



What Is It Really Like To Be A Syrian Refugee?

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The [UNHCR](#) says that by the end of the year it is estimated that half of the population of Syria will be in need of aid. The Regional Response Plan for Syrian refugees totals US\$2.9 billion. The governments of Lebanon and Jordan are also appealing for funds, asking for US\$449 million and US\$380 million respectively. The humanitarian appeal for inside Syria is for US\$1.4 billion...

This all adds up to US\$5 billion, the largest appeal in history.

The Syrian conflict is now well into its fifth year and the Syrian agony continues without end in sight. The battle between the West and its allies and the Syrian government rages with all of its complexities, little understood by Western politicians and the media.

In the last few years the conflict has resulted in what is now considered the worst humanitarian disaster in modern history. A third of the population has been displaced internally, and some 3.8 million Syrian refugees languish in refugee camps in neighbouring countries. The United Nations and Arab League envoy to Syria put [actual deaths](#) due to the conflict at close to half a million as at April 2016.

One in 4 people in neighbouring Lebanon (which forbids permanent refugee camp construction) are refugees. Private land owners, known as 'Shawishes' charge exorbitant fees for refugees to camp away from official government sites. Syrians are forbidden from working in Lebanon and the vast majority are unable to pay the huge cost of residency permits to stay legally.



A single Syrian child in an apocalyptic image with makeshift fire in Aleppo (image source unknown)

Under these circumstances, Syrian children and adolescents are particularly vulnerable to mistreatment and abuse. Forced prostitution and rape are commonplace. As [Foreign Policy](#) reported a few months ago - *"In April, 75 Syrian women were rescued from sexual slavery at a brothel in Lebanon. They had been beaten, tortured, electrocuted, and compelled to have sex more than 10 times a day. Increasing numbers of teenage Syrian girls are entering early marriages in order to receive financial and physical protection from their adult husbands."*

The abject misery and despair forced onto their lives through no fault of their own has led to

truly desperate measures. According to a 2014 United Nations [Population Fund \(UNFPA\) study](#), the dismal conditions have led to 41 percent of Syrian youths in Lebanon to say they have had suicidal urges. A big problem is that local NGO workers are unable to compile statistics on suicide attempts and completions – the conditions, religious beliefs and implications make it impossible to know. Death is endemic to this way of life.

A quarter of a million fled to Iraq thinking it was safer than Syria. Here, 20,000 people are [violently killed](#) each year for no known reason. Before America's invasion, just 3 people a month were murdered each month; that escalated immediately afterwards to 1,300 a month; it still is today. The official "iraqbodycount" (Read: [The shocking truth of UK involvement of 6-8 million in Iraq and Afghanistan](#)) database is well known to report far less than actual numbers.

Another way of putting it is that half of Syria's pre-war population — more than 11 million people — have been killed or forced to flee their homes. Harsh winters and hot summers make life as a refugee even more difficult. At times, the effects of the conflict can seem overwhelming.



Syrian children arrive at refugee camps suffering from the living nightmare of conflict and open warfare having lost parents, siblings, homes and basic family security

In one child refugee centre in the Bekka valley run by a Lebanese NGO, the children arrive both mentally and physically shattered. Piecing their lives back together seems impossible. They arrive with no hope whatsoever after a nightmare ordeal you and I are simply unable to imagine.

Makeshift tented classrooms attempt to act as normality, as a safe haven. There is painting and music, the children interact with other refugees, there is chatter and sometimes laughter. Just as the children start to make some sort of sense of their predicament and hope starts to build for a future, the centre has been told it must close by UNHCR due to funding cuts and political decisions.

Rima, the woman who runs the centre [says](#): *"We have three months to prepare the children to tell them that we're leaving... The new model [for the U.N.] is to work with governments in regards to refugees. It's all very political. They want to make the Lebanese government responsible for taking care of the refugees. But we don't have basic health services even for the Lebanese, and there is barely anyplace in schools for Lebanese children, let alone Syrians."*

UNHCR say they need nearly \$500 million to keep the centres in Lebanon open but funding is short by 60 percent.

"When this place closes, all our services will end," Rima says. "The girls will all get married, and if they can't find work, the boys will become criminals. Lebanon will become less safe not only for the Syrians, but also for the Lebanese.... It's like we took them halfway and abandoned them. What kind of a future will they have now?"

The resulting wave of refugees from Syria is having serious repercussions. Lebanon's real GDP growth has been cut by 2.85 percent a year between 2012 to 2014, unemployment has doubled to above 20 percent and it has widened the deeply indebted nation's deficit by \$2.6 billion. That might not sound a lot but Lebanon has an annual GDP of less than \$10 billion. And [according to the World Bank](#), the crisis has cost Lebanon £7.5 billion so far - the equivalent to over \$2 trillion to the UK economy, or running the NHS for nearly 20 years.

Many Syrians have been forced to make the journey to Europe as the region is now simply too dangerous, especially for young males. Many have lost their lives. Many escaped death by a whisker. It was [found that over 100,000](#) people had been killed in conflict around the region in 2014 alone, it almost makes no difference where to flee to, death lurks in every corner - Europe is a safe haven.



Migrant, refugee boat sinks off Libyan coast, kills at least 37 (Image - Libya's Channel)

Hamed Shurbaji, 24, was one of the "lucky" ones. His [story](#) testifies to the struggle of many. He survived three attempts to make it to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea.

His long journey began when he left Syria to Egypt via Lebanon. He struggled for 40 days in Egypt until he decided to go to Europe.

He decided to travel to Libya to find a way to Europe. He spent a day and a half walking on foot near the border in an effort to enter, but was caught by Libyan guards. Accused of being a jihadist he was detained and jailed for few days before he was released. He then decided to travel to Tripoli, to find work and save money for his trip to Europe. After seven months of hard work, he was able to make some money and start planning a way out to Europe. Already, one has to admire his tenacity.

He headed to Zowara, the Libyan coastal city near Tunisia, where he met a people smuggler. "It took me a whole month to finally get on a boat to Europe, but unfortunately it did not work. The Libyan coast guards stormed the boat and detained us all for two days and then let us go," Hamed said, describing his first attempt.

On his second attempt, while Shurbaji was still in Zowara, he met a Syrian people smuggler who charged him \$1,000 to guarantee a place on the next boat to Europe. When he finally got on the boat, they spent 30 hours at sea without moving. "The boat was very small, about 12 meters long at most, but the smugglers put over two hundred people on it. The load was way too heavy for the boat to move," Hamed said.

Not long after that, an Egyptian rescue boat came and took them all back to Zowara again.

His third and final attempt was truly terrifying. On a two-level boat, the smugglers this time crammed in hundreds of people.

"They put all the African people in the lower level where the engine was located, and on the upper level they put all the Palestinians, Syrians, and Lebanese," Hamed explained.

After a few hours they noticed a helicopter in the horizon. It circled around them in the air for few minutes then left. "Right after that, we saw a ship with a Danish flag approaching us

fast," Hamed said. "While we tried to get close to it, the big ship hit the nose of our boat and made it sink."

He added "I started to swim toward the ship. When I finally reached it, I looked back and saw this horrifying scene of all these people fighting for their lives." A Maltese coast guard finally arrived but some had drowned and dozens of others who were in the lower level of the boat suffocated to death from the smoke from the engine, Hamed explained.

The rescue boat dropped them off in Catania, Sicily, where they were put in a camp and warned that they would be fingerprinted the next day. But early in the morning the very next day, Hamed and a few others managed to escape the camp to a train station and made it to Milan, Italy.

"My friend and I headed to France after that, but we were caught by the French police, who took our fingerprints and sent us back to Italy," Hamed declared. Back in Milan, they met another smuggler who took them by car into Germany. Once he entered Germany, he turned himself in to the German police in Dortmund.

After three months in Germany, Hamed was finally granted refugee status and became a legal resident of Germany.

We are now living in a shameful chapter of human history as if the lessons of the cumulative wars and conflicts over our life time have taught us nothing. It is not known how many thousands of desperate refugees die in the Mediterranean Sea. It is not known how many are murdered along the way or what dreadful futures the survivors face, or what will become of orphaned and abandoned children - there is no database. We do know that as a result of Western aggression this region the world now has more refugees than at any time in human history - including the last world war, and our response is to shut the door and let them drown one way or the other.

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