



Background for Congressional District Visits: Syrian Refugee Crisis

What's the issue?

March 15, 2017 marks 6 years since the beginning of the brutal civil war in Syria, in which more than 400,000 men, women, and children have been killed. In Syria today, more than 13.5 million people, including 6 million children, are in need of international assistance. Children, who make up more than half of Syrian refugees in the Middle East, are paying the heaviest price: many have witnessed violence and the loss of homes or loved ones, and most have been out of school for years. Syria's neighbors—Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Egypt—have responded by welcoming those in need. However, with an influx of more than 4.1 million refugees, their economies, social services and basic infrastructures are strained to the breaking point. Until refugee families can feed their children and provide them with safe futures, they will need to continue their search for better opportunities.

More than 1 million asylum-seekers and migrants fled to Europe by boat in 2015. Approximately half were Syrians. In response, the European Union and Turkey negotiated a controversial deal that has deterred asylum-seekers, while stranding tens of thousands of people in northern Greece. With the deal in place, and borders into Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan effectively closed, many refugees are unsure where to turn.

Due in part to consistent and high-level efforts encouraged by the Obama Administration, a fragile cease-fire took hold for 8 weeks in the spring of 2016. But intense fighting has resumed in the Syrian city of Aleppo, and reports confirm that both mosques and hospitals continue to suffer deliberate attacks. And hundreds of thousands of people in besieged cities may not be able to hold out much longer for international assistance to reach them.

It is clear that the situation in Syria and the refugee crisis in that part of the world are not improving at this point. Therefore, it is essential that we, as a nation, do not close ourselves off to their need. Refugees are the victims, not perpetrators, of violence, and need our love and support.

What is the Church doing to help?

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and Catholic Relief Services have urged the United States government to work with other governments towards peace and to protect humanitarianism by obtaining cease-fires, initiating serious negotiations, providing impartial humanitarian assistance, and encouraging societies in Iraq and Syria to protect the rights of all citizens, including Christians and other minorities. Since the beginning of the conflict, CRS has aided more than 1.25 million war-affected Syrians. "The scale of the suffering is devastating," says Kevin Hartigan, CRS regional director for Europe and the Middle East, who has overseen CRS' response for the past four years. "But as Pope Francis reminds us, there are human faces behind the staggering statistics. Each of the millions of displaced Syrians is an individual, uprooted from a full life, a family member, a loved one." Many of these individuals have witnessed unspeakable horrors. CRS works with partners in Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, and now in Europe, providing basic assistance like food, medical care, and shelter. We emphasize education and psychosocial support for Syrian children, in hopes that an entire generation is not devastated by this conflict.

What can I do to help?

Pope Francis has urged us to respond to Syria's refugees with humanity, saying "We must not be taken aback by their numbers, but rather view them as persons, seeing their faces and listening to their stories." Instead of looking the other way, you can follow his lead by taking action. Start by scheduling a district visit with your members of Congress, and asking them to support efforts to end the war and assist refugees from Syria and around the world. Download [instructions on how to set up a visit](#) and [tips for a successful visit](#) with your members of Congress. You can also contact your [CRS regional office](#) for assistance.

For more information, visit [Catholic Relief Services](#) and the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#) websites. We also invite you to [watch this video about the crisis](#).



Talking Points

1. As your constituent, I am deeply concerned about the millions of Syrians fleeing civil war and facing persecution by ISIS and other armed groups in Syria and Iraq. Our country can and must do more to assist these refugees.
2. Please support the humanitarian funding that is a lifeline to so many refugee families and those in need in Syria. By providing this vital assistance to refugees in the Middle East and around the globe, our nation can promote greater stability in the region overall.
3. Please support efforts to increase the number of vulnerable Syrian refugees admitted into the United States for resettlement—men, women and children who each go through extensive screenings and background checks.
4. Resettlement and humanitarian assistance are necessary, but not sufficient, to protect the dignity of our brothers and sisters fleeing war and persecution. I urge you to work with your colleagues in Congress and the Administration to continue to use all diplomatic means to end the violence, provide impartial humanitarian assistance, and encourage efforts to build more inclusive societies in Syria and Iraq that protect the rights of all citizens, including Christians and other religious minorities.