be done without violating human rights and compromising our commitment to compassion?

One way to develop a more sustainable long-term response is to significantly increase the number of refugees resettled in any given year. As stated in Goal 2 above, this would likely have the long-term effect of significantly lowering the numbers of people that set out on the dangerous journey to Europe in order to seek asylum.

³⁴ UNHCR, “Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase”, 18 June 2015. See <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.

While there are many challenges related to increasing the number of refugees resettled every year, we must compare them with present challenges related to the tsunami of asylum seekers entering Europe by any means possible.

Such a strategy would require a significant increase in burden sharing, especially on the part of industrialized nations in the global community.

A significant increase in the number of resettled refugees would clearly honor our commitment to justice and compassion (i.e. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention relating to the status of Refugees and our biblical mandate). Some key positive outcomes of this long-term strategy include:

a. Decrease the uncontrolled flow of asylum seekers into Europe

A significant increase in refugee resettlement will decrease the flow of asylum seekers heading to Europe.

This will require refugee camps and processing centres to be known as safe places offering temporary refuge, rather than long-term warehouses filled with traumatized and forgotten people.

The average time of displacement today is 17 years.³⁵ This number will have to be greatly reduced in order to convince asylum seekers to seek refuge in a camp or processing centre rather than setting out for Europe on their own. The most realistic way for this to happen is for the world to greatly increase the number of resettled refugees.

b. Minimize the dependency of asylum seekers upon criminal organisations and networks

A response that includes a significant increase in the number of resettled refugees will be the most effective way to fight human smuggling networks. Attempts to arrest smugglers and sink their boats will prove largely ineffective so long as there are desperate people who see no other alternative to find refuge. A far better strategy is to decrease demand for their services.

c. Increase the sense of control over the asylum seeker situation in Europe

In the present crisis, European countries are having to react to the escalating number of asylum seekers crossing their borders as uninvited guests.³⁶ Media and politicians can easily frame the situation as out of control. Asylum seekers are often misrepresented as a threat to Europe rather than as fearful and desperate people in need of protection and refuge.

If nations choose to significantly increase resettlement opportunities for refugees, they would feel less reactive and more proactive in addressing the world's refugee crisis. Nations would be able to select bonafide refugees for resettlement, giving society a greater sense of responsibility and control.

As the numbers of asylum seekers into Europe decreases, fewer stories of asylum seekers drowning at sea, suffocating in trucks, sleeping outside railway stations, and suffering in inhumane conditions of detention centres will be in the news.

³⁵ "The forgotten millions", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), 22 January 2015. See <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/forgotten-millions>.

³⁶ At 1.66 million, UNHCR recorded the highest number of asylum seekers ever in 2014. Source: "Facts and Figures about Refugees", UNHCR, August 2015. See <http://www.unhcr.org.uk/about-us/key-facts-and-figures.html>.

Nations will feel less and less to be victims of an unstoppable wave of migration. They will feel increasingly in control of the situation. Radicalized groups within their societies will be increasingly marginalized.

d. Relief to developing nations presently caring for the vast majority of refugees

While news headlines speak regularly of Europe's refugee crisis, about 9 out of every 10 refugees are found in developing nations (i.e. 86%).³⁷

A significant increase in the number of resettled refugees would be welcomed by these host nations and honor the spirit of the Refugee Convention concerning international burden sharing.

Developing a Short-term Response

Development and implementation of a long-term response will take considerable negotiation and time during which a short-term response is necessary. Identifying an acceptable long-term solution to the refugee crisis can frame our short-term response in a way that provides helpful perspective and generates hope that the present crisis will not continue or escalate indefinitely.

Once again, our short-term response must be aligned with our commitment to justice and compassion. Our short-term response needs to include the following:

1. Value human life above other agendas
2. Raise awareness and advocate on behalf of asylum seekers
3. Embrace and empower grassroots community initiatives that promote integration (including faith-based initiatives)
4. Increase international burden sharing

1. Value human life above other agendas

In the spirit of justice and compassion, our short-term response must prioritize protection and rescue above all political and ideological agendas. We cannot allow our societies to leave people to die in order to deter others from attempting to reach our borders.

2. Raise awareness and advocate on behalf of asylum seekers and refugees

Misrepresentation of asylum seekers and refugees by media, politicians and others must be overcome with public advocacy campaigns that represent them honestly. We must not allow others to distort reality and paint asylum seekers as a threat. Our societies must recognize asylum seekers as people who are desperate and vulnerable. We must help them understand the forces that drive people to risk their lives in search of refuge.

Schools, churches, media, politicians and others need to have easy access to helpful resources that raise awareness and expose prevalent misunderstandings and myths.

3. Embrace and empower grassroots community initiatives that promote integration

Recovery from displacement requires local integration. Failure to integrate not only results in an increased likelihood of long-term dependence upon social welfare, it also leads to marginalization and raises the risks of future radicalization.

³⁷ UNHCR, "Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase", 18 June 2015. See <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.

Community and faith-based initiatives that promote local integration of asylum seekers and refugees need to be encouraged and empowered by every level of government and civil leadership.³⁸

4. *Increase international burden sharing*

Some European countries bear a disproportionate burden in comparison with others when it comes to responding to the refugee crisis. This can lead to social unrest, economic instability, and international tensions. It is in everyone's best interest that this burden is shared among the international community (including within Europe as well as the international community).

Conclusion

Our response must be framed by a commitment to justice and compassion. We must develop a realistic long-term strategy as well as a humane short-term response. One such strategy could be established around a significant increase in the number of refugees resettled each year.

The Yazidi refugees in southeast Turkey have heard about the dangers and risks on the highway to Europe. They have heard about untrustworthy smugglers. They have heard about drownings and death. They have heard about the walls and fences being built to try and stop them. They do not want to make the journey. But they are convinced that they have no other choice.

It is up to us to create a better option for them.

*"For an age of unprecedented mass displacement, we need an unprecedented humanitarian response and a renewed global commitment to tolerance and protection for people fleeing conflict and persecution."*³⁹

—Antonio Guterres, UNHCR



A Yazidi orphan in a refugee camp in Turkey

³⁸ For a more in depth overview of how churches can respond to the refugee crisis in Europe, see *"A Christian Response to the Humanitarian Crisis in the Mediterranean"*, by Thomas Albinson, April 2015. Available at www.IAFR.org/news/262-response-to-the-crisis-in-the-mediterranean.

³⁹ "Worldwide displacement hits all-time high as war and persecution increase", UNHCR, 18 June 2015. See <http://www.unhcr.org/558193896.html>.