



Humanitarian Crisis In Syria: People Must Not Wait For Politicians To Save Lives

Doug Bandow

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KUWAIT CITY, KUWAIT—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.

Security was heavy in Kuwait, though in contrast to the previous two sessions the Emir was the only head of state to attend. The conclave remained a priority for the small Gulf nation, which 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.

The forum suffered from a common disease of international gatherings: some participants used their allotted three minutes to highlight their moment in the spotlight, even if they had nothing substantive to contribute. Nevertheless, the subject deserved serious attention. Valerie Amos, the UN Undersecretary-General and Emergency Relief Coordinator, noted that everyone last year had hoped the 2014 conference would be the final session devoted to war and that this year governments and groups would be meeting "to talk about rebuilding Syria." Instead, the crisis has deepened and expanded with the rise of the Islamic State, dramatically increasing the need for humanitarian aid.

Kuwait opened the proceedings with a promise of \$500 million, matching last year's donation. The U.S. won the number one position by committing \$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. That's almost as much raised by the first two conferences combined, but not every government made good on their earlier promises; about ten percent of last year's pledges, for instance, remain unpaid.

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 and declared that the administration “is proud of this effort.” She complained about countries which “are giving the same amount, or even less than they have in the past.” To pressure the unconvinced Power contended that “Years from now, when Syrians and the world look back on the country’s horrific crisis, they will remember which countries stepped up to help people in dire need, and which countries did little or nothing at all.” (Overall, the U.S. provided \$1.7 billion total last year and \$3.2 billion for Syrian relief since the conflict began.) Actually, “the world” isn’t paying a lot of attention to the vagaries of the conflict, let alone who is giving what to whom, even today. Nevertheless, the crisis is real.

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. The number of Yarmouk residents had plunged nearly 90 percent from around 160,000 to 18,000; those remaining describe the situation today as a nightmare, catastrophe, and hell,

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. 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.”

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 escaping to neighboring states. About 150,000 have applied for asylum in the European Union; European states, mainly Germany, have promised to take 33,000 for resettlement. Many more Syrians are attempting to reach the continent. Last year roughly a third of the boat people landing in Europe started in Syria. Many of those forced from their homes are double refugees, including Christians who fled Iraq’s violent implosion after the U.S. invasion for then-stable Syria.

Surrounding countries are ill-equipped to handle the exodus. Egypt, a poor nation under authoritarian military rule, has about 135,000 Syrian refugees. Jordan hosts around 1.2 million refugees and Turkey some 1.8 million; many are in camps but others have settled, often illegally, in surrounding communities.

Fragile, divided Lebanon has more than 600,000. Noted Syrian Salam Kawakibi for the Migration Policy Centre, tension between pro- and anti-Assad forces “was amplified by the already unstable Lebanese political alliances” and broader impacts of the conflict on Lebanon.

A quarter million Syrians have fled to Iraq, another country ravaged by civil strife and war. The latter nation, Guterres told the aid conference, “has become completely engulfed in the Syria conflict, and hosts Syrian refugees alongside the 2.5 million of its own citizens that have become internally displaced since early 2014.”

Syria’s economy has crashed and jobs have disappeared. More than half of hospitals have closed or lost services. The number of medical professionals has dropped by more than half. Medicines produced have dropped by 70 percent. At the same time, the number of battlefield injuries, both of combatants and civilians, has reached epidemic proportions. Moreover, noted WHO: “Overcrowded living conditions and poor sanitation and nutrition have led to outbreaks of many communicable diseases.”

Children are at special risk. UNICEF explained: “Syria’s once-proud education system, its pupils and teachers, has suffered terrible punishment.” Some 4200 schools have been destroyed, damaged, or turned into shelters for displaced Syrians. In Syria organized education for an estimated two million children has ceased; 600,000 outside the country are not attending classes. The conflict has scarred children’s pasts and impaired their futures.

The extraordinary hardships suffered by Syrians have encouraged recruiting by the Islamic State and other radical groups. A Syrian father in Lebanon told Bloomberg that if the group “approaches my son and gives him \$300 to fight with them, he would do it.” Jan Egeland of the Norwegian Refugee Council worried about millions of young in the Middle East without jobs or hope: “We still expect them not to radicalize? Or course they will radicalize.” Obviously, people fight for the Islamic State out of belief as well as for money. But today circumstances reinforce philosophy.

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: in fact, only Bahrain has accepted enough to measure. In the region less than a half dozen Syrians have received protection while applying for asylum—and not one in Saudi Arabia. The latter also hasn’t provided much 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 NGOs helping Syrians are based in the Middle East, with several in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Gulf. Western organizations also are active and provide convenient and effective vehicles for prospective Western donors. Many groups have a religious orientation. For instance, World Vision and Catholic Relief Services reflect Christian principles, while Islamic Relief USA is a Muslim organization formed in 1993. 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. CARE, Concern Worldwide, Doctors Without Borders, International Medical Corps, International Rescue Committee, Life for Relief and Development, Mercy Corps, Mercy-USA, Save the Children, and Shelterbox all assist victims of the Syrian civil war. Some groups operate directly in Syria, others serve Syrians outside their country; some organizations go to camps while others run refugee centers in surrounding nations; many NGOs emphasize particular forms assistance, such as education, children's services, food, health care, and shelter. All make a catastrophic situation slightly less awful.

The need for outside assistance is vast. The conflict has destroyed much of Syrians' ability to respond to the simplest economic and social problems. For instance, in 2014 the World Health Organization delivered 13.8 million treatments, vaccinated 2.9 million children against polio and another 1.1 million against measles, provided nearly as many people with drugs and supplies, supported 17,000 health care workers, and underwrote 119 health centers.

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. The number is expected to increase this year, but far more should be done. As of January some 9000 Syrian refugees had been referred to America by the UNHCR. Washington must screen out potential violent radicals, but the U.S. 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. No amount of money can make the victims of war whole. Even the best intended and managed aid programs can only ameliorate the horrors of the ongoing conflict. So long as an authoritarian dictatorship faces totalitarian theocrats with some number of dubious "moderates" stuck in between, the humanitarian result is going to be awful. Only a political settlement will lead to genuine peace, but at this point the Syrian people would benefit if the conflict simply burned out, leaving a cold, uncertain calm.

However, with war still raging there is much to do to assist the Syrian people in the midst of seemingly uncontrolled death and destruction. 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. The many NGOs dedicated to aiding Syrians offer a wealth of options for those inclined to give. There's no reason to wait for politicians to act.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute.