



Americans Should Not Wait for Politicians to Help Syrian War Victims

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Seventy-eight nations plus 40 non-governmental organizations recently gathered to raise money for the relief of Syrian refugees. Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah opened the Third International Humanitarian Pledging Conference for Syria with a plea for funds.

The small Gulf nation has carved out an international humanitarian role. "This is our baby," one Kuwaiti official told me. His country gives far more as a percentage of GDP than its Gulf neighbors.

Kuwait opened the proceedings with a promise of \$500 million, matching last year's donation. The U.S. won the number one position with an offer \$507 million, but many participants offered little more than good will. Overall the conference generated \$3.8 billion of the \$8.4 billion which aid agencies were seeking.

The Obama administration sent UN ambassador Susan Power to head the U.S. delegation. She said that she came to "renew America's commitment" to provide humanitarian assistance. She complained about countries which "are giving the same amount, or even less than they have in the past."

Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, warned that "We are at a dangerous tipping point." The vulnerability of those caught in the conflict's crossfire was highlighted by the Islamic State's advance to the Yarmouk camp for Palestinian refugees on the outskirts of Damascus.

Alas, virtually no one in Syria has escaped the impact of four years of civil war. As the Emir observed in his opening statement, "the conflict in Syria has transformed the streets and neighborhoods of Syria into rubble, the buildings into ruins, and the people of Syria became merely casualty figures of death and displacement."

More than 200,000 Syrians are thought to have died; another million have been injured. The economy has imploded. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon added: “Four out of five Syrians live in poverty, misery and deprivation.”

Some 12.2 million people, more than half of the population, are estimated to need humanitarian assistance. A similar number have been displaced—between 6.5 million and 7.8 million within Syria and three to four million on to neighboring states.

Surrounding countries are ill-equipped to handle the exodus. Jordan has around 1.2 million refugees and Turkey some 1.8 million. Fragile, divided Lebanon hosts more than 600,000. A quarter million Syrians have fled to Iraq, another country ravaged by civil strife and war.

Yet Kuwait’s Gulf neighbors, led by Saudi Arabia, which have done so much to foment conflict in Syria by underwriting the most radical insurgents, have done little to deal with the consequences. They have taken few refugees and provided little money. At the latest conference Riyadh promised a paltry \$60 million, no more than in 2014, which was down from \$78 million the year before.

Among the Gulf States only Kuwait has given generously and fulfilled its promises. Kuwait’s ambassador to America explained that “The message from Kuwait to our friends in the Gulf and the region is: We need to do something, and quickly.”

One of the best ways to help those suffering from the Syrian conflict is through private relief groups. Indeed, the crisis has spawned a variety of relief efforts by NGOs around the world, many of which were represented in Kuwait.

Private organizations obviously face challenges as well, including, paradoxically, some being heavily reliant on public support. But they tend to be more diverse and flexible than public agencies.

Many groups have a religious orientation. For instance, I have met dedicated staffers with the International Orthodox Christian Charities, respected by Muslims and Christians alike. The IOCC works with Syrians in Syria as well as those who have fled to Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon. Many other NGOs provide welcome relief throughout the region.

Governments around the world also should relax immigration rules to allow vulnerable people, especially those targeted by either the Assad regime or radical insurgents, to resettle, including in America. Between October 2011 and December 2014 the U.S. accepted just 284 Syrian refugees, a pitiful total. America must screen out potential terrorists, but should be generous, especially to religious minorities who are being wiped out and have nowhere else to go in the Middle East.

Of course, “there is no strictly humanitarian solution to this problem,” noted Guterres. However, with war still raging there is much to do to assist the Syrian people. The latest international aid conference in Kuwait has helped highlight the great need.

Americans can't be expected to make Syrians' war their own. But they are an ever generous people who should do what they can to help other peoples in desperate need. There's no reason for them to wait for politicians to act.

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