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Bringing Aid And Hope To Syrian Refugees -- Americans Should Do More To Help

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BEIRUT—“Syrians are everywhere,” an aid worker told me. “Everybody is poor now.” Well over a million Syrians are scattered across Lebanon, many in small “tented settlements.” Almost half live in sub-standard housing; many lack fuel and warm clothes for winter. The government spends upwards of \$1 billion annually to care for refugees and local residents are losing patience with the influx. Nearly a third of the country’s population is made up of people fleeing one conflict (Syria) or another (Iraq, Palestine).

Jordan hosts even more Syrians at greater cost. (So does Turkey, though it is much larger and wealthier.) Six of every seven refugees live in poverty. Large camps hold only 15 percent of refugees; the rest are spread throughout the country.

Almost five years of civil war have killed a quarter of million Syrians, wrecked the country, created economic catastrophe, displaced millions, and left virtually no one unaffected. Earlier this year UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said: “Four out of five Syrians live in poverty, misery and deprivation. The country has lost nearly four decades of human development. Unemployment is over 50 percent. Life expectancy has been cut by an astounding 20 years.” Children are at special risk, with horrific pasts and dubious futures. As many as five million people have fled to surrounding countries.

Thus, the stampede of Syrian migrants to Europe should not surprise. Even those who already have escaped the fighting are desperate to provide for their families and start a new future. Many see little appeal in Syria after peace eventually returns. “Before the conflict Syria was a most diverse and tolerant society. Now that is down the drain. Syrians are doing what people did in Lebanon,” observed a Syrian working for International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC).

Americans traditionally have offered sanctuary to those fleeing repression and war. However, so far the U.S. has taken in only about 2300 Syrians. Administration plans to accept another 10,000 have generated rising political opposition. Although fears of a refugee fifth column are overwrought, placing Syrians into recalcitrant communities is problematic for residents and refugees alike.

But Americans can contribute financially. Earlier this year Kuwait hosted a donors' conference for Syria. Some \$3.8 billion was pledged, topped by donations from the U.S. and Kuwait, long the Middle East's leader in such humanitarian efforts. However, the total was less than half what aid agencies were seeking, and in both 2013 and 2014 actual contributions significantly lagged original promises.

Which places greater responsibility on private relief groups. Yet they also have suffered financially as people's attention has wandered. Journalist Thanassis Cambanis explained: "Money problems are now afflicting every organization trying to help Syrians. Interest in the grinding conflict has flagged; sporadic political attention and media coverage mostly focus on the Islamic State, while fewer and fewer governments respond to the United Nations' 'urgent appeals' for aid."

Nevertheless, NGOs offer the best means for Americans to help Syrians in need. There are many worthy organizations. Earlier this year I traveled with IOCC to Lebanon and Jordan to view several aid projects. IOCC is an agency of the Orthodox Churches of North America and helps anyone in need. Widely respected by Muslims as well as Christians for its work, since 2012 the charity has helped more than 3.2 million Syrians throughout the Middle East. Its efforts demonstrate that the key to meeting vast humanitarian needs is not to focus on the seemingly hopeless whole but to address discrete problems facing individuals and families. Much good then can be done.

Based in Baltimore, Maryland, IOCC sees its mission as aiding those in need "in the spirit of Christ's love," who commanded that we feed the hungry and aid others in distress. Indeed, what more powerful way to fulfill the Apostle Paul's admonition to "do good to all people" (Galatians 6:10) than to enter a war zone to help?

Much of IOCC's work is conducted in Syria. The organization provides a form of "boots" on the ground and works with the Greek Orthodox Church in Syria. Even though the group seeks to send staff only into safe areas, fighting can shift suddenly. (This is one reason why IOCC didn't want to bring an outside scrivener there.)

More than half Syria's population now is estimated to require outside aid. One of IOCC's staffers from Syria, in Beirut for a workshop, told me that "Everyone in Syria is in need but there is no budget to help everyone." Nevertheless, IOCC attempts "to help the host population as well as" those displaced by the fighting, she explained, since "the host population is so poor."

Assistance runs the gamut, starting with emergency food, infant care, clothing, and bedding. IOCC repairs sanitation and water systems and teaches about proper hygiene. Health aid includes paying for medicine and surgical procedures. IOCC provides pre-natal and post-natal care, birth assistance, and nutrition programs. Money is used to repair shelter and pay rent assistance. Various measures support continued education of children. Psychological support programs are offered. In conjunction with its local partner IOCC deploys "rapid action teams" to address the consequences of new outbreaks and escalations of fighting.

One major challenge is to help people care for themselves. IOCC runs a “cash-for-work” program for Syrian women. They are trained to knit and provided with needles and wool. The dual benefit is warm clothes and outside income. Beneficiaries include widows and mothers with small children.

Aid work takes a toll. I spoke with Sama Laham of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchates of Antioch and All the East, in Beirut for an IOCC meeting. “We are facing daily challenges, daily problems,” he said. “Sometimes it is hard to face. But life goes on.” The longer the war rages, the greater the destruction. He lamented: “Buildings can be rebuilt. You cannot rebuild human beings.”

IOCC has been active in Lebanon since 2001, when it began aiding Lebanese still recovering from their civil war, which ended only in 1990. For instance, the group began supporting education in Lebanon, providing school equipment, underwriting school repairs, and providing school meals. The charity also promotes hygiene in public schools.

The massive influx of Syrian refugees has created new challenges. One IOCC official told me that “Lebanon faces a lot of problems, so we want to help the host country.” Tensions between residents and refugees have risen along with the increased job competition, pressure on infrastructure and services, and living costs. People “started out very sympathetic,” another IOCC official told me, especially since there had been “a lot of trans-border trade and families on both sides.” However, residents are poor people who “became even poorer, and they felt the government was not taking care of them, but only the refugees.” Aid projects providing community support help moderate such antagonisms.

One program which I visited focused on mother-child nutrition, from conception up to five years. The “public health system was overwhelmed by refugees,” explained Rana Hage of IOCC. The program is operated in conjunction with the Ministry of Public Health and seeks to provide training and equipment for scores of local public health centers (PHCs). It is open to all, though refugee families predominate. Children are screened and then regularly measured and weighed, with nutritional supplements, high-protein foods, and milk provided.

Pregnant and lactating women also receive nutritional aids. While I was visiting a 20-year-old pregnant woman came in, looking malnourished. She was provided with nutritional aids and directed to a PHC closer to her home. IOCC also trains Lebanese workers and empowers Lebanese agencies to educate mothers and provide emergency assistance. Tens of thousands of children have been screened and hundreds have been rescued from malnutrition. The program also emphasizes education and counseling.

IOCC covers the country. I went to the Makarem al-Akhiak PHC in Tripoli to the north. Three-quarters of those served are Syrians, who are spread throughout the community and “can come from anywhere,” said one of the local health care workers. “Tripoli is very central and easy to reach,” she added, and contains seven PHCs. Staff members reach out by “going to shelters and informal settlements and talking to women.” Unfortunately, “it sometimes is very dangerous to be here,” noted our security escort. Some 70 percent of population is Sunni and most oppose

Syria's Assad, in contrast to the Shia Hezbollah movement. Christians have only a small presence in the city. Sporadic sectarian violence has resulted.

Another community-oriented program provides meals to those in need. I visited a community kitchen in the West Bekaa District of the Bekaa governorate, one of two which helps feed 1750 people. IOCC underwrote a large, efficient cooking facility and hired local women to cook. Pots of food are distributed to needy families—both refugee and resident. The program hires both Syrians and Lebanese; the kitchen manager said that “we choose the most vulnerable women to work here.” A dietician designs the menu, so the meals “are healthy but not very expensive,” a staffer told me. The program helps reduce local resentment of refugees since needy residents also receive assistance. IOCC hopes to add another two kitchens.

The charity also runs the WASH program at two refugee encampments with more than 7500 people. I went to the Bar Elias Settlement, also in Bekaa. The initiative seeks to develop an efficient and safe water and waste systems, no easy task for expanding yet theoretically temporary encampments. The agency also seeks to establish water/wash facilities while providing hygiene education involving food preparation, hand-washing, and latrine use to reduce disease. Here as elsewhere IOCC hires staff from areas being served. Camp residents are more likely to accept instruction from those they know—the hygienist was a personable young lady who appeared at ease chatting with residents as we walked through the camp. She said she tries “to be sensitive with women and kids,” and plays educational games with the latter. Unfortunately, the job is never done. Said another aid worker, tents are “everywhere, everywhere,” and the camp is “constantly changing as more people come.”

Syria surrounds Lebanon to the east and north: things “can turn very dangerous very quickly,” one IOCC staff told me as we passed along the border. Nevertheless, Lebanon provides IOCC with a reasonably safe base for regional operations. While I visited the group brought staff in from Syria—a drive through territory still controlled by the Assad government—for a two-day workshop. People were able to relax and briefly set aside the war. The final dinner delivered much food, laughter, dancing, and karaoke, both in English and Arabic. The next morning came the return trip to Syria.

Jordan may be less fragile than Lebanon, but suffers greatly as well. Some 80,000 people are crowded into Jordan's Zaatari Refugee Camp, well-organized but with very basic conditions, sitting only a few miles from Syria. Twenty-two-year-old Abdul al-Jabbar said his family of nine came from Daraa to the camp three years ago. Life was difficult, “but at least we are alive. We must adapt.”

IOCC runs a program to prevent and treat lice, especially affecting children. The charity has distributed anti-lice kits to more than 20,000 kids. There's nothing glamorous about this sort of work, but it meets a critical need. The camp has nine medical clinics emphasizing the practical. The one I visited typically served about 700 people daily. “Every day we face challenges,” said clinic health coordinator, Samer Makahleh. “To fill gaps we go to outside partners like IOCC for head lice,” he explained. The program, which began some three years ago, emphasizes accountability and follows individual patients.

The most serious medical cases are sent outside the camp. Some needs still go unmet. Al-Jabbar, who works in security, said scores of other people were waiting for expensive procedures, hoping for a “special donor.” I was approached by a 64-year-old seeking support for a heart operation.

With most refugees living outside the camps, IOCC works outside as well, even making home visits for those unable to travel. The group provides everything from school uniforms—required to attend Jordanian schools—to infant supplies and household items. Many refugees may be unable to return to their earlier livelihoods once the war ends; some are entering adulthood without being able to develop work skills; others, largely women, have lost the family breadwinner. So IOCC provides vocational training, including in computer and phone maintenance, cosmetology, and graphic design, and English instruction.

There are Iraqi and Palestinian refugees in Jordan as well, and IOCC serves them all. In fact, said Felomain Nassar-Batshone, IOCC program manager in Jordan, “we began in anticipation of the Iraq war” years ago. Then the charity “started to meet the needs of the local population,” and today aids Jordanian families harmed by the refugee influx.

As needs have grown IOCC has expanded its activities. For instance, the group stepped in a couple months ago to provide meals and water for Syrian (and other) refugees arriving at three Greek islands and support immigration centers elsewhere in Europe. There is no geographic limit to human hardship.

IOCC’s identity is Christian. But it sees its calling as serving the needy without discrimination. In the Middle East the charity mostly serves Muslims. IOCC seeks to moderate the immediate crisis while preparing people for a better future. Many of its staffers know conflict, having suffered in Syria or grown up during Lebanon’s civil war.

Of course, even the best humanitarian efforts can only do so much. One top IOCC official told me he “sees no end of the conflict.” Every day more people are displaced. But he opposed Western military intervention, which would exacerbate the crisis. Only a “credible political process” which “gives people hope it will get better” can stem the refugee flow, he argued. But that political process appears to be barely beginning. Which means the need for aid will continue to increase. Yet he worried: “Funding is going to diminish next year. Donors are not going to be there.”

Unless more Americans and other people of good will around the world step up to address Syria’s humanitarian disaster. Centuries ago Christ called on his listeners to help the “least among us.” We should meet that challenge today.

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