

d·i·e

Deutsches Institut für
Entwicklungspolitik



German Development
Institute

What should (and what should not) be done to ease the Syrian refugee crisis?

By Mark Furness & Annabelle Houdret,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

The Current Column

of 8 September 2015

What should (and what should not) be done to ease the Syrian refugee crisis?

Bonn, 8 September 2015. In recent weeks the flood of Syrian refugees seeking protection in the EU has developed into a crisis without precedent in recent European history. From a pre-war population of around 23 million, some 12 million Syrians have fled their homes – seven million internally displaced people in Syria, and 5 million to neighbouring countries. Around 340,000 have made it to Europe in 2015.

As the war drags on, the situation of ordinary Syrians has become increasingly desperate. More people have abandoned the idea of returning home and decided to risk attempting to reach the relative safety of Europe. The German government's commendable decision to accept all asylum claims from Syrians has enabled Germany to take the moral high-ground. However, with no legal and safe routes from the Middle East to Germany, Syrian families have to place their lives in the hands of ruthless people smugglers. Their psychopathic disregard for others has led to tragedies like the terrifying discovery 71 bodies in a truck on the motorway between Hungary and Austria.

With no end to the Syrian civil war in sight, the crisis will continue to get worse unless three things start to happen, simultaneously. In each case the EU and its member governments have crucial roles to play. None of these things are easy, because key players are either more interested in the status quo or are not yet prepared to pay the price needed to bring about change.

The first is to stop the war. This needs an internationally brokered regional agreement with all the major players around the table, including the Assad regime, Syrian opposition groups, the Iranians, Russians, Kurds, Turks and Saudi Arabians. ISIS should be excluded, that problem requires a multilateral containment strategy rather than diplomacy, and is supplementary to the task of securing an agreement that stops the killing in the rest of Syria. Unfortunately, given the animosity with which the region's big players regard each other, and their vastly divergent interests, a regional accord appears a pipe-dream. However, the inescapable fact is that the war will not stop without international pressure on regional players, and if the war does not stop people will continue to flee.

The second is to massively increase international efforts to address the long-term humanitarian crises in Syria's neighbours, Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. The situation for refugees is becoming untenable

and tensions with local populations are rising. Adults cannot work and children are missing school. International partners have started several education and training programmes, but more needs to be done if a 'lost generation' is to be avoided. The humanitarian appeals are chronically underfunded and the UN's 3RP programme to address longer-term needs of refugees has run into organizational as well as money problems. Some other interesting ideas have been proposed, such as setting up a special industrial zone for Syrians inside Jordan. The problem with increasing these efforts is twofold: the big Western donors, China and the Gulf States have been reluctant to cough up cash, and the Lebanese and Jordanians are nervous about anything that looks like a permanent refugee settlement in their countries, following their long experience with Palestinian refugees. But the fact remains that if conditions for refugees in Syria's neighbours are not improved, the pressure to try to reach Europe will grow, and conditions for incubating radicalism will develop fast.

The third thing that needs to happen is agreement among EU member states on how to handle the transit and settlement of refugees that reach Europe before points 1 and 2 take effect. There are many reasons why this has not happened yet. Europe's leaders seem at a loss about what to do, and debates have descended into a mess of uninformed myth-trading. Public opinion seems divided between those who think Europe has both moral responsibility and capacity to accept Syrian refugees and those who see them as a threat to Europe's economic and social stability. Given the passion with which everyone defends their position, reaching agreement will be difficult. Nevertheless, the plain fact is that if there is no EU agreement soon, the chaos we have seen over the last few weeks will get worse. This begs the question of how many more dead bodies the EU, which supposedly stands for human rights, and freedom, is prepared to accept.

Two things that will not work but will only increase suffering are further Western intervention in the Syrian war, and measures to seal Europe's external and internal borders to refugees. The former would simply release more destructive forces that cannot be controlled, as all other Western interventions in the Levant since World War I have done. The latter measure will merely make the journey more expensive and dangerous, but it will not stop desperate people from trying.