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LIVING UP TO A NOBLE TRADITION ON SYRIAN REFUGEES

Raja Khouri and Samir Mourani

In light of the devastating Syrian conflict, which has resulted in the displacement of millions of Syrians across several countries in the region, the Canadian Arab Institute has analyzed Canadian policy with regards to Syrian-refugee resettlement in this country. The intent of this brief is to provide policy recommendations to the Canadian government that are in line with our international obligations, tradition, and capacity for refugee resettlement.

KEY FINDINGS:

1. **Canada's post-World War II recent history demonstrates a tradition of international leadership in the resettlement of large waves of refugees from conflict zones.**
2. **The Syrian conflict has produced a humanitarian crisis and the world's largest refugee population since World War II.**
3. **Canadian response to the crisis has been slow, deficient, and lacking in transparency. The country has fallen behind many of its international peers in offering resettlement.**
4. **Canada has the appropriate know-how and mechanisms for facilitating the resettlement of large numbers of Syrian refugees.**
5. **A successful model exists: that of the resettlement of over 20,000 Iraqi refugees to Canada in the recent past**

INTRODUCTION

The tragic historical aberration of the 1930s – when xenophobic and anti-Semitic responses conditioned a “**none is too many**” response to the desperate situation of Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution (Abella & Troper, 1982) – continues to leave a scar on Canada’s history. Official acknowledgement of this historical tragedy is reflected in the 2010 decision by the federal government to fund, under the auspices of the Community Historical Recognition Programme, a monument reflecting on the historic response to the M.S. St. Louis when Jewish refugees were denied entry to Canada and turned back to their deaths. (Annual Report on the Operation of the Canadian Multiculturalism Act 2009-2010, 2011) Displayed at Halifax’s Pier 21, the monument, like the Canadian Museum of Immigration at the same location, symbolizes our humanitarian values while simultaneously recognizing the valuable contributions of refugees and immigrants to Canada’s past, present, and future.

Since then, Canada has drastically changed its policies towards refugees. In 1969, Canada signed the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, designed to facilitate the proper treatment of refugees inside foreign nations and outline the responsibilities of host nations. According to its terms, “refugees deserve, as a minimum, the same standards of treatment enjoyed by other foreign nationals in a given country and, in many cases, the same treatment as nationals”. (Helping Refugees: The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol) In a recent speech at the Global Centre for Pluralism in Ottawa, the High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, specified that this treaty “also spells out the obligations the states have

towards the people seeking safety on their soil.” (Guterres, 2014)

When a state accedes to the 1951 Convention, it explicitly accepts the following:

- It demonstrates its commitment to treating refugees in accordance with internationally recognized legal and humanitarian standards;
- It gives refugees a possibility to find safety and security;
- It helps to avoid friction between States over refugee questions. Granting asylum is a peaceful, humanitarian, and legal act;
- It demonstrates its willingness to share the responsibility for protecting refugees;
- It helps the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to mobilize international support for the protection of refugees. (The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol)

Between 1979/80, the Progressive Conservative government, under Joe Clark, was **involved in the resettlement of approximately 60,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees.** (Paris, 2014) In 1986, the United Nations awarded the Nansen Refugee Award to the people of Canada – an award which historically was given to individuals. Canada became the first, and only, country recipient of the prestigious award. (Archive of Past Nansen Winners, 2001) Since the end of World War II, more than 860,000 refugees have been resettled on Canadian soil. (Pressé, & Thomson, 2008) On average, Canada resettles one out of every 10 refugees globally through private and government-

assisted sponsorship. (The refugee system in Canada)

The general approach to integration, as a multidimensional process requiring adaptations on the part of both newcomers and the host society, is widely seen by scholars and immigration specialists as preferable to alternative approaches (segregation / forced assimilation). A large body of cross-national comparative research shows that **Canada stands out amongst other Western countries for its embrace of multiculturalism**. As a result, Canada has been able to maintain relatively high levels of permanent settlement, paving the way towards citizenship acquisition. (Abu-Laban, 2007)

In comparison to the United States, studies show that refugees who arrive in Canada have been more likely to acquire citizenship and participate in community and political life. This has been attributed to the mechanisms put in place by the Canadian federal government to promote citizenship acquisition, such as funding of settlement services and the adoption of an official policy on multiculturalism. (Bloemraad, 2006) From the Vietnamese boat people to the more recent resettlement of some 20,000 Iraqis, examples of refugee relocation are a key part of Canada's history.

THE SYRIAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

On the heels of an uprising-turned-civil-war in 2011, the humanitarian crisis in Syria has resulted in the largest forced displacement crisis in the world since World War II. Over nine million Syrians (Syrian Refugees: a Snapshot of the Crisis - in the Middle East and Europe, 2013) are in need of basic humanitarian assistance. Every year since

the beginning of the conflict has seen an exponential growth in the number of Syrian refugees. In 2012, there were approximately 100,000 refugees. By April 2013, that number drastically rose to 800,000. This figure doubled to 1.6 million less than four months later. (Quick facts: What you need to know about the Syria crisis) There are now over three million Syrians scattered throughout neighboring states. It is estimated that at the current rate, the number of Syrian refugees could eclipse the four million mark by the end of 2015.

A breakdown of these figures paints a picture of despair and dire need. Women and children account for a majority of the refugee population. Approximately 80% of all Syrian refugees are currently living in urban areas outside a formal camp setting. (Syrian refugee crisis) **Up to 38% of those outside the camps are living in below-standard shelters**. Water has become a luxury, as even refugees living in formal camps in Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey require support to ensure access to clean and safe drinking water. (2014 Syria Regional Response Plan)

The lack of clean water and sanitation in crowded, makeshift settlements has become an urgent concern. Water shortages have reached emergency levels in the more populated settlements. **Diseases like cholera and polio have become easily spreadable** and are straining the already thin resources of aid groups on the ground. A United Nations Relief and Works Agency spokesperson described the breakout of polio amongst Syrian children to be "the most challenging outbreak in the history of polio eradication." (Jones, 2014) To make matters worse, security is a constant concern as horror stories have surfaced from inside the camps describing instances of stoning and rape. (Greenwood, 2013)

In Lebanon, the largest recipient of Syrian refugees thus far, Syrians now make up a quarter of the country's population. The lack of a formal refugee policy means Syrian refugees are living in abandoned warehouses, under highways, and in mosques and churches. **The sheer magnitude of resettlement in Jordan prompted that country's minister of planning and international cooperation to liken Jordan's absorption of Syrians to the United States resettling every single Canadian within its borders.** (Onishi, 2013) A recent report by Amnesty International speaks of the many Syrian refugees who have become victims of abuse when trying to cross the border into Turkey. Syrians are fired upon, beaten, or mistreated by Turkish border guards. Many of the families inside Turkey are currently living in extreme poverty and only 15% of refugees outside the camps receive any form of aid. (Letsch, 2014)

Aside from the poor living conditions, Syrians in neighboring states are being continually exploited in labor markets. Women and children are frequently exposed to humiliation and sexual abuse. For example, Syrian women working in Turkey report being sexually harassed by their employers. (Stoter, 2014) Some **women are entering into unwanted marriages as a means of securing financial security for their families.** (Syrian refugee women exploited in Egypt) Young girls are reportedly being forced into prostitution networks and minors being sold off to the highest bidder. (Saleh, 2013)

With rising costs, staggering shortages, security concerns, and camp overflows, the UNHCR has once again appealed to world states to lend their economic and political support, and called for the resettlement of

100,000 of the most vulnerable of Syrian refugees over the next two years (2015/2016). (UNHCR new call for resettlement or other forms of admission for 100,000 Syrians, 2014)

CANADA'S RESPONSE TO THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Canada has so far provided over "\$630 million in humanitarian, development and security assistance in response to the Syria crisis." (Canada's response to the situation in Syria) Despite this generous financial support, **Canada's overall response to the UNHCR's call for resettlement of Syrian refugees confounded many** because it seemed to be less generous than in years past. In July 2013, then-immigration minister Jason Kenney said Canada would accept 1,300 Syrian refugees in response to the UNHCR's first appeal for resettlement of Syrian refugees – two hundred of whom, considered "extremely vulnerable," would be government assisted. Meanwhile the remaining 1,100 would be resettled through private sponsorship. (Payton, 2013)

There has been a lack of transparency in progress being made on resettling the 1,300 Syrians with firm numbers being scarce. The Canadian Council for Refugees stated **a meager nine Syrians were resettled in the first eight months of 2013.** (Canadian immigration responses to the Syrian crisis - backgrounder, 2013) A recent article in *The Ottawa Citizen* documented how Citizenship and Immigration Canada is well behind on its resettlement commitments and the real danger it will not meet its target for 2014. (Berthiaume, 2014) Even more worrisome is Canada's silence at UNHCR meetings in Geneva earlier in December 2014 in response to the call for resettlement of 100,000 Syrian refugees by 2016.

CANADIANS WANT TO HELP

There are a growing number of Canadians who have expressed their support for resettlement of Syrian refugees. The list includes grass roots projects (RefugeAid) and established non-governmental organizations (Canadians in Support of Refugees in Dire Need, Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance, Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holder Association, Doctors for Humanity, Union of Syrian Medical Relief Organizations, and the Canadian Council of Refugees).

Organizations have already publicly announced their willingness to assist in the sponsorship of refugees. The Sponsorship Agreement Holders' Association, which consists mainly of church-based organizations, has already submitted over 100 sponsorship applications since 2013. (Swan, 2014) Meanwhile in June 2014, prior to World Refugee Day, the Canadian Immigrant Settlement Sector Alliance, a national umbrella group that acts as a representative for numerous provincial associations, had also sent a letter (Mas, 2014) to Minister Chris Alexander making the case for resettlement of 10,000 Syrian refugees.

WHAT CANADA SHOULD DO

In order to meet UNHCR's call, the government of **Canada should mirror its successful Iraqi refugee resettlement program.** This program has been effective in the resettlement of large numbers of Iraqi refugees through a combination of government-assisted and private sponsorships. Canada had proclaimed its

commitment to the largest single resettlement initiative in over 25 years when it pledged to accept 20,000 Iraqi refugees by 2015. (Canada to fast-track Iraqi immigrants, 2007) According to Citizenship and Immigration Minister Chris Alexander, over 18,320 Iraqi refugees have been resettled in Canada thus far, (Chase, 2014) with a majority being privately sponsored. The same happened in 1979, when the government of Prime Minister Joe Clark leveraged the public-private relationship to facilitate the relocation of the "boat people." (Paris, 2014)

For this to happen in the case of Syrian refugees, **the government must announce an initiative to match private sponsors in the resettlement process.** The government is in a position, just as it was during the Clark government, to partner with a number of private and non-governmental organizations that can help facilitate resettlement of Syrian refugees. In addition, **the period of time it takes to process an application needs to be shortened dramatically.** The current processing time for private sponsorship of refugees stands at 26 months. (Processing times for privately sponsored refugee applications)

Canada's family-class sponsorship system is a cost-effective method that could be used more broadly to facilitate the integration of Syrian refugees into the country, with financial costs being borne by the private sponsor. **All that is needed is for the government to help broker the sponsorship.** Eligible sponsors wishing to sponsor Syrian relatives to Canada are consistently met with delay challenges. For example, the Canadian embassy in Jordan (Processing times for privately sponsored refugee applications)¹ is currently taking up to 24 months to process applications for sponsorship of spouses, common-law or

conjugal partners and dependent children. In addition, the timeline process for sponsorship of parents and grandparents through the Canadian embassy in Jordan is currently pegged at 68 months. (Processing Times: Family Sponsorship)

Canada is no stranger to offering and extending support to persons in critical need through reformulation of the family sponsorship program based on critical need. Recent modifications and exceptions to its family sponsorship program were made in response to humanitarian crises in Iraq (2007), Haiti (2010), and the Philippines (2013).

Following the outbreak of a deadly civil war in Iraq, the government of Canada began giving priority to refugees from Iraq who had close family in Canada. Iraqi nationals under the “family class” were processed on a priority basis for permanent residence in Canada. Family class included spouses, common-law and conjugal partners, dependent children, parents, and grandparents. (Canada to fast-track Iraqi immigrants, 2007)

In 2010, a major earthquake hit Haiti causing massive displacement. Canada announced a special Haitian family reunification program that fast-tracked 2,200 family-class sponsorships involving more than 3,300 people. (Goodspeed, 2014) And just 24 hours following the devastating typhoon that ravaged the Philippines in 2013, Canada introduced priority visa processing for affected Filipinos with Canadian family members. (ARCHIVED – Background — Typhoon Haiyan: Frequently asked questions) In total, Canada resettled 1540 Filipinos through this process. (Dempsey, 2014)

Family re-unification programs are already being implemented in other parts of the globe to deal with the rising number of Syrian refugees. The two best practice examples of Syrian family reunification come from Germany and Sweden. Combined, the two countries have admitted 100,000 Syrians.

In September of 2013, Sweden announced that all Syrian refugees approaching its border would be granted entry and afforded permanent residency alongside their immediate family members. (Sweden offers residency to all Syrian refugees, 2013) To date, the Swedish government has granted permanent residency status to an estimated 30,000 Syrians.

CONCLUSION

Canada is an international leader on humanitarian causes. Many of our traditional partners in responding to international calamities have already acted. The United States has implemented an open-ended resettlement policy while Australia aims to resettle 5,600 Syrians through a special humanitarian program. Brazil has launched an open-ended humanitarian visa program in which Syrian refugees can apply for refugee status. Germany and Sweden have already opened their doors to massive numbers of Syrian refugees.

The UNHCR’s Antonio Guterres has expressed his desire for Canada to resettle a large number of refugees, citing the country as a prime example of refugee protection. (Guterres, 2014) This is a sentiment shared by many in the international community and, more specifically, here at home.

Canada already has support mechanisms for immigrant integration that promote citizenship acquisition, funding of settlement services, and official multiculturalism. **Our systems are the envy of the world** with multiple waves of immigrants and refugees successfully integrating and peacefully coexisting.

We have the legal obligation, the tradition, the knowhow, and the mechanisms. There is no cause for further delay in relocating large numbers of Syrian refugees

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Canadian Arab Institute calls on the Government of Canada to do the following:

- 1. Make a clear and firm commitment to resettle 10,000 Syrian refugees through a combination of government and private-sponsored refugees by the end of 2017.**
- 2. Work alongside private organizations and NGOs with the aim of promoting private sponsorship for the resettlement of Syrian refugees.**
- 3. Expedite the resettlement process for sponsorship of Syrian refugees with familial ties in Canada.**

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