

## The Ethics of Refugee Acceptance: A Morale Obligation or “Not My Country Not My Problem”

### Background

The Civil War in Syria has wrought a crisis of epic proportions and is the worst humanitarian disaster of our time. The conflict has its roots in the Arab Spring and the subsequent attempt to oust the autocratic regime of Bashar al-Assad from power. Starting in March of 2011<sup>1</sup> the war is now in its sixth year. It has destabilized the region and brought untold human suffering to the civilian populace. The most current data has the death toll at 470,000, the externally displaced diaspora at 4,900,000, and the internally displaced population at 6,300,000.<sup>2</sup> These are remarkable numbers in and of themselves before one even considers that these three numbers total 11,670,000, which is over half the pre-war Syrian population of 22,000,000.<sup>3</sup> Almost twice as many Syrians are dead or displaced now as the total number of Jews that were exterminated by the Nazi regime during World War II.<sup>4</sup> The conflict has allowed for the freedom of maneuver, expansion, and emboldening of religious extremist organizations, most notably Daesh (also known as ISIS, ISIL, and The Islamic State). The war has pitted the policies and strategic objectives of the United States (US) and Russia against each other. The conflict has allowed the two regional powers of Iran and Saudi Arabia to vie for regional hegemony using the conflict as a proxy war. Global trade markets have been affected, flagrant human rights violations have been committed, and no reasonable end is in sight. The international community is at odds with itself. Sensible and rational people argue both for and against different means of involvement, engagement, and conflict resolution.

The situation is complex and not just difficult to understand, but practically impossible to solve in simple terms due to so many competing and conflicting interests. While statesman,

politicians, and other significant international leaders waffle and fail to establish anything close to a concrete plan of action, innocent noncombatants continue to die and the region is further destabilized. This state of affairs is counterproductive to every global citizen and does nothing but fuel the flames of religious zealotry bent on theocratic autocracy in direct conflict to the secular values of liberty, equality, and democracy. Complex problems are not impossible to solve. Complexity merrily requires an understanding of the system, how to deconstruct it, what touch points affect others, and how to influence those points in order to achieve the desired results. A true solution to the Civil War in Syria will require an international joint effort and whole of government approach in order to stabilize the region, bring back rule of law, and reestablish personal integrity rights for the local population. Developing and implementing a solution to this Syrian refugee crisis will not in and of itself solve this complex problem, but it can remove a significant amount of stress on an already weakened and fractured environment.

## Discussion

Ethics is defined as, “the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.”<sup>5</sup> Ethics is merely the means to an end or tools we use in order to try to frame the world. They help us face the dilemmas of life and subsequently help determine how we to act. Humanity attempts to quantify and categorize right and wrong behaviors and thoughts through ancient texts, scholars, reason, logic, codes of conduct, law, cultural norms, and pragmatism. There are many forms of ethical codes that espouse different values, for different times, and for different reasons such as cultural relativism. That concept “...maintains that morality is grounded in the approval of one's society - and not simply in the preferences of individual people... and hold(s) instead that moral values in fact change from society to society

throughout time and throughout the world.”<sup>6</sup> This concept is arguable very true. The country and world we live in today is vastly different than it was in every preceding generation.

When my German ancestors immigrated to Illinois in the 1830s half of the US considered the ownership of a person as their property perfectly moral, acceptable, and just. The Bible does not condemn slavery at all, but conversely compels slaves to obey their masters. Arguments for slavery and indentured servitude in Illinois were not completely nullified until, “1841 (when) a prominent but largely unknown lawyer and Whig politician, Abraham Lincoln, argued a case before the Illinois Supreme Court in which he was able to establish the important precedent that under the Illinois constitution all persons were presumed to be free.”<sup>7</sup> When my ancestors from the Balkans immigrated to Missouri in the 1910s half of the population of the US still lacked many of the basic rights and liberties we now take for granted. It wasn’t until 1920 when this demographic, women, was first allowed to exercise their newfound right of self-determination and allowed to vote when the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution of the US was ratified.<sup>8</sup>

My grandparents grew up in an America where much of it included a government imposed system of second class citizenship on anyone that was not white, further subjugating an entire people based on the color of their skin. It wasn’t until my parents’ generation that women were able to seek more equality in the workplace and at home. It wasn’t until their adolescence that “the American Psychiatric Association voted to remove ‘homosexuality’ from the second edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-II), which meant that homosexuality was officially no longer considered a disorder in itself.”<sup>9</sup> It was only seven years before my first child was born and only after extreme political pressure that Bob Jones University finally removed its ban on interracial dating.<sup>10</sup> My children and their generation will be the first to experience a US where they can serve in any job in the military and marry whoever

they want to regardless of their gender. These slow, but progressive achievements in human dignity, self-determination, and liberty were made possible by the unchaining of archaic cultural norms and tyrannical interpretations of religious texts from society in the pursuit of a more liberated and less bigoted system of governance and culture.

The US system of governance is secular. The US Constitution forbids the establishment of religion at all levels of governance to include legislation that is based on or the result of excessive government entanglement in religious dogma. The legal system of the US is conducive to all religions and cultures insofar as the behavior of a person does not interfere with or infringe on another person's constitutionally protected rights. It can be said that in the US you can "do what you will as long as it harms no one" with few exceptions to include the prevention of "self-harm" such as in the case of drug use. The constitution enshrines the protection of personal rights and liberties to include speech, assembly, religion, due process, life, and liberty from slavery and indentured servitude.<sup>11</sup> As the US and much of the liberal and secular minded world has moved forward in time, the expansion of liberty, equality, and peace has followed suit.

That statement is not true for much of the rest of the world and especially with regards to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The MENA has a long and tumultuous history of autocratic regimes both secular and theocratic. Small blips in time on the radar of the MENA that represent democracy and other liberal tenets, are quickly overshadowed by military coup, religious extremism, despotism, dictatorship, or a combination of all of the above. Peaceful transitions of power except within families are hardly existent. It is within this context that the Arab Spring began. Across the MENA discontent and grievance grew and largely youthful protests developed against oppressive and liberty restricting regimes. A combination of a more networked, educated, and disenfranchised generation cried out for more liberty and opportunity.

It is from within this framework that we must now peer deeper into the disaster of Syria. Syria is a predominately Islamic worshipping and Arabic speaking state, but composed of several different ethnicities, religions, language groups, and varying degrees of religiosity. It is ruled by Bashar al-Assad who took power in 2000 after his father Hafez a-Assad and then President of Syria died. There are competing interests within the conflict. The varying groups include pro and anti-government forces. There exists theocracy minded as well as liberal seeking factions. Some groups are separatists while others are revolutionary. The result is a war torn country with few that have not been affected while most have lost much if not everything. Conflict forces people to make one of three decisions. They must choose whether to stay and fight, stay and avoid fighting, or leave. No one wants to leave their home, their family, their possessions, and their stability. Few people chose to put their life on the line and fight unless they feel utterly compelled to. It is not a choice many make lightly. The cost benefit analysis must be great enough to leave a rationale person no real choice when they either chose to take up arms or abandon all they know for a faraway land and a hope for a better tomorrow. Few usually choose to leave and fewer still have the means to leave, but in a situation like Syria where the conflict has gone on for so long and the destruction is so epic that the rationale choice continues to sway more and more towards leaving with every passing day for those that are left. What does the empirical evidence tell us about refugee flows? Is this purely a humanitarian issue or a broader security concern with regards to Syria's' neighbors, a regional problem, or even a global instability issue?

Recent academic research and findings show that the migration of refugees does cause conflict. Idean Salehyan states that there are four main causes of conflict or friction with regards to refugees.

“First, refugee migration can inflict an economic burden on host countries... Second, refugees may entail negative public health consequences for their host countries... Third, refugees may upset the ethnic balance in their host countries through what may be thought of as a "demographic" externality... Finally, refugee flows may directly affect the security and stability of the host country by contributing to organized armed conflict on the host's territory... Along with the refugees themselves, foreign fighters, arms, and ideologies that contribute to violence may stream across the border.”<sup>12</sup>

He dissects the factors and variables that are tied to a refugee population and explains how those factors and not the actual refugees themselves are the cause for conflict. He eventually deduces that his work,

... finds that both refugee-sending and refugee-receiving states are more likely to initiate militarized disputes. More generally, the issues and actors in civil wars frequently span national boundaries and become part of a regional security nexus, blurring firm distinctions between domestic and international conflict.”<sup>13</sup>

He finds that the presence of refugee populations does in fact increase the probability of conflict between states, but insofar as those refugee populations are tied to other factors that contribute to conflict. He found that refugee producing states and refugee receiving states are both more likely to engage in conflict to stem the flow of refugees for a multitude of reasons.

Idean Salehyan teamed up with Kristian Gleditsch in a different article, which dealt with refugees as a cause of civil war. They detail a similar list of factors that they state can cause refugee populations to increase the probability of conflict. “Refugees can change the ethnic composition of the host state; exacerbate economic competition; bring with them arms, combatants, and ideologies that are conducive to violence; and mobilize opposition directed at their country of origin as well as their host country.”<sup>14</sup> They argue that refugee populations can be causal with regards to regional violence clusters, which often is a result of conflict “bleed over.” They argue that conflicts do not just cause refugees, but that refugees can cause conflicts. “Thus population movements are an important factor contributing to the regional clustering of

violence and the diffusion of conflict.”<sup>15</sup> They do caution though that the vast majority of refugees are not violent, do not seek violence, and do not engage in violence. “The vast majority of the world's refugees never directly engage in political violence but are rather the unfortunate victims of it. Furthermore, most refugee hosts never experience armed violence.”<sup>16</sup>

The key distinction in this article is the argument that the key enabler of conflict with regards to refugee populations is the proximity of those refugees to their former host country.

...we believe the most important factor in raising the risk of conflict is the presence of refugees from neighboring countries. Refugees from distant countries are less likely to have ethnic kin in the host country. They are also less likely to mobilize militarily, bring in arms, and concentrate in large numbers in particular areas. Accordingly, we do not expect the risk of civil war in the United States to be affected by the influx of refugees from Somalia, but Somali refugees could increase the risk of civil conflict in Ethiopia.<sup>17</sup>

Their analysis showed a state's probability of conflict both inter and intrastate increased from 3% to 10% when refugees were present.<sup>18</sup> They caution that although there is statistical correlation and arguable causation, the results are not earthshattering. “However, it is also clearly the case that the relationship between refugees and conflict is not a deterministic one. Although civil wars are more common in countries that are refugee recipients, the majority of cases in which a country hosts refugee populations are not violent.”<sup>19</sup> They deduced that a significant factor was the proximity of the refugees to their home state. “We have shown that refugees from neighboring countries can increase the risk of intrastate conflict.”<sup>20</sup>

They also argue that turning away refugees worsens the situation. “Closing the border to refugees is, furthermore, likely to be a counterproductive response to refugee influxes. Despite the ethical problems with such an approach, restricting exit options-an alternative to fighting-may lead to the escalation of violence in neighboring states, which could yield even greater security risks.”<sup>21</sup> By restricting people's movement away from violence, catastrophe, and

instability policy makers run the risk of further fueling the fire with the innocent lives of those unable to flee the flames.

William Wood claims that hegemonic states have a duty to help stabilize refugee populations to ensure regional stability, but often times do not. “Yet, powerful countries – most notably the United States – have been reluctant to resettle refugees from these conflicts, even though this could relieve the burden on regional hosts.”<sup>22</sup> He takes the criticism further by calling out apparent policy hypocrisy. This current preference significantly contrasts with the approach taken after the Vietnam War, when large numbers of refugees were resettled as a way to prevent regional destabilization. Similar resettlement efforts could significantly improve economic and security conditions in other volatile regions as well.<sup>23</sup> Forced migration and refugee crises occur disproportionately in the countries with the lowest standard of living and are prone to be caused by ethnic conflict.<sup>24</sup>

The neighboring countries of Syria have absorbed the vast majority of its externally displaced refugee population. The countries that have accepted the most Syrian refugees are: Turkey at 2,760,000; Lebanon at 1,017,000, Jordan at 655,000, and Iraq at 228,000.<sup>25</sup> Not a single Arab Persian Gulf state has accepted a single refugee, which is not surprising and could be used to the US’s advantage. The predominantly Sunni states of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have an interest in a destabilized Iraq and Levant. Destabilized and anarchic territory allows for a battleground far from home to commence a proxy war against their Shiite adversary, Iran. Syria is not just a battlefield, but a recruiting ground for converts and foot soldiers. The Gulf States are opposed to absorbing people that are not homogenous to their internal ethnicity, share their fervent religious persuasion, and are liberty seeking. The Persian Gulf States have thus far avoided and nullified the liberty minded and freethinking movement of the Arab Spring.



They want to maintain their autocracies and are able to placate their internal populations with state oil revenues and targeted subjugation. The Arab Gulf states are part of the problem and cannot be relied upon to be part of the solution. Marginalizing their influence is the best course of action.

## Recommendation

The US and its liberal, democratic, and secular minded allies must exert its influence in the Syrian conflict to reduce the rise of radical religious extremism, counter autocratic regimes, and stabilize the region. An element of that approach must be the absorption of refugees fleeing the conflict. Failure to relieve the stress of the humanitarian crisis from the pressure cooker of Syria will only prolong the war. Refusal to accept refugees also risks of expanding the conflict to Syria's neighbors. The conflict has already spilled over into Iraq. Daesh used the vacuum of power, freedom of maneuver, and increase in arms availability in Syria to bolster its forces and capture much of Iraq's territory. The presence of refugees in a country increases the probability of intra and interstate war in that country when the refugees come from a neighboring country. That resulting conflict would only further destabilize the region, cause more death and destruction, and yield further refugees. The US has a vested interest in combating the theocratic influence of both Iran and Saudi Arabia. The US has secular and liberal values, which run counter to the goals of the Ayatollah and the Wahhabis. Ignoring their influence, allowing them to expand it, and pretending that the US values are in synch with them is dangerous. The US citizen has more in common with the Syrian refugee than they differ. The US is a nation of migrants and refugees that left autocracy, religious tyranny, and persecution for a better life and liberty. Turning our backs on the refugees will only embolden the religious extremists that seek the grieving and opportunity lacking refugee to become their new foot soldier, radical, and

suicidal bomber. The US is a nation of 300,000,000 people that can readily absorb hundreds of thousands of refugees and assimilate them into American culture with ease and little demographic impact. The refugees should be looked upon as human capital and a rare resource indeed that would be indebted to its newfound motherland. The thankful refugee and newfound American would likely be spiteful towards religious theocracies that turned their back on them. Combating the spread of religious extremism and theocratic tyranny is a war of ideas within the human domain more so than in the kinetic world of strikes and body counts. The US should use every means it has at its disposal to spread its values both abroad and domestically.

Darkness is the absence of light. One does not spread the light of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness by putting it in a box or building a wall around it. Allowing discontent to fester, the innocent to wallow in misery, and turning away those seeking liberty, empowerment, and equality is how the likes of Mussolini and Hitler are empowered. The New Colossus must once again cry out across the ocean, "'Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!'"<sup>26</sup> A failure to adapt, assimilate new patriots, and spread the values of enlightenment and liberty will leave the US weakened and forgotten to the dustbin of history.

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<sup>1</sup> "Syria profile - Timeline," BBC (1 March 2017). <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14703995> (accessed 27 March 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Jessica Durando, "Syria's civil war: Disturbing facts show cost of conflict," USA Today (14 March 2017). <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/03/14/syria-civil-war-facts/99126148/> (accessed 27 March 2017).

<sup>3</sup> The Data Team "Syria's drained population," The Economist (30 September 2017). <http://www.economist.com/blogs/graphicdetail/2015/09/daily-chart-18> (accessed 27 March 2017).

<sup>4</sup> "Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution," United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10008193> (accessed 27 March 2017).

<sup>5</sup> "Definition of Ethic," Merriam-Webster. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethic> (accessed 27 March 2017).

<sup>6</sup> James Fieser, "Ethics" Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy <http://www.iep.utm.edu/ethics/> (accessed 27 March 2017).

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- <sup>7</sup> Dennis K. Bowman, "Slavery in Illinois: Culture Versus Law," Illinois Periodicals Online. <http://www.lib.niu.edu/2007/iht14020702.html> (accessed 27 March 2017).
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- <sup>10</sup> "Bob Jones University Drops Interracial Dating Ban," Christianity Today (1 March 2000). <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2000/marchweb-only/53.0.html> (accessed 27 March 2017).
- <sup>11</sup> "The Constitution of the United States: A Transcript" National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution-transcript> (accessed 27 March 2017).
- <sup>12</sup> Idean Salehyan, "The Externalities of Civil Strife: Refugees as a Source of International Conflict." *American Journal of Political Science*, 2008: 789-790.
- <sup>13</sup> Salehyan, Idean. "The Externalities of Civil Strife." 789-790.
- <sup>14</sup> Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." 2006: 338.
- <sup>15</sup> Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." 2006: 338-339.
- <sup>16</sup> Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." 2006: 339.
- <sup>17</sup> Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." 2006: 350.
- <sup>18</sup> Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." 2006: 352.
- <sup>19</sup> Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." 2006: 352.
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- <sup>21</sup> Gleditsch, Idean Salehyan and Kristian Skrede. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." 2006: 360.
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- <sup>23</sup> Salehyan, Idean. "The Externalities of Civil Strife." 789-790.
- <sup>24</sup> William B Wood, "Forced Migration: Local Conflicts and International Dilemmas." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 1994: 607-634.609.
- <sup>25</sup> "Quick Facts: What You Need to Know About the Syria Crisis," Mercy Corps. <https://www.mercycorps.org/articles/iraq-jordan-lebanon-syria-turkey/quick-facts-what-you-need-know-about-syria-crisis> (accessed 27 March 2017).
- <sup>26</sup> "The New Colossus" Liberty State Park. <http://www.libertystatepark.com/emma.htm> (accessed 27 March 2017).