

TheNational

Put the politics aside ... refugees need our help

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Speaking at the Leaders' Summit on Refugees at the United Nations in New York, Reem Al Hashimi, Minister of State for International Cooperation, announced that the UAE would welcome 15,000 Syrian refugees over the next five years. The minister stated that 115,000 Syrians had lived and worked in the UAE before the Syrian crisis erupted five years ago, while another 123,000 have been welcomed to the country since.

Syria's civil war is the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. Half the country's pre-war population – more than 11 million people – have been killed or forced to flee their homes.

Families are struggling to survive inside the country, while others are risking their lives on the way to Europe, hoping to find acceptance and opportunity. Millions of Syrians need our help.

According to the UN, 4.8 million Syrian refugees have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt and Iraq and 6.6m are displaced within Syria.

While some countries have stepped up to their responsibilities to provide shelter and hope we have also been subjected to fear mongering anti-refugee sentiment.

Just last week, Donald Trump Jr, the US presidential candidate's son, posted a tweet suggesting that some refugees posed a threat, likening this to a situation in which a person was presented with a bowl of Skittles, some of which were poisonous.

"If I had a bowl of Skittles and I told you that just three would kill you, would you take a handful? That's our Syrian refugee problem."

Overlooking the very basic fact that the statement was dehumanising in every way – as he was comparing human beings who have and continue to endure devastating horrors to sweets – the image grossly oversimplifies and exaggerates the threat and risk posed by accepting refugees.

A report released last week by the Cato Institute measured the risk to Americans posed by refugees. The report found that an American's chance of being killed by a refugee in a terrorist attack in any given year is 1 in 3.64 billion. America's murder rate – at 4.5 per 100,000 capita – is about 163,800 times higher. According to some digging on my part, since October 2015, the United States has admitted roughly 8,000 Syrian refugees. Not one has committed an act of terrorism. That's zero deadly Skittles.

Buying into the toxic fear machine is the last thing we need to be doing. The fight against terrorism does not mean that we forgo our humanitarian duties and our help to those in need in the best way we can. We need to fight the narrative that refugees are dangerous and instead lend a helping hand. In addition, creating an unwelcoming environment for those already dealing with the trauma of war is likely to ostracize them, which helps nobody in the end.

So politics aside, this is a humanitarian issue.

It is easy to get caught up in our own problems and think that this is something that doesn't concern us. But what fault do civilians have when they are casualties of a power struggle that doesn't involve them? What fault do the orphaned children or broken families have that they no longer have a home to go back to?

Even if you cannot find it in yourself to be empathetic, remember that what goes around comes around. You should lend a helping hand because you are in a better place than someone else and you would hope for the same yourself if you are in a bind.

For such a small country, the promise to take in 15,000 refugees – compared to the United Kingdom, whose population is more than six times that of the UAE, which pledged to resettle 20,000 refugees by 2020 – is truly significant.

It is a step in the right direction and I hope that many more countries follow suit. It is our duty as human beings to help each other out.