

The Key to Resolving Syria's Refugee Crisis? Ending Its War

by [Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh), [Elliott Abrams \(/experts/elliott-abrams\)](/experts/elliott-abrams)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Singh \(/experts/michael-singh\)](/experts/michael-singh)

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute.



[Elliott Abrams \(/experts/elliott-abrams\)](/experts/elliott-abrams)

Elliott Abrams was a deputy national security advisor in the second George W. Bush administration.



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To avoid or mitigate further fallout from the war, the United States and its allies need to create facts on the ground by establishing and enforcing safe zones inside Syria.

A wave of Syrian refugees has caught Europe and the United States flat-footed, leaving the European Union scrambling to devise a plan to deal with those arriving on its shores and Americans debating our role in the matter. A humanitarian reaction is natural -- but woefully inadequate, because refugees will keep coming as long as the Assad regime continues to brutally repress Syria's Sunni majority. Only by bringing the conflict to an end will the flow of ever more thousands of refugees stop.

This crisis was neither unpredictable nor unavoidable. Syrians have been fleeing, or being forced from, their homes in massive numbers since 2011. Nine million Syrians have reportedly been displaced. More than half remain in Syria, while the vast majority of the others have taken refuge in nearby countries. Lebanon, which has only about 4 million citizens, hosts more than a million refugees. That's one Syrian refugee for every four Lebanese; by comparison, even if 800,000 migrants seek asylum in Germany, as is anticipated, it would amount to one refugee for every 100 Germans.

The United States has been the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to Syrians, giving \$4.1 billion since 2011, but has taken in only about 1,500 refugees. The Obama administration recently pledged to accept an additional 10,000, but it behooves this country to accept far more as we urge allies in Europe, the Middle East, and elsewhere to do likewise. Doing so is consistent with U.S. values and with past practice: The United States accepted hundreds of

thousands of refugees from Cuba, Vietnam, Northern Iraq, and Kosovo in recent decades.

Accepting more refugees as part of a significant international effort at burden-sharing would also benefit our national interest, primarily by easing conditions in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Given the chaos gripping the Middle East, any investment in these allies' stability merits careful consideration. While any refugees should undergo appropriate vetting to ensure that they pose no threat to U.S. security, those from Syria and Iraq should not be regarded with special fear or apprehension. It would be a bitter irony if those fleeing from the Islamic State's barbarity and Bashar al-Assad's barrel bombs were blamed for the crimes of their tormentors.

That the U.S. and Europe have been woefully unprepared to cope with the wave of migration is symptomatic of the Obama administration's broader attitude toward the Syrian conflict: bide our time and hope it goes away or can be contained. Together, the U.S. and allies should more decisively seek to address the Syrian conflict itself, not merely its symptoms. The refugee crisis vividly illustrates that this means taking action against not just ISIS but also the Assad regime; the refugees are not merely the byproduct of general conflict in Syria but a key element of Mr. Assad's brutal and cynical strategy. Assad policy seems to be to drive out millions of Sunnis so that his Alawite minority group comes to represent a much larger portion of Syria's population.

The recent Russian military buildup in Syria appears designed to protect Mr. Assad and to provide him and Moscow with leverage against the U.S. and its allies in any diplomatic talks on Syria's future. Maddening though this may be, it reflects the reality of how diplomacy is conducted: not merely through talks and conferences but also by creating facts on the ground that set the stage for deliberations. While Russia's presence constrains U.S. options in Syria, it does not vitiate them or render us impotent.

Rather than being cowed by Vladimir Putin's gambit, the U.S. and its allies should continue to insist that any diplomatic solution to the Syrian conflict require Mr. Assad to step down and a representative government to succeed him. And we should reinforce this position with action. A good place to start would be the creation of "safe zones" in Syria that could offer a haven to refugees and places to work with the Syrian opposition. Maintaining such zones would require a significant Western contribution, including air support and perhaps limited personnel on the ground. But as the refugee crisis and ISIS-inspired terror attacks demonstrate, inaction has not spared the U.S. from the costs of Syria's conflict.

U.S. agreement and contribution to creating such zones in Syria should be tied to our regional allies agreeing to provide financial and military support -- including in the form of ground forces able to help police the areas. Just as important, our allies must agree to refrain from supporting extremists and, instead, act jointly with the U.S. to channel support and aid to responsible elements of the Syrian opposition. Together, we should redouble efforts to stanch the flow of men, money, and materiel to Mr. Assad and ISIS, which prosper in perverse symbiosis with one another.

Regrettably, the refugee crisis is likely the first of many reverberations of the breakdown of Syria and Iraq that we will have to cope with in the years to come. With earlier action, we probably could have prevented it. But it is not too late to reduce the magnitude of the crisis or to stem further fallout from these conflicts by acting more decisively to resolve them.

Michael Singh is the Lane-Swig Senior Fellow and managing director at The Washington Institute. Elliott Abrams is a senior fellow for Middle Eastern studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. This article originally appeared on [the Wall Street Journal blog "Think Tank."](http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/09/23/the-key-to-resolving-syrias-refugee-crisis-ending-its-war/) (<http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/09/23/the-key-to-resolving-syrias-refugee-crisis-ending-its-war/>) ❖

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