

PLAN of ACTION for REFUGEES from SYRIA

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Intention

This document focuses on practices. What steps can readily, prudently and reasonably be put in place to significantly increase the number of private sponsorships and the rate at which Syrian refugees can be enabled to arrive in Canada? It is not concerned with analyzing which political party program can best achieve the objective of facilitating the arrival of many more Syrian refugees, but, given existing laws, what practices in Canada can be adopted that can respond quickly and expeditiously to the leadership being demonstrated across Canada by politicians at the federal level, church figures, provincial premiers, mayors from all our major cities and the public in general.

Humanitarian, Security and Economic Considerations Related to the Exodus

Issues of security and humanitarian crises are interconnected. So are economic forces. Though inter-related, though problems in one area are interconnected and impact on each other, and although the world has not yet developed systems for tackling all these issues in a coherent and integrated fashion, opportunities for initiative, cooperation and coordination are available. Further, foreign policy and military efforts to contain military crises in one territory do not mean that we cannot undertake reasonable and rapid security checks on refugees or assist those refugees both with humanitarian aid in countries of first asylum and through refugee resettlement.

Because of the involvement of ISIS and other radical extremists, the situation of the Syrian refugees has been compounded by fears of potential terrorists sneaking into the country if Canada accepts large numbers of Syrian refugees. As Ron Atkey wrote in an op-ed in the *Globe and Mail*, security is “the elephant in the room.” Ron Atkey was the Conservative Minister of Immigration when Canada initiated the entry into Canada of 60,000 Indochinese refugees. Ron Atkey was also the first chair of the former Security Intelligence Review Committee (SIRC). In his op-ed, he reminded Canadians that the government of the day in 1979 also had security concerns, as did previous and subsequent governments that brought large numbers of refugees into Canada. Security screening is essential; however, it can be deployed in a way to expedite the process, rather than delay it.

As he suggested in his op-ed, “a special program focusing on selecting families and those with Canadian connections will minimize and even possibly eliminate any potential problem of security risks from this refugee group.” Security officers from CSIS should be assigned “to liaise with the immigration selection officers, interview refugees as required, monitor the cases and advise on additional steps to eliminate the threat of new entrants to Canada being security risks.” After all, this was “one of the reasons why CSIS was recently given new powers by Parliament under Bill C-44 to operate outside Canada.”

The Scale of the Crisis

The scale of displacement of people fleeing the violence in Syria is overwhelming – 4 million Syrian refugees, half already registered with the UNHCR and half awaiting registration. Scholars in the field have provided us with higher estimates since many are urban refugees in hiding and people in transit. Only 150,000 of the two million registered with the UNHCR have been processed and certified as convention refugees under the UNHCR definition. There are also over seven million internally displaced people within Syria.

With all the attention on refugees in Europe at present, four neighbouring countries, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq, have been struggling with large influxes of people displaced from Syria for several years: Turkey (1,865,255 – now estimated to be close to 2.2 million at its peak this past summer, though tens of thousands have left for Europe); Lebanon (1,172,753); Jordan (629,128) and Iraq (251,499). Egypt also hosts 125,000 Syrian refugees. Europe is now expecting over 800,000 to arrive in 2016.

Of these almost four million refugees, over half are children (2,073,905) and half of the other half are women -- even though most of the people seen on television in the train stations in Hungary and Austria appear to be men travelling on their own; many of them have left their wives and children behind to save them from the difficulties of the arduous and perilous effort to escape. *The Globe and Mail*, in its exemplary coverage of the issue, published a one page spread on Syrian child refugees taken from UNICEF figures (12 September 2015, page A9) suggesting that the proportions of child refugees was not only more than 50%, but much more: Lebanon - 845,555 children under 18 compared to a total of 1,172,753 refugees; Jordan – 431,582 child refugees of a total figure of 629,128 refugees; Iraq – 143,103 of a total of 251,499 refugees; Turkey – 1,339,499 child refugees of a 1,805,256 total; Egypt – 73,733 child refugees out of a total number of 132,375.

It, of course, should not be forgotten that there are many other refugee populations around the world, many who have been “warehoused” for a generation and even two. However, the Syrian refugees, arriving on top of a large wave of Iraqi refugees, are now by far the largest cohort in the world. Further, if not assisted or resettled, they have the greatest potential to provide fodder for Islamic extremists.

The European Response

Not since WWII has Europe faced a refugee crisis of such enormous dimensions. At the end of August, unexpectedly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, now dubbed Merkel the Bold, announced that Syrian refugees would NOT be sent back to the country where they first entered the European Union as provided in the Dublin Regulation, but instead those refugees who reached Germany would be processed as asylum claimants. Then came what many consider the most significant change of all. Chancellor Werner Faymann of Austria joined Merkel in announcing that their countries would now admit the refugees on a *humanitarian* basis, thus avoiding the heavy costs and long delays of an asylum application process. The Syrians would be admitted as humanitarian refugees without having to prove individually that they had a well-founded fear of persecution. Germany's interior minister subsequently announced that this one country in Europe had a target of resettling 500,000.

On Friday 4 September, Prime Minister David Cameron bowed to public pressure and acceded to taking in a much larger number of Syrian refugees – admitted from the UNHCR camps bordering Syria rather than from Calais. However, the 20,000 announced does not come close to matching those being admitted by Austria, Germany and Sweden on a per capita basis. Hopefully, Cameron will permit those displaced and outside their country of origin to enter as humanitarian cases. Otherwise, no matter what figure is announced, those who can actually get through the process will be far fewer.

The Canadian Government Response

In July 2013, the Harper government initially pledged to take 1,300 Syrian refugees by the end of 2014. It evidently took until March 2015 to achieve that target. The intake was divided between government and privately sponsored refugees. The target was then raised; 10,000 Syrian refugees were to be allowed entry into Canada over three years, again divided between government and private sponsorships. During the first half of the election campaign, the Harper government added another 10,000. The number included both Syrian and Iraqi refugees. The number was to be spread out over four years.

On 12 September, Jason Kenny, Minister of National Defence in the Harper government, signalled the following although no details were announced:

Accelerated processing

- NO mention of increased numbers
- Emphasis to be on ethnic and religious minorities who do not live in refugee camps but in urban slums and are not typically among those registered by UNHCR, namely Kurds, Ismaili Shiites, Chaldeans, Syriacs, Druze, Medeans, Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Yazidis
- Suggested a possible increase in the financial partnership with sponsors
- Private sponsorships would be processed in approximately six months
- The use of advanced satellite communications for matching and processing to get around the problem of narrow band width in the countries in which the refugees are located
- No airlift, presumably because the numbers coming would not warrant such an expense

In the absence of a more detailed announcement, one can speculate about the implications of these comments, but they raise more questions than answers with respect to selecting vulnerable people from all religious and ethnic groups.

Currently, the UNHCR referrals are all going to Canadian visa offices for consideration as GARs (Government Assisted Refugees); as of mid September only 35 have been referred as BVOR (Blended Visa Office Referrals – refugees whose resettlement is funded jointly by a sponsor and the government. Local sponsor groups (Groups of 5 or G5s) have no access to UNHCR or Visa Office Referrals. SAHs (Sponsorship Agreement Holders) only have access to a very small BVOR list. This means that Canadian sponsors have to find their own refugees to sponsor, primarily through family connections in Canada. Then those named refugees have to go through lengthy application processes to determine their eligibility. There is no chance the targets notionally allocated to the private sector can be met because of these barriers. Sponsors will fall away and there is then a danger of interpreting this situation to claim that there was not enough public support for the program. There is also a risk of a backlash if those willing to sponsor are overwhelmed by the barriers to sponsorship.

Canada's most important asset is a demonstrated concern and desire for action by thousands of individual Canadians, faith communities, NGOs, federal, provincial and municipal political leaders. The historical experiences of the Ugandan, Kosovo and, above all, the Indochinese movements, provide the inspiration and confidence captured in Lifeline Syria's motto "We did it before. We can do it again". At the same time, no refugee crisis is the same and the program developed must respond to the actual case at hand. For example, with respect to the settlement side of the equation, in contrast with the Indochinese movement, the comprehensive network of Canada Employment and Canada Immigration Centres that provided services to sponsors and refugees and were the locus of community coordination in past refugee movements, no longer exists. On the other hand, Canada now has a national network of highly experienced community-based immigrant service agencies and access to information technologies undreamt of in the 1970s.

However, a number of obstacles exist for private sponsors in the current process. In the absence of already selected cases referred by visa officers to Canada for matching with sponsor groups, sponsors have to find their own refugees to sponsor, submit lengthy and complicated applications to CIC and wait for the visa officers to locate, interview and assess the refugees' eligibility and admissibility. Jason Kenney cited a figure of six months for processing with respect to sponsored refugees. The CIC website shows a much higher figure. The current processing time for Syrian refugees headed for Canada in Lebanon is 11 months, for Jordan, 19 months, and for Turkey, 45 months.

If sponsors still have to name the refugee they wish to assist and if each refugee case has to be individually assessed by the UNHCR or a state or a Canadian visa officer for their eligibility as a refugee, the program will continue to be arduous, inefficient and slow.

Syrian refugees from countries of first asylum can be brought in under the Country of Asylum Class that provides for the intake of refugees, The refugees must be:

outside your home country or the country where you normally live and have been, and continue to be, seriously and personally affected by civil war or armed conflict, or have suffered massive violations of human rights.

Under the existing regulations, the refugees must also be:

- outside Canada,
 - referred by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or another referral organization **OR** be sponsored by a private sponsorship group, and
 - that sponsorship group has the funds needed to support the sponsored refugee and any dependants after they arrive in Canada.
- can pass a medical exam and satisfy a security check.

All Syrians outside Syria in countries of first asylum would fit this criteria and could easily be processed without lengthy application, interview and determination processes. This would increase efficiency and reduce processing times enormously.

We recommend that those admitted have a Canadian connection. That connection would include relatives of Canadian citizens or Permanent Residents. Family would be defined as spouses and children of any age, accompanying parents and grandparents, siblings, uncles, aunts, nieces and

nephews. Definitions notwithstanding the fundamental rule (applied during the Indochinese movement) would be that extended family groups who have fled or taken refuge together, would be processed and travel to Canada together. Families will not be broken up. Other Canadian connections could include displaced Syrians who have studied in Canada, worked for Canadian companies or have, in the opinion of a visa officer, other significant ties with this country that will enhance their ability to establish themselves in Canada.

The current regulations limiting Groups of Five (G5s) to sponsoring only those with UNHCR or state recognition is an enormous barrier. **Effective October 19, 2012, a G5 may only sponsor applicants who are recognized as refugees by either the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees or a foreign state.** To get around it, obligating local sponsorship groups to working through Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) is of little help since most of these SAHs are already overburdened. That regulation would have to be repealed or modified. It is inconsistent with the Country of Asylum Class that dispense with the requirement; CACs are not required to be convention refugees. But they are still required to be registered with UNHCR. To facilitate expeditious processing, G5s should be allowed to sponsor Syrian refugees directly with only the requirement that Visa Officers check whether they meet the definition used in the Country of Asylum Class. This is particularly important given the extreme shortage of UNHCR reviewing officers and the enormous backlogs they face.

If the individual refugee determination requirement was removed and Syrian refugees were considered as *prima facie* humanitarian refugees through a humanitarian program under the policy provisions of the Immigration Act, the determination of eligibility by visa officers would be tremendously expedited. Having a significant number of Visa Officer Referrals (VORs) available to be matched with Canadian Groups of 5 (G5) would speed the process up enormously. Groups, however, could still choose to submit named refugees for family reunification purposes if they so chose.

Other measures have been proposed to expedite the process. One is the use of Temporary Permits as was done with the Kosovars. But in that case, the refugees could be picked up at one spot and the expectation was that the conflict would soon be over – as it was. This is not the case with Syrian refugees who have fled a war that has gone on for almost five years and has recently entered into an even more extreme phase. Creating a secondary hurdle down the line for those seeking permanent residence would not be appropriate to this case.

The Kosovo temporary permit experience is a process that should not be repeated unless absolutely necessary in dealing with refugees in immediate danger. The following reasons indicate why this option should be avoided:

- Temporary visa holders were placed in limbo and were unable to get work immediately or access refugee resettlement funds;
- The process was so quick that medical and security checks could not be carried out;
- Those refugees with active TB risked contaminating everyone else on the planes and frightened the Canadian staff at the receiving end;
- For an airlift, much more cooperation is required of the host country
- In the Kosovo airlift, military cargo planes were readily available nearby – they are not available in this case;

- The process led to many splits in families given the rushed nature of the exodus.

Another factor that can help expedite processing is to favour Syrian refugees who have a connection to Canada. Selecting refugees on the basis of a connection to Canada, while prioritizing families with children, would be most expeditious. . Prompt and deep engagement with the UNHCR would also be an important step in expediting the process. At the same time, independent processing by Canadian visa officers would expedite the process.

Scope of a New Canadian Commitment

The approach suggested will maximize the impact of the Canadian program. It will demonstrate federal leadership, ease the burdens of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, divert refugees away from Europe, provide a safe alternative to risky boat travel to Europe and bring a respectable number of refugees to this country. In addition, it will channel the best impulses of individual Canadians and civil society institutions into practical action through a responsive and streamlined sponsorship program.

We suggest 25,000 government assisted Syrian refugees (GARs) be admitted in 2016. We suggest as well that a target of 25,000 privately sponsored refugees be put in place for the voluntary sector. This is a very modest goal compared to Germany's commitment to admit 500,000. If many of those privately sponsored were sponsored by a government-private sponsor partnership,(over and above the 25,00 GARs) this would significantly increase the numbers the private sector could sponsor. If the privately sponsored target is met and overreached, the government would delay some of its government assisted refugees to accommodate private sponsors and defer the numbers, for which the government will still be committed, to the following year over and above the commitment for that year. Assuming that the 2016 program goes well, the government would plan for an additional 25,000 government-sponsored refugees to be admitted in 2017 and, a new target, up to 25,000, would be set for the voluntary sector.

The target over two years could be 100,000 Syrian refugees, clearly well below the numbers being admitted to Europe, let alone those languishing in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. However, the numbers would be large enough to make a real difference to the refugees and the hard pressed countries of first asylum. The number would be over and above existing targets for the intake of other refugees. The principle of additionality is important. The intake of Syrian refugees should not require the sacrifice of refugee opportunities for refugees from other source countries.

Source of Refugees

Though a small number of Syrian refugees may be admitted from Europe if they can demonstrate a Canadian connection, the vast majority would come from Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and some from Egypt with a special emphasis on Lebanon which is in a situation where the refugees constitute 25% of the population. This would have three effects: 1) demonstrate Canadian leadership in participating in burden sharing where it is most desperately needed; 2) reduce the incentives for refugees to risk the perilous journey to Europe; and 3) relieve the potential of the refugees emerging as a violent powder keg in the Middle East.

Types of Refugees

As indicated above, Canada should concentrate on taking families with children and extended families, and give priority to refugees with a Canadian connection . Visa officers should be given wide discretion under general guidelines with care being taken not to separate extended families that have fled together. Family reunification should be a priority and quickly expedited. Visa officers would have the authority to deal rapidly with highly vulnerable refugees, such as families headed by a single female or in urgent need of protection.

To satisfy the backlog of private sponsor demand and existing government commitments, refugees would be initially accepted from the numbers already approved and referred by the UNHCR. Once more officers are deployed in the field, refugees with Canadian connections could also be accepted directly by Canadian visa officers as prima facie humanitarian refugees under the definition used in the Country of Asylum Class who would not have to be individually certified as refugees by the UNHCR or by the country of first asylum. Those accepted could be assigned to private sponsors. Refugees would be processed under Visa Officer Referred or Blended Visa Officer Referred provisions and made available for private sponsorship as soon as they are ready to travel.

Visa Officers

Given the scale of the program, at least three dozen experienced visa officers would have to be redeployed to the region to handle the work load. Trained, energetic and enthusiastic officers would be sent to the front lines to do the selection. As discussed in the previous section, Visa officers would not be limited to selecting refugees previously cleared by UNHCR. They should be given considerable latitude under Canadian immigration policy and regulations to keep families together. Flexibility will be needed to facilitate family reunification in cases where one of the members of the family is elderly or ill to ensure that a family is NOT denied admission on such grounds. They also need the authority to act quickly when they identify family cases with urgent protection needs.

In order to make plans for the numbers of visa officer to be deployed to different areas, we suggest notional targets for each area roughly in proportion to the number of refugees in that area modified by the degree of difficulty in different countries. As an initial take, we suggest the visa officers be deployed as follows:

Turkey	10 visa officers
Lebanon	12 visa officers
Jordan	6 visa officers
Egypt	2 visa officers
Reserve and Europe	6 visa officers
Total	36

Medical Examinations

Since all refugees will have to be medically cleared before entering Canada, arrangements will have to be made with local medical professionals and international organizations, specifically the IOM, to facilitate medical clearances on the scale of the planned intake. There would be a second review in the Staging Areas with an infirmary for refugees who are held back until they receive final medical clearance. There should be a reinstatement of the Interim Federal Health Program for all privately sponsored refugees so they get the same coverage as GARs. Provinces need to be contacted to arrange for immediate enrolment of the refugees in provincial health programs. Perhaps cards could be arranged for those who are already in the staging area using electronic hook-ups so that, upon local arrival, they receive their health cards right away. Protocols for dealing quickly and safely with special health cases need to be negotiated with provincial governments and local boards of health.

Transportation

To transport 50,000 refugees in one year entails chartering at least three flights a week using large aircraft that could hold about 325, beginning in January 2016 when planes would be available after the Christmas rush. These charter flights would be contracted in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration which already has the requisite expertise. The existing Transportation Loan Fund would be used to finance the flights, with refugees required to repay the costs over ten years with special assistance available for those for whom the extra costs would be too burdensome. It may be necessary to infuse the Loan Fund with more monies to ensure that it does not crash. To avoid hardship, time frames for repayment can be extended and payments modified when necessary. To avoid worries, shocks and even panic, reminders of the terms of the loan should not be sent out one month after the arrival of the refugees in Canada, but one year after arrival when repayment would begin when feasible.

On the flights, the audio-visual system would be used to orient the refugees to their new homes in Canada, to the Canadian political and social culture and even to the use of minimal English for those who lack that asset. This would complement the orientation that refugees would receive abroad by IOM through COA (Canada Orientation Abroad). Finally, given the greater extremes in climate due to climate change, contingency plans will have to be put in place to deal with anything from sandstorms and extreme heat in the Middle East to large snowstorms in Canada that could delay flights significantly.

Staging Areas

One of the most successful initiatives in the Indochinese Refugee Movement was the creation of two staging areas using Department of National Defence facilities in Edmonton (Griesbach) and Montreal (Longue Pointe) that are still there and these or other bases can easily be put in service again once a policy for a substantial resettlement program is in place. At the staging areas, the refugees would receive food, shelter, health services, clothing (particularly winter clothing since the first flights of refugees will be arriving during the three coldest months of the calendar year) and be subjected to a second medical clearance before being transited to their final location in Canada in 3-4 days. Special attention should be given to the provision of Middle Eastern food in the staging areas.

The staging area would provide time for additional orientation by settlement officers and employment counsellors to explain the sponsorship system, inform the refugees of the settlement services available, and provide some information about the communities to which they are headed. Essential information could also be provided on banking, insurance, the labour market and various other services. Banks may even want to provide kiosks to enrol refugees in credit card programs with minimal limits. On site airline agents would arrange onward transportation.

Employment

One of the unique initiatives is a new partnership from the very start with businesses in Canada who would pair with settlement agencies and sponsors to have jobs available very shortly after the arrival of the refugees. The temporary low skilled worker program would be suspended and emphasis put on sending refugees in critical numbers to areas where employment is readily available. As well, programs should be put in place to recognize and upgrade professional and technical licenses of the new refugees and to engage in manpower training to upgrade their skills. Additional resources will have to be made available for English and French language training. It is important to publicize those who arrive who have considerable expertise and a unique reputation for accomplishments.

Settlement

A number of the initiatives from the period of the Indochinese Refugee Movement should be reinstated with the understanding that, in contrast to then, Canada is blessed with a number of well-developed settlement agencies across the country. Those settlement agencies will have to be reinforced with new resources to handle the increased load. As well, the program of Refugee Liaison Officers should be resurrected employing approximately 50 RLOs across the country to coordinate local initiatives, troubleshoot, provide eyes on the ground for the department and assist private sponsors and sponsorship organizations. The Host program to be administered by settlement agencies should be reinstated to assist with the settlement of GARs.

Universities and colleges should be contacted to facilitate enrolment in higher education and asked to waive fees for the initial year. Cell phone companies should be contacted to donate free services for the first year and even possibly free phones. Care will need to be taken to facilitate the smooth integration of refugee children into Canadian schools at all levels. Many other initiatives can be taken along these lines, including arranging with mosques and churches to welcome the new refugees to join their congregations.

A National Charity

The creation of the Canadian Foundation for Refugees (CFR) under two distinguished co-chairs, Paul Emile Cardinal Léger and former Governor General Roland Michener, and the leadership of Conrad Black who was appointed as a member of the Board, should not be replicated. The fund was given an initial donation of one million dollars by the federal government. The organization was expected to raise funds to assist in transportation and provide assistance to sponsorships encountering problems. CFR managed to go through the initial fund without producing a single benefit. On the other hand, fundraising efforts for these purposes on the local level were

effective, and in some cases included a back-up fund for sponsors who encountered financial difficulties and extraordinary expenses. The various successes in fundraising through local initiatives should be shared with other organizations across the country.

Recreation

Plans should be made to encourage and facilitate the enrolment of refugee children in recreation programs. Municipalities and local clubs should be encouraged to offer their help in order to launch this program.

Administrative Leadership

The Deputy Minister of Immigration may find it useful to establish a task force under a dedicated ADM to coordinate and oversee the program. For a short period, retired immigration officials, especially those with experience from previous major refugee movements, should be recalled to provide input, advice and even additional personnel for the program. The most essential detail in facilitating a rapid movement would be the introduction of a simplified and streamlined documentation process.

Given the important role assigned to private sponsorship for bringing up to half of the refugees to Canada, a team should be appointed to liaise with agencies, faith groups, service organizations and especially businesses, both large and small, in encouraging sponsorships and facilitating matches between employers and new refugee job seekers. Echoing what was said above, it is of critical importance that the heavy administrative burden the current sponsorship system imposes on sponsors operating under both Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAH) and Group of 5 (G5) streams be replaced immediately with a simplified, user-friendly system.

Additional resources should be allocated to the Case Processing centre in Winnipeg to ensure expeditious processing of sponsorship applications. There will be a need to support organizations that will provide support to sponsors -- like Lifeline Syria, the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program and SAHs -- given the absence of CICs.

Communications

To launch the new program, a 2-3 day conference should be held in Ottawa around 15 November that would invite various stakeholders including provinces, cities, settlement agencies and sponsorship organizations to discuss, modify and refine a plan of action. This will be of critical importance in building confidence and robust partnerships with other levels of government and the voluntary and private sectors.

For an operation that will require the cooperation of all levels of government, hundreds of organizations and thousands of individual Canadians, communication is critical. In the Indochinese Refugee Movement, the Minister of Immigration issued a weekly Indochinese Refugee Newsletter. The Newsletter allowed politicians at all levels of government, administrators, journalists, sponsors, settlement workers to be kept up-to-date on new initiatives, such as the first breakthrough in the initiation of a new processing regime and the development

of the air transport system, as well as keeping everyone aware of shifts in the refugee system and developments in policy worldwide.

Given the current technology available for continuous and immediate transfers of information, the department should employ several communications officers to use modern technology – including Facebook, Tweets and other software systems – to facilitate rapid and accurate information exchanges and the input of various experiences of the process. Reinstating a hotline to answer questions and facilitate processing should be considered. Media outlets should be contacted to enlist their cooperation in communicating with the public.

Documentary filmmakers should be enlisted from the start to make documentaries on the process from the very initiation of the program. It will also be important for local initiatives to be able to communicate with one another to broadcast their innovations and successes to other agencies. They should be facilitated to make contact with visa selection officers in the field to provide updates on the process and perhaps feature the dedication of those officers.