

## **Oh, Child Left Behind: The Next “Lost Generation”**

Following World War I there was a profound sense that Britain was wounded. The nation was not only pained for those who had died but also for those who had survived and yet would never be whole again. A term was coined, “The Lost Generation,” attributed to Gertrude Stein, which described the loss, in one manner or another, of so many of Britain’s promising youth. These, the would-have-been writers, doctors, and scientists of the country, those who perished or whom war had otherwise deprived of their potential.

Syria, a nation 5 years into a bitter civil war, is about to experience its own, “Lost Generation.” Half of Syria’s 4.9 million refugees are children. Without access to education, healthcare, and hope, how will these children restore Syria to the relatively affluent middle-class nation it once was? The paper examines the state of Syria’s refugees, how the current crisis came to be, and the ways in which the U.S. and other nations should rethink the nature and future implications of these kinds of humanitarian crises. (Stern)

Today, the largest generation of children in history is growing up having known only insecurity. Many of these children’s earliest experiences are the desperate escapes of their families from untenable and often life-threatening conditions. They find themselves far from home, herded into ‘temporary’ encampments with no schools or other semblance of normal childhood life. Some camps have seen new generations born, children growing up never having known any other kind of existence. All of these children represent the future artists, poets, scientists, and doctors of their homelands. Many are growing up experiencing near total insecurity. Refugee children are exposed to frequent physical

violence, receive uncertain and inconsistent legal protections, and have limited access to food, medicine, and education.

While largely (and appropriately) viewed as a humanitarian crisis, that perspective is limited by its immediate focus on dealing solely with the current state of distressed peoples, without necessarily resolving causation or future repercussions of displacement. In order to conceive the full magnitude of the crises displacement represents, particularly regarding children, one needs to see displacement not only as a humanitarian issue but also as a symptom of global social dysfunction and, consequently, as a potential driver of future social, economic, and political instability around the world.

Refugees, those individuals forced to flee their native countries, as well as those displaced in their own countries (Internally Displaced Persons, or IDPs) are an enormous and growing issue for world stability. Though some data shows displaced or migrant people as a percentage of global population has remained relatively stable in the last few years, the actual total number has doubled in the last 25 years (Castles & Miller 6). There are twice as many displaced people in the world today than during President Reagan's first term in office.

The number of migrants globally, including refugees, IDPs and asylum seekers, is approximately 65 million people. Putting this number into perspective, United Nations Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees, Kelly Clements, uses two large prominent U.S. states to describe the size of the crisis, "...65 million, the combined population of California and Texas, forced to flee from persecution war, and other threats to fundamental rights, *half of these 65 Million are kids*" [emphasis added] (Clements, 2017).

Alexandra Bilak is a director at the Norwegian Refugee Council and has spent decades in the field assisting refugees. Though her current work focuses on IDPs, she still stresses the importance of a deeper perspective of forced migrations. “Look at the wider displacement picture. There’s a sense in which the crisis we are seeing today and the refugee arrivals we’ve seen in Europe are very much the endpoint of a crisis rather than a starting point. They’re the symptom of something that started somewhere else.” Bilak is referring to the Syrian refugees who swarmed Europe over the last five years, the result of a vicious and protracted civil war. In addition to her strong advocacy for the immediate needs of Syrians in Jordan, Turkey, and within Syria itself, Bilak also draws attention to the underlying causes of migration. In this instance, “Something that started somewhere else,” started in Syria shortly after the events of the Egyptian Arab Spring movement (Bilak, 2017).

Bashar al-Assad inherited the Presidency of Syria in June of 2000. The first decade of his presidency saw great strides for Syria’s reintegration with the global community, including the opening dialogues with Turkey and Iraq, and meeting with US high officials (including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice) for the first time in many years. This period of the younger Assad’s presidency starkly contrasts with its second decade. In 2010 the US levied sanctions against Syria for their support of terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah. In March of 2011, likely inspired by the Arab Spring uprising in Egypt, Syrian citizens began a pro-democratic movement in Syria. National security forces immediately begin attacking and killing protestors, quickly escalating to using tanks in suburban areas to quell protests. By 2012, in an undeniable admission of

outright civil war, Assad's regime began dropping bombs on Syrian cities, attempting to eliminate the coalesced opposition forces.

In December of 2012 the US, Gulf States, and others, "Formally recognize (the) opposition National Coalition as a 'legitimate representative' of Syrian people" (BBC). In 2016, a Syrian research group estimated that at least 470,000 Syrians had died thus far in the conflict; the number of deaths has inarguably increased since then (Hudson, 2016). The people of Syria, many accustomed to a middle-class existence not unlike that of many Americans, began fleeing their homes en masse. Many, initially, fled to those areas of Syria that were not in immediate danger. Later, many of those same people crossed Syria's borders with the intention of rebuilding normal lives, owning homes, resuming their careers, building families, either in neighboring countries or in Europe.

There were many factors that tipped Syria over the breaking point into civil war. Some, like the success of the Arab Spring, were plainly evident while others were decades in the making, and some even longer. Beginning in 1998, the entire Levant region (encompassing coastal nations from Syria to the northeastern tip of Egypt) had begun experiencing its most significant drought in the last 900 years. The drought, which peaked between 2007-2010, likely contributed to the social unrest that led to both the Arab Spring and Syrian civil war. Findings published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* linked Syria's conflict with Climate Change. "For Syria, a country marked by poor governance and unsustainable agricultural and environmental policies, the drought had a catalytic effect, contributing to political unrest." Part of the research included field interviews. "A displaced Syrian farmer was asked if this was about the drought, and she replied, "Of course. The drought and

unemployment were important in pushing people toward revolution. When the drought happened, we could handle it for two years, and then we said, 'It's enough'" (Kelley, et. al., 2015).

The perfect storm of instability that precipitated the Syrian refugee crisis has left millions of Syrian children without healthcare, physical or emotional protection, or access to a fundamental driver of peace and prosperity, education. Currently, the single largest Syrian refugee camp, based in neighboring Jordan and called Za'Atari, houses nearly 80,000 people (Nations). These camps are rarely the temporary shelters they were initially intended to be. Paul James, director and Professor of the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University (Australia), who gave the keynote address at the 2017 Camden Conference on Refugees and Global Migration, pointedly addressed longstanding refugee camps. Some camps have persisted for decades and the families living within them have become multigenerational with grandchildren being born into the near internment conditions. These camps are not short-term solutions, but rather, "...are becoming a way of life" (James, 2017).

Conflict and the absence of hope created by untenable living conditions breeds discontent that may result in individuals adopting radical views or embracing religious extremism if no other solutions are available to them. In a region rife with sectarian violence, the segregation of ethnic groups and the inequality of rights and opportunity that camps institutionalize pose long-term security concerns for both host countries and global security. Alexandra Bilak, in her presentation to the 2017 Camden Conference, addressed the comparable stresses of internal displacement saying,

Protracted and unresolved internal displacement actually forces people to seek protection and assistance elsewhere. And as we have seen that just shifts problems on to other countries and it puts a huge strain on the resources of host countries. More generally, I think the argument, the most important that has to be made here, the unresolved internal displacement creates a viscous cycle of crises and vulnerability and it lays down the conditions for future crisis and more displacement. (Bilak, 2017)

Humanitarian aid and security are not a zero-sum proposition. Increases in aid intended to educate and otherwise facilitate future self-sufficiency along with increased acceptance of asylum seekers are both anti-terrorism and national security investments. In 2015, former U.S. National Security Advisor to President Clinton, Samuel Berger, advocated that the U.S. should direct funds intended for “humanitarian aid in active war zones” to areas that, unaddressed, will likely become concerns for U.S. and global security. There is a danger in ignoring the humanitarian crises that exist. Relying on the United Nations and NGOs alone to resolve the intolerable living conditions of refugees allows these potential breeding grounds for discontentment and radicalization to persist too long. The use of military funds to aid in refugee relief is forward thinking in its approach to domestic security and global peace. In Berger’s words, the U.S. should provide, “...basic relief in countries likely to become conflict zones or terrorist havens if their governments are unable to meet the basic needs of their people.” (Berger, 2015) This concern is not just espoused by those focused on domestic security. Articulated another way, by the UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees, “Can we afford to let displacement fester and morph into something more sinister and dangerous?” (Clements, 2017). Or, in the words

of The United Nations Children's Fund's (UNICEF) Caryl Stern, "If we do not engage them, others will" (Stern, 2015). As left/right politics divides more of the globe, particularly in regard to refugees and humanitarian obligations, this perspective, that resolving conflicts and supporting displaced peoples supports national security interests, could bring both sides of the ideological spectrum together to address these crises.

One of the most powerful tools that could be made available to refugee children is education. Investment in the education of refugee children provides them the greatest opportunity for future success while reducing the likelihood of their future recruitment by radical groups. According to data collected by UNICEF, at least 2.7 million Syrian refugees have not had any form of schooling in more than three years. Caryl M. Stern, President and CEO of the U.S. Fund for UNICEF, states with powerful clarity, "Education is one of the best tools for breaking the cycle of poverty and devastation. It is the only way to enable these children to gain the skills they need to thrive and support themselves—their only chance at a real future." UNICEF created its No Lost Generation initiative to provide educational and psychosocial support to Syrian and Iraqi refugee children encamped in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, and Turkey. The No Lost Generation program has been operating continuously since 2013 without ever being completely funded. (UNICEF)

This lack of education, and of opportunity, also prohibits nations, both host and home, from maximizing their potential economic growth. Speaking to the fundamental production of human needs, Alexandra Bilak said, "If you think about drops in agricultural production, generations of school dropouts, it means that development itself is undermined, it's suspended, it's delayed" (Bilak, 2017). It is not just the individual

whose ability to thrive is diminished but the fractured nations' ability to thrive as well. Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, Dr. Maha Yahya, estimates 48% of Syrian refugee primary school children are not receiving any form of education, and her assessment of the children's current life and future outlook is bleak, saying children in many camps have, "Nothing to fill their days and very little hope for their future" (Yahya, 2017).

This new potential "Lost Generation" of young migrants around the globe is too great a challenge for any one country or organization to solve alone. Kelly Clements, while speaking to the moral imperative of a collective global response to humanitarian crises at the 2017 Camden Conference, points to a time in history when the combination of world powers overcame the last great age of refugee crises. She said,

The United States understood well that military cooperation was insufficient if not coupled with other forms of solidarity. We know that the Marshall plan injected massive resources into reconstructing economies devastated by the war, and a European push for regional unity helped secure peace through economic and political cooperation. This has contributed to unmistakable peace and prosperity throughout the world.

But it's more than humanitarian, because it also helps our own long-term interests and stability in human rights; our collective responsibility thus appeals to our moral sense and to our selfish concerns for our own security and safety if we take the long view. And propelled by these interests I'm hopeful this ideal will endure because solidarity is more than sentimental, it is strategic. (Clements, 2017)

Conflict, inequality, and inequity—each of these leads to displacement's varied forms. Generations of displaced, aggrieved, under-educated, unemployed refugees and IDPs will likely lead to a self-perpetuating cycle of conflict and continued displacement. Climate change, wealth distribution, authoritarianism, and religious extremism are just some of the challenges the United States will need to work in conjunction with global partners to resolve.

The only action the U.S. should take unilaterally is the public support and acceptance of asylum seekers, recognizing they are first and foremost victims of violence. To do so would embrace a heritage of global goodwill that the U.S. has been noted for in the past, for welcoming the helpless and the hurting. Supporting the healthy development of the next generation(s) of the world's most vulnerable populations will be crucial to developing long-term global stability, security, and prosperity.

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