

An Insider's Perspective on the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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Brief Analysis

A German diplomat and a former Syrian official join two American experts to discuss how various parties are handling the ongoing mass refugee flow, and what more they can do to address the cause of the problem, not just its symptoms.

On October 14, Philipp Ackermann, Bassam Barabandi, Margaret Brennan, and David Pollock addressed a [Washington Institute LINK event \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/link\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/link) at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum. Ackermann is deputy chief of mission at the German embassy in Washington. Barabandi is a former Syrian diplomat and cofounder of People Demand Change. Brennan is a diplomatic correspondent for CBS News who has covered the Syrian refugee crisis extensively. Pollock is the Institute's Kaufman Fellow and director of Fikra Forum. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

PHILIPP ACKERMANN

The international community is busy trying to find a solution to the Syrian crisis, but efforts have been unsuccessful thus far. It will not be a military solution -- aggression tends to complicate issues, so the reflex of turning from inaction to escalated military action would not necessarily help the situation in Syria. A diplomatic path should be pursued, engaging all parties -- perhaps even the Assad regime.

When refugees lose hope to return home, they become desperate enough to cross the Mediterranean Sea and walk through entire countries, including children and pregnant women. This year, Germany has accepted between 800,000 and one million refugees, the equivalent of 1 percent or more of its population. About 40 percent of Germans are involved in volunteering to help these refugees, which is an extraordinary amount. The empathy is overwhelming, but the amount of refugees is so large that the public mood will change, and after a certain point Germany will reach its limit. Currently, around 6,000 to 8,000 new refugees are arriving every day.

The problem posed by this influx is not the fear of potential terrorism, but rather the fact that Germany has to teach an enormous number of refugees how to abide by local laws, which are very different from Syrian laws. For example, officials need to explain that girls attend school with boys, that homosexuality is accepted, and that anti-Semitism is entirely unacceptable.

Going forward, Europe needs a system for handling the crisis. Although refugees who are politically persecuted should be entitled to stay in Germany, those who come for economic reasons cannot stay. And Europe needs to find a way for all countries to share the burden. The United States has been willing to accept only a small number of refugees, and this is disappointing; it is a privilege Germany does not have.

BASSAM BARABANDI

As Syria buckles under U.S., Russian, and regime military operations, there is no peaceful area inside the country where people can stay. Most Syrians do not feel that they have a future there, which is a huge problem. The issue is not just mass displacement, but the fact that Syrians are continually being displaced. For example, many have been forced to move from Deir al-Zour to Aleppo and then to Damascus.

A growing number of Syrians will try to leave the country as the violence increases. Some will leave for Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey, while the more fortunate will make it to Europe. Syrians can enter Russia and Iran without a visa, but no one travels to either country because people do not believe they will find opportunities there. Few Syrians believe they have a future in the Gulf states either, so even if those countries open their doors, refugees are unlikely to go there. Syrians are looking for a long-term solution, including education for their children, so they are trying to reach Germany or other European countries.

The United States is a superpower, but the Obama administration has been hesitant to take action in Syria. The international community believed the military interventions in Libya and Iraq were a mistake, so they decided on inaction in Syria. The United States will not attack Syrian regime forces because Washington wants to negotiate with Iran. The Syrian people are well aware of this reality -- they are very politically aware in general, and they do not appreciate the funds the U.S. administration is sending for assistance programs at a time when they are in desperate need of action. The refugees are not going to Europe to find jobs, they are running for their lives. And once there, they will likely have issues with understanding local laws, including the fact that Europeans drink alcohol and teach both genders in the same classrooms.

As for the Islamic State, the threat is exaggerated in the media -- the group is weak and scared, and attacks over the past year have weakened it. Islamic State fighters are mainly foreigners who do not have popular support, and Syrians are willing to kick them out of the country. If the United States supported locals on the ground, the group could be expelled much faster.

MARGARET BRENNAN

Media coverage of the refugee crisis has skyrocketed, particularly as individuals have begun leaving camps due to dire circumstances. A refugee camp does not necessarily mean an escape from the crisis, because many people wind up stuck in camps for years. Refugees often do not have the right to work and can be subject to exploitation if they choose to work illegally. Thinking about the crisis in personal terms is particularly moving. For many people, the conflict was tragically humanized when the Syrian Kurdish toddler Aylan washed up on Turkey's shore.

The U.S. administration will talk about the amount of money that has been spent to help the refugees -- for example, to ensure they have running water. But the United States has permitted entry to only 1,500 Syrians over the past four years, and these few refugees are afraid to speak to the media because they have relatives who remain in Syria or believe they will be stigmatized in the parts of America where they have been settled. U.S. officials also say they have pressured the Gulf states to support refugees; one of the frustrations at the beginning of the war was the lack of enthusiasm about giving money to the UN. More recently, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have released fact sheets regarding how many refugees they have accepted, but it is difficult to know how officials calculated those numbers.

There are many layers to this story, but looking at it solely as a humanitarian crisis obscures the fact that it is wrapped up with a national security crisis as well. The wars of the past few decades are affecting the current situation -- decisionmakers are in a difficult position over what to do next, partly because of the pervading idea that if you touch a crisis, it becomes your responsibility. Now the conversation is about treating the symptoms of the Syrian refugee crisis rather than the causes. The situation will only get worse in Europe and the countries surrounding Syria.

DAVID POLLOCK

America's reputation has suffered and continues to suffer for its lack of action on the Syrian crisis. Washington has been generous in writing checks to support refugees, but it has not been generous enough in resettling them in the States. In addition, little action has been taken to stop the conflict.

The issue is not "muscular or non-muscular" -- the issue is whether to do it right or do nothing at all. Although military action is risky, messy, and fraught with unintended consequences, sometimes it is the only thing that can resolve a conflict. In 2012-2013, the United States had an opportunity early in the uprising to take military action at relatively low cost, and the government missed that opportunity. Now the conflict has been greatly complicated by the presence of ISIS, Russia's military involvement, and the refugee crisis. The U.S. government and many others looked at the results of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya and learned the "lesson" that military intervention can only make things worse. They have also ruled out supporting an indigenous opposition; the United States had that option in Syria but did not take it.

Finally, Washington is unlikely to pressure the Gulf states regarding the refugee crisis, since it would not be productive to make a big push for them to take in fleeing Syrians. Yet these countries could make more of an effort in funding operations to assist refugees.

This summary was prepared by Erica Wenig.



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