

OVERVIEW

The Middle East Refugee Crisis

CONTEXT.

The Middle East is a vibrant region of incredible religious, cultural, and political diversity. It is the holy land of three of the world's oldest religions. However instability has long persisted in the region, influenced at various times by European geopolitics, Israeli-Palestinian politics and US involvement including in the Iraq war of 2003-2011.

Syria's rich history and cultural significance is complex and diverse. The nation is known as the beginning of civilisation, home to the Bronze Age (the oldest written alphabet and first musical notation), some of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, and ancient locations categorized as World Heritage Sites. Against a backdrop of longstanding regional instability, and the rise of so-called Islamic State or "ISIS" and in the context of the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt in 2011, a "perfect storm" was brewing in Syria. Key factors at play included years of devastating drought, loss of livelihoods, migration to cities, and a significant existing refugee population from other nations.

A small uprising began in Daraa, southwest Syria, by some who felt oppressed and that there needed to be a change of government. Protests erupted after the arrest and torture of teenage boys. As demonstrators were killed in the government's response, riots broke out and military force attempting to quell them failed. Over the next two years the situation took on a political and religious nature and violence escalated as the country descended into civil war (Aljazeera; The Atlantic-a; BBC). In many places a power vacuum was created, which armed groups and terrorist groups took advantage of, taking control of areas across the country. A generally non-sectarian uprising was hijacked and turned into something very complex that many struggle to understand. Conflict has spilled over into Iraq and in 2014 ISIS took control over large areas of western Iraq and many people have been living under their brutal occupation.

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS.

The Syrian civil war is the deadliest conflict of the 21st century thus far. Over 450,000 Syrians have been killed in the fighting and more than a million injured (Aljazeera). As this crisis enters its sixth year, civilians continue to bear the brunt of a conflict marked by unparalleled suffering, destruction and disregard for human life (UNOCHA-a). Humanitarian and protection needs are growing to unprecedented levels in terms of scale, severity, and complexity. 13.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, 5.7 million of whom are in acute need (UNOCHA-a). The conflict in Syria has caused the largest displacement crisis in the world. Over half of all

Syrians have been forced from their homes. There are over 4.85 million registered Syrian refugees and 6.3 million internally displaced people (IDP) (European Commission). 2.9 million Syrian children under the age of 5 have grown up knowing nothing but conflict (UNOCHA-a). At least half of Syria's refugees are children (at least 2.4 million) and at least 306,000 children have been born as refugees (Aljazeera). Since 2011, at least 15,525 unaccompanied and separated children have crossed Syria's borders (Aljazeera). One third of school age children in Syria are not in school (UNOCHA-a). The Syrian war is creating profound effects far beyond the country's borders. Neighbouring Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan are housing large and growing numbers of refugees, some of whom have attempted to journey on to Europe. Fighting has occasionally spilled over from Syria into Lebanon, contributing to the country's political polarisation (Aljazeera).

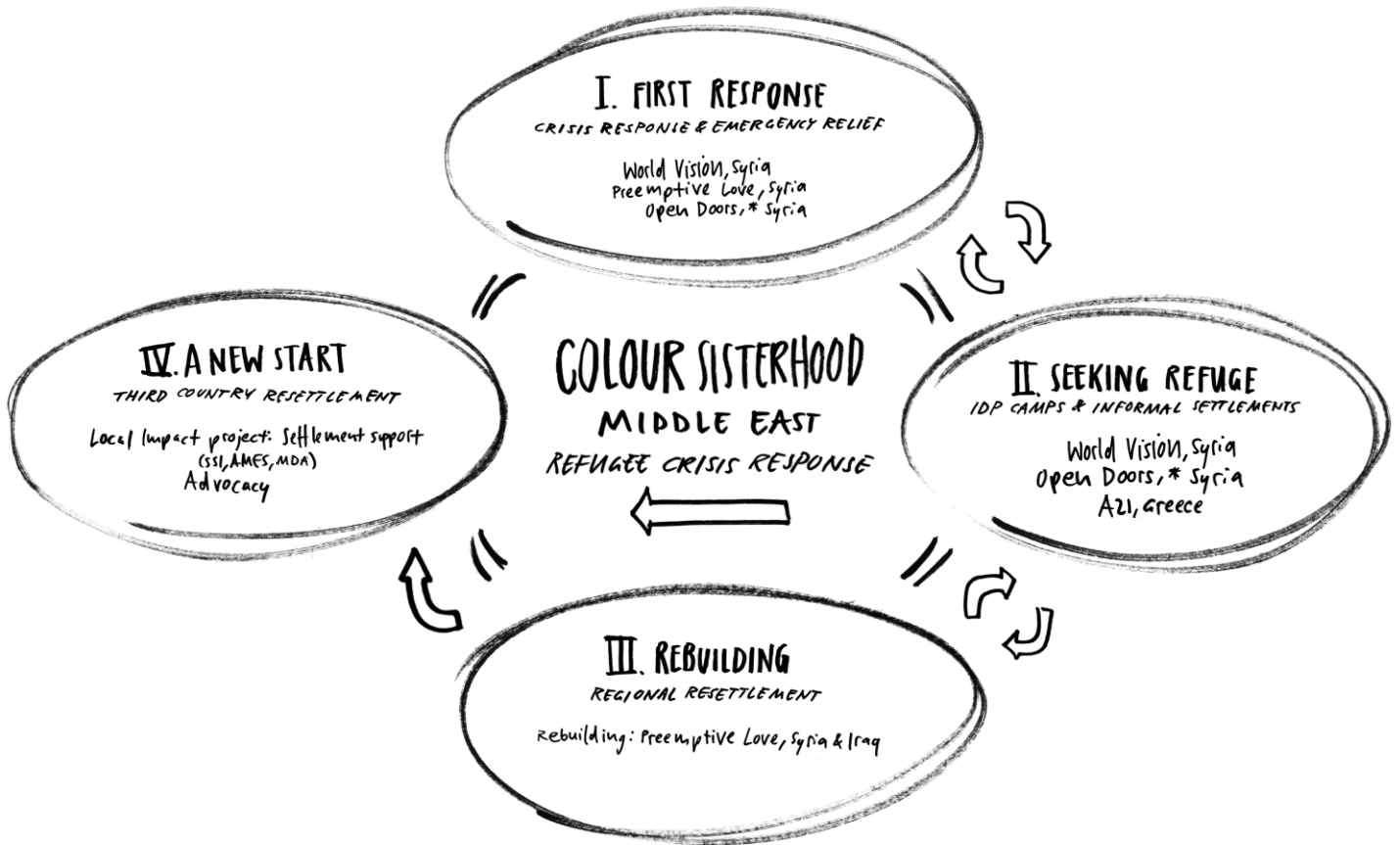
"Before the war Syria was a middle income country with universities, parks, restaurants, and schools. People had jobs, they went to work, caught the bus, took their kids to school... it was a life that a lot of us can relate to.

People still have dreams that one day they can go home to their towns and cities in Syria and resume those lives again. Whether it be as a tailor, a baker, an academic, a farmer, people just want to be able to live in peace, raise their kids, send them to school, pay off their university fees, buy them cattle if they're going to be a farmer... they are dreams and ambitions that any of us can relate to.

It's about trying not to get caught up in all the politics and messiness or the seeming hopelessness that it might never end, and realising that at the end of the day, the people who are affected the most by what's going on are just average everyday families who had a normal life before the war. They're people who were born in Syria and Iraq instead of being fortunate enough to be born in Australia and if roles were reversed we would hope that the world would care about what was happening to us.

...it's about recognising the humanity in these people and thinking, ok, I may not understand who's who in this conflict and why they're fighting but I do know innocent people are suffering so how can I support them?"

Erin Joyce - World Vision International



THE COLOUR SISTERHOOD RESPONSE

We are partnering with organisations to respond in various ways across the stages of someone seeking refuge's journey. We may not personally be found on the front lines but we can extend our efforts through partnership and have an impact through enabling the provision of emergency relief, safety and education for children in camps or informal settlements, support for those facing the task of rebuilding, and acting and advocating for a spirit of "welcome" to those arriving on our shores. We have a range of projects to engage with that cover all of the 4 stages of the journey that someone seeking refuge may take. There are projects based in countries all over the region from Iraq to Syria to Lebanon and Jordan as well as our own local communities. Refer to individual Fact Sheets for further details.

PRAY.

As a company of women we gather together and pray for what may seem impossible! We pray for a ceasefire and for peace and stability in Syria and across the region. We pray for safety and protection of civilians, access to humanitarian assistance and for effective responses including emergency relief, serving displaced populations, rebuilding and resettlement. We pray for a compassionate global response to the Middle East Refugee Crisis. We pray for comfort and healing for those who have suffered injury, trauma or loss. We pray that the Church would grow in influence and become an agent of hope for those who are suffering.

Stages & Their Projects

I. FIRST RESPONSE.

Emergency Relief.

World Vision, Preemptive Love Coalition, Open Doors

Responding on the front lines to meet Immediate and basic needs of people displaced by conflict.

II. SEEKING REFUGE.

Internally Displaced People In Refugee Camps and Informal Settlements.

A21, World Vision, Open Doors

Helping to support those living in camps or informal settlements, including helping children to access education and a safe space to learn and play.

III. REBUILDING.

Regional Resettlement And Rebuilding.

Preemptive Love Coalition

Supporting families to rebuild their homes and empowering them to build towards their future.

III. A NEW START.

Third Country Resettlement.

Local Impact Project & Advocacy

Creating a culture of "Welcome Home" for families arriving in Australia by providing practical support and speaking up for refugees.

The Middle East Refugee Crisis Further 'Unpacked'

THE RISE OF ISIS.

ISIS stands for the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. They want to be known as the Islamic State, but no government in the world recognizes them as a state, and many Muslims are appalled by their definition of Islam (CNN). The group began in 2004 as al-Qaeda in Iraq, formed by Sunni militants after the US-led invasion in 2003 (WVA). It was an ally of - and had similarities with - al-Qaeda but unlike al-Qaeda, which disowned the group in early 2014, has proven to be more brutal and more effective at controlling territory it has seized. ISIS has religious, psychological, and technological faces but in some fundamental respects it is an anti-colonial movement that takes as its reference point Islam's pre-colonial conception of power - an Islamic state, a Sunni caliphate (The Atlantic-b). Gender-based violence seems to be endemic in areas under ISIS control, including against Yazidi and Sunni Arab women (HRW).



THE NATURE OF THE CONFLICT.

There are hundreds of groups and factions, many coming from outside Syria, participating in the conflict that has torn Syria apart. Initially, opposition supporters began to take up arms to defend themselves and later to expel security forces from their local areas. Defectors from the military formed the Free Syrian Army. Rebel brigades formed to battle government forces for control of cities and towns (The Atlantic-a & BBC). Insurgents are split into mutually hostile groups. This has made them impossible to defeat and very difficult to engage in negotiations (The Atlantic-a). ISIS capitalised on the chaos and in 2011 joined the rebellion against President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, where it found a safe haven and easy access to weapons (World Vision). ISIS have displaced entire communities. In 2014, ISIS overran large swathes of northern and western Iraq, including Mosul, which it took after a seven-day battle, and declared itself a caliphate - a state, governed by an Islamic leader (World Vision; CNN). The Iraqi government declared a state of emergency as soldiers fled their posts (The Independent). The conflict has mushroomed into a proxy war with foreign backing and intervention, including from US and Russia, playing a major role. Territorial control in Syria has changed many times since the country's uprising began (BBC). In 2016, the conflict remained particularly intense, volatile and unpredictable. Several rounds of peace talks have failed to stop the fighting (Aljazeera).

2016 MILITARY OFFENSIVES.

Mosul, Iraq: In October 2016, a military offensive was launched to reclaim the northern Iraqi city of Mosul (the second biggest city in Iraq) from ISIS. At the beginning of the operation the UN reported 550,000 people remained in the city. Around 190,000 people fled in the following weeks and 46,000 have returned recently (NY Times). In January after a 100 day battle, liberation was declared in eastern Mosul, however certain areas remain under siege and residents say they are being targeted by ISIS snipers, mortars and grenade-dropping drones several times a day. It is reported that ISIS sleeper cells remain in Rashidiya, the last district in eastern Mosul declared liberated, where people are struggling, without electricity, running water and other essential services (NY Times). In early February a suicide bomber attacked a popular restaurant that had reopened and a second killed a soldier at a checkpoint (NY Times). Even though major inroads have been made toward ending ISIS rule in Mosul, a complete victory for the Iraqi government is still a ways off (NY Times).

Aleppo, Syria: In November 2016, the Syrian army launched a military offensive seeking to retake control of Aleppo, the largest city in Syria. Approximately 400,000 people were displaced (UNHCR) In December 36,000 people were evacuated from east Aleppo to non-state armed group controlled areas in west Aleppo with an estimated 90,500 people remaining within Aleppo city (UNOCHA-b). Some families are returning but many are sheltering in damaged buildings or informal settlements (UNHCR). The humanitarian situation remains dire. Approximately 600,000 people are still deprived of regular access to water supply and health facilities experienced a 50% increase in service demand and are stretched beyond limits (UNOCHA-b).

References:

Aljazeera: <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-1605084119966.html>
The Atlantic-a: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/12/understanding-syria-from-pre-civil-war-to-post-assad/281989/>
The Atlantic-b: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/how-isis-started-syria-iraq/412042/>
BBC: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-22798391>
CNN: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/01/14/world/isis-everything-you-need-to-know/>
European Commission: <http://reliefweb.int/map/syrian-arab-republic/syria-crisis-idps-syrian-refugees-and-palestinian-refugees-syria-13012017>
Human Rights Watch <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/20/iraq-sunni-women-tell-isis-detention-torture>
The Independent <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/iraq-war-invasion-caused-isis-islamic-state-daesh-saysus-military-adviser-david-kilcullen-a6912236.html>
The Lowy Institute: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/issues/iraq-war>
UN: <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/dsg/statement/2016-11-29/deputy-secretary-generals-remarks-international-day-solidarity>
UNOCHA-a <http://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/2017-humanitarian-needs-overview-syrian-arab-republic-enar>
UNOCHA-b http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/aleppo_sitrep_12.pdf
Reliefweb: <http://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/iraq-conflict-forced-displacement-needs-humanitarian-response-dg-echo-un-ngos-echo-daily>
UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/latest/2017/1/586d45994/amid-ruins-aleppo-unhcr-sees-signs-hope.html>