

Today, there exists an enormous group of people facing dire circumstances whose stories go largely untold and whose needs are largely unmet. In the wake of unrest and conflict, millions of people flee their homes in search of peace, security, and a better future for themselves and their families. Instead, refugees are met with dismal, unsanitary living conditions, limited educational opportunities, increased vulnerability and an uncertain future. The refugees of Syria know this story all too well.

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the total number of individuals forcibly displaced from their homes as of June, 2014 reached a staggering total of over 50 million people (World). Syrian refugees account for nearly 1/5 of all uprooted peoples, with an estimated 9 million individuals seeking refuge since the initial outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. While 6.5 million Syrians live as an internally displaced population within Syria, 3 million have left the country altogether to seek refuge in the neighboring countries (Hello). An estimated 150,000 Syrians have declared asylum in the European Union, with the countries of Sweden, Bulgaria and Germany experiencing the highest influx of immigrants. However, the countries that were hit hardest by the incoming of Syrian refugees were the countries closest to the conflict – torn region – Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, and Iraq.

The numbers of registered refugees alone is staggering. The Syria Regional Refugee Response puts the numbers of registered refugees in the country of Jordan at 624, 961, Lebanon hosting 1,172, 170 Syrians, Egypt having taken in 136,661 refugees, Turkey with 1, 552, 839 individuals from Syria residing within its borders, and Iraq having experienced the influx of 244, 731 Syrian refugees. However, those numbers do not take into consideration the individuals who have not registered as refugees in the countries in which they now reside. This means that there

are perhaps thousands more individuals within those countries that are not accounted for (UNHCR Syria).

To accommodate for the needs of the multitude of people seeking refuge within those countries, refugee camps have been established as makeshift homes for individuals to live in while they await the end of conflict in Syria. Although it did not experience the greatest immigration of refugees, Jordan is home to the largest Syrian refugee camp, Za'atari.

Hosting 83,796 individuals as of February of this year, Za'atari provides refuge for the largest number of Syrian refugees in the world. In this particular camp, males outnumber females 50.1% to 49.9%. The youth make up 57% of the population living in Za'atari. On top of that, 19.9% of the youth are under five years of age (N.p.).

Za'atari is located in the northern region of Jordan, close to the Syrian border. It was established in a desert landscape, which makes for harsh, unforgiving conditions. The summer brings unbearable heat and the winter ushers in a season of flooding and freezing temperatures. While the close proximity to the refugees' homeland of Syria may at first be recognized as a positive aspect of the camp, the nearness to the conflict – torn region allows refugees to hear the sounds of bombs exploding, which only serves as a reminder of the devastating losses they have suffered (Za'atari).

When refugees arrive at Za'atari, the first sight that they will lay eyes on are rows of pre-fabricated metal shelters and canvas tents that serve as housing and stretch for miles. The initial response to meet the needs of incoming refugees was disorganized at best. According to IRIN, a humanitarian news source, “cases of waterborne and water-related diseases [were] appearing in the camp on a weekly basis, including diarrhea, scabies, leptospira, rotavirus and hepatitis A”.

Aside from those illnesses, “communicable diseases related to hygiene conditions have also been reported, including acute jaundice syndrome, chicken pox, lice and measles” (Vandalism).

The primary cause of the outbreaks of infection, disease, and illnesses was due to lack of proper hygiene practices, and according to the refugees themselves, a lack of access to clean water. Aid workers acknowledge that the layout of sanitation services was poorly planned, however, and steps were taken to rectify that logistical misstep (Vandalism).

To make water available to more people in various sections of the camp, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) built smaller water and sanitation facilities, but in a greater quantity (Vandalism). This is an incredibly important facet of sustaining a refugee camp because, “the UNHCR estimates that more than half of the refugee camps in the world are unable to provide the recommended daily water minimum of 20 liters of water per person per day” (Unite).

Unfortunately, with the provision of scarce resources, comes fierce competition to collect on what is being provided. According to IRIN, “providing water and sanitation in the camp also means fighting, theft, vandalism, aggression, and in some cases, violence” (Vandalism).

An especially vulnerable group within refugee camps are women and girls, who tend to be more susceptible to forms of violence that they may not experience if not for the circumstances in which they live. According to the UNHCR, “in situations of displacement...risks – particularly discrimination and sexual and gender – based violence – can be exacerbated”. That harsh reality can be attributed to the “community support structures [breaking] down and traditional or formal justice systems [which] may not uphold women’s

rights”. The most defenseless subset of this group is “unaccompanied women and girls, women heads of households and pregnant, disabled, or older women” (Women).

Although it is imperative that basic nourishment and security standards are met so that Syrian refugees can survive the enduring crisis, it is just as integral that Syrian refugees have the opportunity to be educated, so that they can be catalysts in discontinuing the cycle of violence and conflict that persists in the Middle East. In an effort to achieve that goal at Za’atari, “the Jordanian Ministry of Education, together with UNICEF and partner agencies, opened three schools, which run double shifts — girls come in the morning, boys in the afternoon” and last year alone, “18,000 children enrolled in Za’atari’s schools” (Shmulovich). However, the initiative to educate the youth of refugee camps is not always successful. Devastatingly, “among refugees, nearly half of all children are not receiving an education in exile” (UNHCR Warns).

Another essential aspect to establishing a secure future for Syrians is the provision of mental health services to assist refugees in coping with the traumatic events of being violently displaced from their homes and likely experiencing violence and the loss of loved ones along the way, while being made to live in less than ideal conditions in an unfamiliar place. The UNHCR contends that, “experiences of displacement due to armed conflict, persecution, or disasters put significant psychological and social stress on individuals, families and communities” and that, “the ways in which refugees experience and respond to loss, pain, disruption and violence vary significantly and may in various ways affect their mental health and psychosocial wellbeing or increase their vulnerability to develop mental health problems” (Operational). In Za’atari, doctors “have been educated by a Doctors of the World psychologist in the detection of mental health problems, and were trained in referring patients who need psychological counseling”, which is an incredible service (Jordan).

Despite the insurmountable challenges that the Syrian refugees have been confronted with, there is a remarkable resilience among them. To support themselves and recreate a semblance of normalcy, despite their uncertain circumstances, “the lively camp boasts of home-grown barber shops, wedding rentals, vegetable stalls, and even a travel agency and pizza delivery service” (Gavlak). Another aspect of life in the refugee camp that brings comfort and freedom to refugees is the implementation of grocery stores, in which they pay with World Food Programme vouchers (Knell).

For long-term residents of refugee camps, having establishments that are commonplace in the rest of the world is very important. With the Syrian civil war entering its fifth year of conflict, camps such as Za’atari are becoming more permanent residences for some individuals. Startlingly, although refugee camps are intended to be temporary places of shelter, the average time a person will spend in a refugee camp is 17 years (How).

Considering the massive number of refugees and the duration of time for which they remain displaced, our response to their situation will have a paramount impact on the future of the refugees and of the world as a whole. To quote the UNHCR High Commissioner, Antonio Guterres, “we have only a narrow opportunity to intervene now as this potentially lost generation confronts its future...Abandoning refugees to hopelessness only exposes them to even greater suffering, exploitation and dangerous abuse” (A Monthly).

When considering the groups that suffer from human rights abuses, it is imperative to remember the millions of forcibly displaced people around the globe, who live each day with uncertainty about what their future holds. This vulnerable groups experiences traumatic losses and typically substandard living conditions, but much of the world is unaware or unconcerned

with the wellbeing of this large population of people. It is time for the international community to become more cognizant of the struggles of refugees as a whole and to contribute to their wellbeing.

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