

Testimony of Sean Callahan,
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before the Helsinki Commission
hearing on

Europe's Refugee Crisis: How Should the US, EU, and OSCE Respond?

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Chairman Smith, Co-Chairman Wicker, thank you very much for calling this hearing to consider how the US and Europe can better respond to the plight of hundreds of thousands of people fleeing to Europe in recent months. Chairman Smith, your long-standing commitment to protecting the poor and marginalized across the globe and in places long forgotten is a profound demonstration of the compassion and solidarity Pope Francis asks us all to engender.

I am Sean Callahan, Chief Operating Officer of Catholic Relief Services (CRS). CRS is the official humanitarian relief and development agency of the Catholic Church in the United States. We serve nearly 100 million people annually with local partners in more than 100 countries.

I recently traveled to the Balkans to witness firsthand CRS' response to the refugees entering by the thousands every day. It is heart-breaking to imagine walking in their shoes; to imagine one's own life in such chaos. First, suffering violence in one's home community; then biding time in a neighboring country, humbly accepting charity. And then finally to conclude that your family has no future and so someone must undertake a supreme act of love and sacrifice, risking a treacherous and unknown journey so that the rest of the family may live.

Khaled, who came to Serbia with his wife and four children after their apartment in Aleppo was bombed, told us, "I was swimming alongside the boat, with Ronya (age two and one-half) wrapping her arms around me and clinging her head to my neck. It was a rubber boat and very slow. So I could keep pace."

Khaled's eight-year-old daughter, Omama, told us proudly, "My Daddy is very strong... When we went from Syria to Turkey, we walked over hills and mountains. And most of the time he was carrying Joud (six months old) and Ronya in a big backpack. And sometimes he was also carrying me."

Despite immense generosity and hospitality on the part of the governments of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, the scale of suffering has outpaced their ability to respond. It has also overwhelmed the capacity of the international humanitarian and refugee systems. CRS and our partners have assisted nearly 800,000 people and spent over \$110 million in the last three years in response to the Syrian crisis. Many other international non-governmental organizations (iNGOs) and intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), as well as new donors like the Gulf States, have committed significant resources to respond to this crisis. Despite these generous responses, the exodus to Europe cries out that so much more must be done. As global leaders in international humanitarian and refugee response, the US and Europe must find new and creative ways to help to alleviate this suffering and protect the vulnerable. Pope Francis

has led in this effort to do more by asking every Catholic parish in Europe to reach out and assist the refugees; He reminds us of our moral obligation to help the stranger.

In my testimony, I offer first, CRS' analysis of the current exodus to Europe; second, CRS' response to those in need and third, our recommendations for how to move forward not only to address the extraordinary humanitarian needs in Europe but also the longer-term needs in refugee host countries.

Exodus to Europe

During my recent visit to Europe, I was amazed by the rapid pace and fluidity with which the refugees are moving. The scale of movement is also noteworthy: as many as 6,000 people passed into Serbia one day; the average is 4,500 people a day. Most are guided by their cell phones; information from family or friends who preceded them; and social media.

The UN reports that two-thirds of the refugees fleeing to Europe are from refugee-producing countries: predominantly Syrians; while most of the others are Iraqis –largely Kurds - and Afghans. This matches CRS' experience. The Syrians are from Kobani, Tartous, and Hassake, among other places, but many had already fled Syria and had been residing in neighboring countries. Some are coming in family groups. These refugees brought only what they could carry. As the *Washington Post* and others have reported, we have come across a smattering of other opportunistic economic migrants, but they are not the majority by far. Many of the Afghans had been living in Turkey for years. Nevertheless, those fleeing are not the poorest of the poor: it costs about \$3,000 per person currently to cross the Mediterranean. People are traveling using their smartphones, without guides or other assistance. They hire drivers or ride buses from one border to the next. Some report exploitation in the form of extortion and robbery. As entrepreneurial individuals offer services such as transportation, the risk of this exploitation will continue.

Most of the refugees with whom I met traveled through Greece and Macedonia; some through Bulgaria. Most did not travel by boat but rather through Turkey. Many refugees have discovered they can traverse southern Europe more quickly by bypassing the major cities such Belgrade, and the registration process. Individuals are moving astonishingly fast – spending a few hours in Macedonia. The route is very fluid, changing based on what successful travelers report out about border openings. Our partnership with faith-based organizations enables us to respond quickly to these shifts. Like way stations on a marathon route: we aim to be punctual and flexible. This response will become more challenging with the onset of winter: the need for shelter, medical assistance, and warmer clothes will increase the risk of the journey.

CRS' Response

CRS is working with partners in Serbia, Greece, Macedonia, Albania and Croatia to meet the needs of **more than 212,000** tens of thousands of refugees. As the Chairman knows, CRS operates as part of the international umbrella of Caritas Internationalis – the Catholic social service agencies throughout the world. Caritas agencies throughout Europe have been responding to the plight of Syrians, and CRS is helping them to rapidly scale up in response to the immense needs. Given the scale of need, CRS is partnering with other faith-based organizations as well. In a symbol of the healing salve of time, we are working with Muslim and Orthodox partners.

Likewise, our funding is interfaith: the Church of Latter Day Saints and Islamic Relief have funded CRS. As always, CRS is leveraging private money with public money to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. We anticipate spending at least \$2 million into next year on the response in Europe, including with a grant to Caritas Germany.

Program activities include meeting basic needs. Food and emergency living supplies are being provided to families including women, children and the elderly; they include sleeping bags and mats, hygiene packages, food rations, clean water and other support. Most refugees in transit are sleeping in public parks, forests and abandoned factories. CRS and our partners in Serbia have established several large structures equipped with beds, toilets and showers to provide basic shelter and sanitary needs for the most vulnerable refugees, particularly those who returned from Hungarian border. Doctors on staff in Serbia treat hundreds of refugees at a refugee aid center near the Hungarian border. Finally, CRS and our Church partners provide critical information, legal resources, translation and language services, so refugees know their rights and can make informed decisions. As winter approaches, assistance will become more complex and more costly.

As faith-based organizations, we serve not only refugees' physical needs, but also are sensitive to their spiritual ones. For example, on September 24, we joined other aid organizations to organize an Eid celebration for Muslim refugees.

CRS and our partners' assistance throughout the Middle East runs the gamut: from distribution of non-food items and food to legal support; from medical assistance to water and sanitation. We have focused in particular on emergency education, child-friendly spaces, and psycho-social support. In one particularly innovative project, we partnered with No Strings International (the creators of the Muppets) to create culturally appropriate videos to help children process trauma and facilitate peacebuilding. Through trainings of trainers, we have exported this program throughout the region. We primarily work outside of camps, where most of the refugees live.

Why this new movement now?

A steadily growing sense of hopelessness as their situation deteriorates seems to be the catalyst for most fleeing. They can no longer live with such uncertainty for their future or their families'. Life in Syria has become too difficult and violent, but dreams cannot be realized in a country where one is but a guest.

To name violence as the cause of this flight is necessary but not sufficient. Violence is not new. Yet as it becomes more complex, the dangers weigh more heavily. A certain randomness as to who is bombing whom exacerbates the fear and uncertainty. The refugees with whom we spoke do feel that Assad is more vulnerable now. (Though it is noteworthy that this was before the Russian airstrikes began.) The unknown of who might fill that power vacuum – and the possibility that it could be a radical group – can be terrifying. Fear of the self-proclaimed called Islamic State and how it will operate overshadows communities in their proximity. Particularly in Iraq, people would not be nearly so fatalistic were it not for the presence of the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

Beginning last year, refugees with whom we work in the region began to voice despair. Many had given up the idea of returning to Syria anytime soon. And unless children can go to school and parents can provide for their families in the refugee host communities, integration into these host communities will

be unrealistic.¹ We know that many refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, particularly religious minorities, have not registered with the UN and may be moving as assistance in the region contracts. Some male refugees decline to register to avoid being recruited, and some flee Syria for fear of forced recruitment.

We also know that many of the Syrians fleeing are educated and entrepreneurial. CRS and our partners have hired many: as teachers, engineers, and outreach workers. The inability to work in refugee host communities affects not only their economic but also their psychological well-being. The inability to work legally leads to negative coping strategies, including early marriages, prostitution, and child labor, among others. CRS commends the Government of Jordan for its recent authorization for refugees to work. When refugees can legally work, NGOs can engage in livelihoods programs to help them become more self-sufficient.

The remote likelihood of returning to Syria in the near future, and the possibility of finding opportunity in Europe appear to be the main reasons so many have determined that the journey is worth the risk. Some families' coping strategy, as resources wear thin, is to send one worker to Europe who can send remittances back to the family. This would enable the rest of the family to remain in the region, where cultural and family ties, not to mention cost of living, make life easier. Nonetheless, unless education and work opportunities for Syrians in Syria's neighboring countries can be vastly scaled up, the family member in Europe will almost certainly eventually send for the rest of the family.

The exodus of Syrians and Iraqis from the region signals a new phase in the Syrian conflict. Despite efforts by INGOs like CRS, local civil societies, governments, and non-traditional donors, the despair of so many refugees indicates that assistance must move beyond short-term band-aids to longer-term solutions. To that end, CRS offers the following recommendations.

Recommendations

Resolve to end the conflict. The Administration should commit to high-level negotiations towards a political solution to the conflict in Syria. As the violence escalates, the time is ripe. The Administration should work urgently and tirelessly with other governments to obtain a ceasefire, initiate serious negotiations, provide impartial humanitarian assistance, and encourage efforts to build an inclusive society in Syria that protects the rights of all its citizens, including Christians and other minorities.

To respond adequately to the situation in Europe, the Department of State's bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) should fund international private organizations directly. The agility and speed required to respond to the scale and fluidity of this flight to Europe demands the shortest funding routes possible. By mandate, PRM gives the majority of its funding through four agencies, including UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration. Yet direct funding of operational agencies will help to get assistance on the ground faster and navigate potential governmental barriers. Staffing limitations to manage funding within PRM can be creatively solved through mechanisms such as consortia, which have worked well elsewhere.

¹ There are traditionally three options for refugees in the long-term (known as "durable solutions"): return to their home country; integration in the host country to which they fled and have been living; or resettlement to a third country. Resettlement is usually a reality for less than 1% of the population.

The US government should galvanize greater support for the regional strategy – with traditional and new donors such as the Gulf States – to support medium-term integration of humanitarian and development assistance in refugee host communities. This will help families to envision a future in countries of potential integration, and reduce tension among host communities. If many refugees will remain in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey for the foreseeable future, a focus on helping them to thrive and integrate, rather than merely survive, should be the aim of humanitarian and development strategies. The World Bank and other development organizations do not operate in these countries because they are considered middle income; but extraordinary times in fragile states call for extraordinary measures. Development organizations can help to facilitate such a strategy by supporting the host country schools, medical facilities, and economic development, among other institutions and activities. Gulf States could help by significantly increasing their reception of “guest workers.” (Those governments are not signatories to the international refugee convention, but have allowed refugees to work there.)

Congress should robustly fund both humanitarian and development assistance in host countries beyond previous fiscal years. With \$4.5 billion in funding to date to the region, the US has led traditional donors in assistance. We must continue robust funding and seek to collaborate with other donors, including the Gulf States, to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. Gregory Maniatis of the Migration Policy Institute estimates that an adequate response would cost on the order of \$20 billion in the region and around \$30 billion per year in Europe. For Fiscal Year 2016, the US should fund no less than was appropriated in Fiscal Year 2015. CRS and the US Conference of Catholic Bishops support the Middle East Refugee Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act of 2016 (S. 2145) released last week by Senators Graham and Leahy, which, if enacted, would provide an additional \$1 billion for BPRM.

Redouble efforts at protection, particularly education of children. UNICEF’s No Lost Generation campaign reminds us that a child without an education will suffer throughout life. According to UNICEF, as many as 1.5 million of the refugees are children, and many of them are out of school. The cumulative impact on Syria’s development will be significant. As Pope Paul VI once said, “war is development in reverse.” The United States should increase its funding for emergency education and other protection efforts, including psycho-social support and child-friendly spaces.

Continue the United States’ historic leadership in refugee resettlement: the Administration should significantly increase the numbers of refugees resettled in the United States. When the US helps to resettle particularly vulnerable populations, including religious and ethnic minorities and those with complex medical needs, it helps to ease the burden of neighboring countries hosting particularly large refugee populations. Our colleagues at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops resettle a significant number of refugees in the United States and can speak to the requirements necessary to scale up. The Administration must work diligently to make resettlement more effective and efficient for these vulnerable populations.

With the UN, the Administration must strengthen support for and adherence to UN Security Council resolutions 2139 and 2165 calling for greater humanitarian access within Syria.² A paltry percentage of

² Resolution 2139 (February 2014) demands that parties “promptly allow rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access,” and Resolution 2165 (July 2014) authorizes UN humanitarian agencies and their implementing partners to provide cross-border assistance with notification to (rather than the consent of) the Syrian government.

the more than 400,000 Syrians in besieged areas receive assistance, due to lack of access. Unless the United States and other actors reinforce these resolutions, both these lives and the future of international humanitarian law are at great risk.