



Resolution 2107 (2016)¹

A stronger European response to the Syrian refugee crisis

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Syrian refugee crisis is a consequence of the ongoing war in Syria, which started in 2011. Refugees began fleeing Syria from the start of the conflict. By early March 2016, the total number of registered Syrian refugees was over 4.8 million, in addition to around 6.6 million internally displaced persons. The mounting complexity of the conflict, coupled with the increasing military involvement of external actors, has made the prospects for peace ever more remote. This makes it equally unlikely that conditions within Syria will allow for a mass return of refugees in the short or even medium term.

2. Jordan now hosts some 640 000 registered Syrian refugees, with a similar number of Syrians resident but not registered as refugees. The country's current total population is around 7.5 to 8 million. Some 18% of the refugees live in camps, the rest are "urban" refugees. The refugee camps – notably Za'atari and Azraq – are well equipped, supplied and orderly, although the food situation is critical – women in particular are often undernourished – and medical care is insufficient. Around 1 070 000 registered Syrian refugees are in Lebanon, a drop of 115 000 from the peak of April 2015, but to which should be added some 400 000 other Syrians, mostly unregistered refugees. Lebanon has a population of 5 850 000 and Syrian refugees make up around one quarter of the population. There are no official refugee camps for Syrians in Lebanon; Syrian refugees live in urban accommodation or in one of the 1 900 informal settlements spread across the country. The population of Turkey is 79.5 million, according to the 2015 estimate. There are now 2 715 789 Syrian refugees in Turkey, which makes Turkey the country with the largest refugee population in the world. Around 10% of Syrian refugees in Turkey live in the 26 camps in the south of the country.

3. Neither Jordan nor Lebanon is party to the United Nations' 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and so neither extends legal protection to refugees in full accordance with international standards, although both remain bound by the customary international law prohibition on *refoulement*. Turkey has ratified the UN's 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees but applies a geographical limitation that excludes Syrian refugees. Under Turkey's 2013 Law on Foreigners and International Protection, however, Syrian refugees can benefit from "temporary protection", analogous to that under the 1951 Convention, including protection against *refoulement*.

4. The Parliamentary Assembly notes that there are problems of access to protection in all three countries. A group of over 20 000 Syrian refugees has been blocked by the Jordanian authorities in the desert at the border with Syria, many for several months. In Lebanon, many refugees have been unable to renew their residence status since January 2015, and in May 2015 the Lebanese Government instructed the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to suspend registration of new arrivals. Turkish policy appears to have changed in recent weeks: thousands of refugees fleeing the intensified fighting around Aleppo have reportedly been denied entry into Turkey, with 110 000 now stuck in camps on the Syrian side of the border.

5. All three countries are under extreme social, political and economic strain. From the refugees' perspective, problems include: uncertain legal status and protection (especially in Jordan and Lebanon); lack of decent, affordable housing; food shortages; lack of work permits (in Jordan and Lebanon, and until recently in Turkey) leading to irregular employment and exploitation; poverty and debt; inadequate access to health care; inadequate access to education; and recourse to negative coping strategies such as child labour, early

1. *Assembly debate* on 20 April 2016 (15th Sitting) (see [Doc. 14014](#), report of the Committee on Migration, Refugees and Displaced Persons, rapporteur: Ms Annette Groth). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 20 April 2016 (15th Sitting).



marriage and prostitution. From the host communities' perspective, problems include housing shortages and rent increases, increased food prices, competition in the labour market and reduced wages (especially in informal employment), pressure on municipal services and infrastructure, environmental degradation, and huge budgetary burdens that have increased public debt and undermined economic growth. From the perspective of both refugees and host communities, the current situation is untenable.

6. In the circumstances, it is not surprising that many Syrian refugees, faced with inadequate protection and lack of prospects for themselves and their children, and with little chance of being able to return home, are turning to western Europe, attracted by its reputation for respecting human rights and the rule of law and by its far greater prosperity.

7. The Assembly believes that the European response to the Syrian refugee crisis must be based on the following principles:

7.1. those fleeing the conflict in Syria are entitled to international protection;

7.2. that protection is usually, but not always, best provided in countries close to home;

7.3. these neighbouring countries cannot provide that protection without extensive external support, which must be tailored to their particular circumstances;

7.4. that support must include sufficient financial assistance as well as technical measures including privileged access to export markets;

7.5. the support must be accompanied by humanitarian pathways for admission of substantial numbers of Syrian refugees, including by resettlement, that prioritise the most vulnerable and avoid the need for them to take dangerous, irregular routes to seek protection in Europe;

7.6. family reunification procedures for refugees should be improved and accelerated; the issuing of visas for family members with either children or parents in European countries should be quick and procedurally streamlined, applying a broad definition of the family.

8. The Assembly therefore welcomes the progress made under recent initiatives, notably the London Conference on Supporting Syria and the Region of 4 February 2016, the financial aid promised to Turkey and the commitment to improve the situation of Syrian refugees in the European Union–Turkey Joint Action Plan of 15 October 2015, and the High-level meeting on global responsibility sharing through pathways for admission of Syrian refugees. The international community, including European States and the European Union, must be prepared to do more if their current efforts prove inadequate. Furthermore, European Union support for Syrian refugees in Turkey must not be made conditional on a reduction in the number of people – far from all of whom are Syrian refugees – crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey to the Greek islands. It must also be ensured that financial aid is invested as intended, in order to meet the needs of refugees both in urban areas and in camps.

9. The Assembly emphasises that the Syrian refugee crisis is the responsibility not only of neighbouring States and of Europe but also of the international community as a whole. It calls on other States, including in the Middle East region, to take a similar approach based on providing not only financial aid, as many pledged to do at the London Conference, but also humanitarian pathways for admission of Syrian refugees.

10. Palestinian refugees, especially those formerly living in Syria, have been particularly badly affected by the conflict and the fact that many of them are stateless adds to the obstacles they face. At the same time, the fact that they are almost exclusively supported by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has left them somewhat outside the reach of much of the international aid intended for Syrian refugees. The Assembly therefore calls on European States and the European Union to respond generously to UNRWA's Syria Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal 2016.

11. The Assembly recommends that:

11.1. the member States of the Council of Europe:

11.1.1. refrain from denying entry to Syrian refugees;

11.1.2. refrain from returning refugees to Turkey, as Turkey cannot be considered a safe third country for refugees;

11.2. European Union member and other participating States comply immediately with the decisions on relocation of refugees from Greece and Italy, as adopted by the Justice and Home Affairs Council in September 2015;

11.3. Turkey:

11.3.1. keep its borders open to Syrian refugees, coming directly from Syria or indirectly via Lebanon or Jordan, in order to ensure that they can flee the violence in their country;

11.3.2. give access to the “removal detention centres” to humanitarian organisations such as the UNHCR and the Red Crescent, and to legal advisers and representatives;

11.4. the European Commission adopt a large-scale resettlement mechanism for Syrian refugees from Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, prioritising vulnerable refugees, including Palestinian refugees from Syria.