

> Fostering Education and Opportunities for Refugees: An Update

By **Anne C. Richard**, *Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees & Migration (2012–2017); Perry World House Visiting Fellow, 2016–2017*

As the Obama Administration prepared for the Leaders’ Summit on Refugees slated for autumn 2016, National Security Council and State Department staff in Washington and at the U.S. Mission to the UN in New York debated how best to structure the event. The Summit would be modeled on a Peacekeeping Summit the U.S. Government had organized the year before, a meeting the President considered a success.¹ Attendance of foreign leaders had been predicated on their governments committing to sizable new contributions in three areas: money, troops and equipment. It had generated significant pledges to UN peacekeeping. But in applying the concept to the humanitarian sphere, it was harder to divide needs into three easy-to-describe baskets. One clear need was for financial contributions to UN humanitarian appeals that were severely underfunded. These funds would help refugees but also other victims of conflict and natural disasters. The United States asked relatively wealthy countries to take refugees in—either through the UN refugee agency’s (UNHCR) formal resettlement program or other paths of entry, such as scholarships or humanitarian visas. A third category needed to be devised to encourage the countries that already hosted refugees to do more.

What to ask of the refugee-hosting countries? This was a delicate question in that these were countries that had already been doing much over years and in some cases decades. While a G-20 country like Turkey could afford to build two dozen well-appointed camps for Syrian refugees along its Southern border, the other top hosting countries are Pakistan (1.6 million refugees), Lebanon (1.1 million), Iran (979,000), Ethiopia (736,000) and Jordan (664,000).² More than 80% of refugee-hosting countries are not rich. Even when they allow international organizations and aid agencies to run camps for the refugees, developing countries still experience demands on their resources as large camps

have an impact on security, the environment and local economies. Dadaab camp (actually a sprawling complex of several camps) in Kenya near its border with Somalia, is the world’s largest with nearly 260,000 Somalis registered as refugees.³ From an empty patch of earth, Za’atri camp, in northern Jordan housed roughly 150,000 refugees at its peak in 2013 and became, at that point, Jordan’s fifth or sixth largest city, before shrinking in size.

Experts also recognize that refugees no longer live primarily in camps. UNHCR estimates that, throughout the world, the percentage of refugees who live outside of camps is 72%.⁴ Refugees try to make it on their own by pursuing opportunities in cities, renting apartments or squatting in decrepit buildings or in informal collection of tents pitched on vacant lots.

In talking to humanitarian leaders and the refugees themselves, we became convinced that more had to be done to help refugees not just survive their flight and the early days of their exile but also deal with the long years of living in limbo that could follow. Refugees wanted opportunities to get jobs and earn a living without fear of exploitation, arrest and penalties and to send children to school. Some needed to finish their own education or gain skills to become self-sufficient. This certainly appeared to be the case with so many young, able-bodied men and boys migrating to Europe in 2016 in search of opportunities. With 2.3 million Syrian children out of school (1.75 million were inside Syria; 530,000 Syrian children were refugees in other countries), UNHCR and UNICEF feared a “lost generation” in the Middle East.⁵ Globally, in 22 countries affected by crisis, nearly 24 million children living in crisis zones were out of school—or one in four school-aged children.⁶ And, because so many crisis situations were dragging on for years without resolution, expecting young people and

This paper reflects the individual views of the author.

families to wait until conflicts were resolved before they could be educated really meant that they would miss out entirely and never attend school. “If we do not give education to these little children—who are now homeless and suffering from child labour,” 16-year old education advocate Malala Yousafzai warned in a 2014 talk, “these children can then in future become terrorists.”⁷ Yousafzai was just one of many concerned that without education, refugee children would be susceptible to radicalization and recruitment into terrorist causes.

For this reason, the “third basket” of the Leaders’ Summit focused on initiatives that would boost education and self-sufficiency. The statement of the sponsors read, in part:

*Altogether, at least 17 governments participating in today’s Summit have committed to strengthen and adapt their policies so that more refugees can attend school and/or lawfully work. The commitments announced today will help ensure that one million children have improved access to education and that one million more refugees have opportunities to pursue opportunities to legally access work. Noting the importance of fostering an environment of inclusion, as applicable, we are pleased that so many countries have made commitments to help facilitate these goals and recognize that, for purposes of implementation, refugee host countries will continue to require sustainable donor support.*⁸

In addition to this focus, there were related initiatives unveiled at the time of the Summit. UN Special Envoy and former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown, UNICEF and other UN agencies, donor governments and NGOs created Education Cannot Wait, a fund to help children receive an education during crises. The World Bank set up a Global Crisis Response Platform to provide grants and loans to help low- and middle-income countries that host large numbers of refugees. Earlier, at the February 4, 2016 London Summit, Jordan had agreed to a compact with the EU to allow Syrian refugees to work in certain sectors in exchange for increased European investment in Jordan. Lebanon sought a similar compact.

What has happened since? In the United States, a new Administration took office in the U.S. and quickly issued an executive order to halt refugee resettlement to the United States for several months, reduce the overall number of refugees allowed in, and drastically restrict entry from seven majority-Muslim countries. The courts blocked the original Executive Order and a revised

version issued some weeks later—actions that the Trump Administration has indicated it intends to appeal. It likely has the authority to reduce the overall number of refugees resettled in the U.S.—lowering total number of arrivals from nearly 85,000 in FY 2016 to 50,000 in FY 2017. In March, it proposed a Federal budget that would cut funding for the State Department and USAID (by nearly 32% on average), including cutting budget accounts that fund international humanitarian agencies. There was little detail—the U.S. government would fund “high priority areas,” ask other countries to pay “their fair share” and challenge relief organizations to become more efficient and effective.⁹ The new Administration also is moving very slowly to nominate candidates for political appointments. As of April 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is the only Senate-confirmed appointee of the Trump Administration serving at the State Department. USAID has zero. Career staff serving in acting capacities lead the key humanitarian offices at State and USAID. And the Breitbart website was calling for those career staff with oversight of the refugee resettlement program to be removed from their posts.¹⁰

In sum, initial actions of the Trump Administration were contrary to Obama Administration policies for aiding refugees and contrary to the generous spirit of the Leaders’ Summit. One exception to this trend is the U.S. announcement, on April 5, 2017, of another tranche of humanitarian aid to Syria. Under Secretary Thomas Shannon—the State Department’s most senior career diplomat—led the U.S. delegation to the fifth pledging conference for aid to the Syria crisis in Brussels and he announced \$566 million in aid, an amount in keeping with the U.S. track record of making significant contributions to humanitarian causes throughout the year.

Named the “Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region Conference,” the Brussels conference was sponsored by the EU, UK, Germany, Norway, Kuwait and the United Nations and is reported to have raised \$6 billion.¹¹ Evidence that the Syrian regime had used chemical weapons a day earlier to kill scores of civilians, including children, in the town of Khan Shaykhu in Idlib province overshadowed the work of the conference. And, of course, the conference was focused primarily on the crisis in and around Syria at a time when there are many other uprooted people around the world.

Will there be a follow-on Leaders Summit to again bring attention to and help all of the world’s refugees in September 2017? While no formal announcement has

been made, preparations are said to have begun in earnest to reconvene world leaders on migration and refugee issues at the UN in September. The Netherlands may step forward to host an event with Italy—but this has yet to be decided and may not be a direct follow-up to the Leaders’ Summit.

Are we making progress in affording refugees the opportunities they seek—to send their children to school, to acquire skills and livelihoods, and work to support themselves and their families? At the April 2017 conference in Brussels, UNHCR Deputy High Commissioner Kelly T. Clements took the opportunity to summarize some of the progress made related to the crisis in Syria: “there have been important advances: policy shifts with regard to education and employment opportunities, improved access to international financing and preferential trade terms for host countries, and a growing convergence between humanitarian and development action.” Indeed, the Government of Jordan seemed particularly astute in building on commitments made at the London 2016 conference and maximizing a mix of traditional grant funding and newer mechanisms, such as the concessionary financing facility administered by the World Bank.¹² In terms of fostering employment in the region, a joint report sponsored by a number of countries, the World Food Program (WFP), International Labour Organization (ILO) and UN Development Programme (UNDP) released at the Brussels conference reported only “very modest” progress toward creating jobs, but did represent smart collaboration among UN agencies and included “critical guidance” on how to create new economic opportunities and expand existing ones in six countries hosting Syrian refugees.¹³ In the area of education, UNICEF provided data that showed progress in enrolling children in school—but also highlighted the very large percentages of Syrian children still left out.¹⁴

How can academic and policy institutions and other

leaders contribute to these efforts and efforts that go beyond the Syria crisis and help refugees in other parts of the world? In order to push back on the notion that refugees are solely a burden to countries that host them, more must be done to build the evidence base for the short-term and long-term impact that refugees have on economies. Such an analysis could usefully examine the economies of the neighboring countries that allow refugees to cross their borders, and the economies of countries that choose to take them through UNHCR’s resettlement program. Advocates maintain that refugees have an overall positive impact in the places they are allowed to work—by spending their salaries, paying taxes, opening businesses, revitalizing neighborhoods and investing. A May 2016 study by economist Philippe Legrain intended for a European audience found that “investing one euro in welcoming refugees can yield nearly two euros in economic benefits within five years.”¹⁵ Critics claim that refugees compete for jobs with locals, work off the books, depress wages, and rely on government handouts. Overseas, the arrival of UN and other members of the “humanitarian community” of aid agencies in areas near crisis zones can boost employment opportunities but also distorts local economies as rents for office space and residences rise and aid workers distribute imported food to refugees in camps. Research can help quantify the actual costs and benefits of hosting refugees, how best to target investments, and how to make the most of the promise and contributions of refugees.

We need to find ways to get more refugee and displaced children in school, and to do so without disadvantaging poor children in countries that host refugees. A number of organizations seek to get more children in school. These include the Center for Universal Education at Brookings, the Global Partnership for Education and the Global Business Coalition for Education. A number of other worthy organizations and initiatives focus specifically on educating displaced children, including international organizations (UNICEF, UNHCR), NGOs

Syrian children out of school:	2014/15 School Year	2015/16 School Year
Inside Syria	2.12 million (40%)	1.75 million (32%)
Syrian Refugee Children	0.63 million (45%)	0.53 million (34%)

(e.g., Save the Children), the No Lost Generation initiative, and the Education Cannot Wait Fund. Staff in the State Department's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration worked with students at George Washington University to start a "No Lost Generation" student group on campus. This idea has spread; there are now fifty university groups in the United States and three other countries. University Presidents and administrators who have spoken out against the travel ban in President Trump's Executive Order on refugees and immigrants could also devote their energies to promoting education of refugees overseas.

The private sector has a role to play. Indeed, some in the private sector appear eager to help refugees. The same day as the Leaders' Summit, President Obama met with private sector leaders at the UN who had made significant commitments to aid refugees. These were among a number involved in a White House "Partnership for Refugees" that was announced (as a "Call to Action") in June 2016, managed by USA for UNHCR and Accenture, and then, in November, spun off to the Tent Foundation (a charitable endeavor begun by Hamdi Ulukaya, the founder of Chobani Yogurt company). Tent had earlier announced the "Tent Partnership for Refugees" at the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos, Switzerland in January 2016 as a platform for businesses that wanted to aid refugees through giving (contributions of money, goods or services), hiring refugees, and "shaping" supply chains (sourcing products and services that originate with refugees/companies that hire refugees). Tent is also making grants to organizations that will spur the social integration of refugees and undertake projects to help match refugees with jobs.

Private sector interest did not end with the conclusion of the Obama Administration. In early February 2017, more than 120 tech companies moved swiftly to join a court brief against President Trump's executive order on refugees and immigrants.¹⁵

Many innovators associated with U.S. high tech companies also want to lend their ideas and know-how to humanitarian efforts, but not every need can be solved by a nifty high-tech solution or app. Tent aims to continue convening private sector companies on these issues, but such an effort would also benefit from the involvement of business schools and NGOs that can evaluate the most useful contributions. The most successful private sector contributions tend to build on the firm's established business model matched with NGOs that steer contributions to address actual needs.

Despite changes on the U.S. political scene, the number of displaced people around the world continues at record levels, protracted crises grind on and the pressing need for help for conflict victims has not lessened. If at all possible, the Leaders' Summit on Refugees should once again be held to highlight actions to date, including in crisis zones outside of the region around Syria, and spur progress. Humanitarian leaders need to follow-up on expressions of support for refugees—from politicians, businesspeople, celebrities, academics, journalists and members of the public—and convert noble sentiments into action, especially action that will shore up the capacity of countries hosting refugees, help refugees pursue livelihoods and get more displaced children to school.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Not everyone viewed the peacekeeping summit as an unqualified success. Some in senior levels of the UN remembered the bruising diplomatic negotiations that had preceded the 2015 Summit as the U.S. government insisted on promises of increased contributions in advance and turned away some countries. They feared a repeat of the “pay to play” model, but this discomfort did not derail U.S. plans and Secretary General Ban was a co-sponsor of the 2016 Summit.
- ² www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html.
- ³ <http://data.unhcr.org/horn-of-africa/country.php?id=110>
- ⁴ “Hitting Rock bottom: How 2016 Became the Worst Year for Syria’s Children”, UNICEF, March 2017, childrenofsyria.info.
- ⁵ UNICEF press release of 12 January 2016. https://www.unicef.org/media/media_89782.html.
- ⁶ Remarks to Connected Women Summit reported in HuffPost UK www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/03/04/malala-yousafzai-syrian-refugee-camps-terrorism_n_4895670.html.
- ⁷ <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/20/joint-statement-leaders-summit-refugees>.
- ⁸ https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/whitehouse.gov/files/omb/budget/fy2018/2018_blueprint.pdf. See pages 33–34.
- ⁹ www.breitbart.com/big-government/2017/02/18/top-ten-holdover-obama-bureaucrats-president-trump-can-fire-today/ by Leahy, Michael Patrick; 18 February 2017.
- ¹⁰ www.unocha.org/syria, “Syria: Forty-one donors pledge a combined U.S. \$6 billion for 2017 in immediate and longer-term support,” 5 April 2017.
- ¹¹ Jordanembassyus.org/news/donors-pledge-around-40-billion-aid-syrian-refugees-hosts.
- ¹² Report entitled “Jobs Make the Difference: Expanding Economic Opportunities for Syrian Refugees and Host Communities” launched on 5 April 2017 and available at www.jobsmakethedifference.org.
- ¹³ UNICEF pamphlet “Preparing for the Future of Children and Youth in Syria and the Region through Education: London One Year On” April 2017 available at: childrenofsyria.info/category/resources.
- ¹⁴ “Refugees Work: A Humanitarian Investment that Yields Economic Dividends” by Philippe LeGrain, May 2016, tent.org and opennetwork.org.
- ¹⁵ “Tech Companies File Legal Brief Against Trump’s Immigration Order” by Mark Bergen and Sarah Frier, 5 February 2017 www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-02-06/twitter-netflix-to-file-brief-opposing-trump-immigration-order.