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# The United Arab Emirates as a Humanitarian Actor: Role in the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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# **“The United Arab Emirates as a Humanitarian Actor: Role in the Syrian Refugee Crisis”**

by Umbreen Shaikh  
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## **Abstract**

*Can a small Gulf country be considered a global humanitarian leader? What role has the United Arab Emirates played in the Syrian refugee crisis? What kind of policies has the UAE developed on migration and how would these apply or not apply to a specific type of migrant: the refugee?*

*This paper will analyze the role of the UAE as a humanitarian actor specifically with regard to assisting Syrian refugees.*

## **Introduction**

As a small country with just over 9 million people, the UAE has established itself as a humanitarian leader in the Gulf region. It is the world’s most generous donor in relation to GNI, it hosts International Humanitarian City which acts as the largest logistics hub for shipping supplies to humanitarian crises worldwide, it has established a number of initiatives to reinforce values of giving and tolerance in its culture, cabinet, and society, and it has recently announced that it will be taking in 15,000 Syrian refugees, making it the first and only Arab country to offer complimentary pathways to refugees.

This paper will introduce the global refugee crisis, then examine humanitarian activities of the UAE as well as its involvement in the Syrian refugee crisis specifically. It will feature the new announcement to host Syrian refugees, and in order to help recommend policy, will include a literature review on migration policy in the UAE as well as interviews with experts. It will end with policy recommendations.

This is a pioneering piece of research, as previously, there has been no academic research published on the topic of refugees in the UAE. There have been multiple studies done on the topic of migration but as a specific type of migrant, the refugee in the UAE has not been studied.

This created a challenge in finding resources to draw on for the literature review. The types of sources that offer information about this topic were predominantly newspapers, websites, and reports from humanitarian agencies related to humanitarian spending, rather than academic research related to policies towards refugees.

It should be recognized that the field of refugee studies is developing rapidly as the subject of displacement becomes increasingly urgent and the Middle East is one of the largest refugee-producing regions in the world. Scholars and practitioners in the Middle East have a huge opportunity to shape the way these issues are being framed in the region while it is still a relatively new field of inquiry.

## **An Urgent Crisis: Global Forced Displacement**

Global forced displacement has become one of the most urgent issues of our time. Never in history have there been such high numbers of displaced people recorded, with an unprecedented 65.3 million forcibly displaced by the end of 2015 (Global Migration Trends Factsheet, 2015).

For every minute of 2015, 24 people were displaced from their homes worldwide. (UNHCR Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2015, 2015).

Of the displaced population, 21.3 million are refugees, defined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as “someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence” (What is a refugee?, 2017). This represents an alarming 55% increase since the end of 2011 and is largely due to the continued conflict in Syria. Syrian refugees make up the largest group displaced from a single country, numbering 4.9 million. (Global Migration Trends Factsheet, 2015).

The dangers faced by refugees are massive, and in many cases, fatal. 2015 was the deadliest year with the most fatalities- over 5,400 migrants died or went missing in their attempted journeys across international borders (Global Migration Trends Factsheet, 2015).

While the majority of people are fleeing human rights violations and conflict in countries in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, this has truly become a global crisis, demanding response, support, and comprehensive strategies on the part of the international community.

The international response has been uneven and countries are not distributing refugees equitably. In 2015, at least 800,000 people applied for asylum in Europe, with hundreds of thousands more arriving outside formal procedures. On the other hand, over 4 million Syrian refugees are being hosted by Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey alone (Koser, 2015).

Some host countries are developing strategies and policies to accommodate and integrate these populations (Germany, Canada) while others are setting policies to block their entry (Hungary, USA). There is a tremendous need for international bodies to comprehensively address the security situations forcing people into flight as well as ensuring safe passage and asylum for those who do flee.

According to the UNHCR, the average time a refugee will spend outside their home country is 17 years, which means that solutions need to take into account the protracted nature of the crises causing the displacement and offer longer-term solutions (Norris & Malknecht, 2015). Policies should be put into place that go beyond providing temporary relief and should realistically address this time frame.

In light of this global crisis, what role is the UAE playing as a humanitarian actor?

## **Philanthropy in the UAE: Embedded in the Culture, History and Religion**

Historically, the UAE has a deep-seated culture of giving, which can be attributed largely to the fact that it is a Muslim country. One of the central pillars of Islam is ‘zakat’: a requirement for Muslims to donate a percentage of their wealth annually to those less fortunate. This ensures a social system whereby the poor are taken care of, and those with the means feel a sense of obligation and responsibility, knowing that charity is a key component of their faith.

An article by el- Sayed el-Aswad titled “From Traditional Charity to Global Philanthropy: Dynamics of the Spirit of Giving and Volunteerism in the United Arab Emirates” traces the history of giving in the UAE. It states that giving started off as traditional and small-scale practices embedded in the culture, and then with the oil boom, morphed into national and international activities on a huge scale (2015, p. 16).

Beginning with the pre-oil period in the Emirates, el-Aswad explains that reciprocity and sharing resources were a key part of tribal culture. The historical continuity of Emirati culture is expressed through gift giving and volunteering, which are inspired by a strong belief in the notions of mutual aid, hospitality, kin solidarity, social protection and moral obligation (2015, p. 4).

According to his survey conducted on attitudes towards philanthropy, “the culture of giving in the Emirates is significantly strong, with more than 91% of Emiratis confirming the personal, social, moral and religious values embedded in giving and volunteering” (el-Aswad, 2015, p. 8).

### **2017 Declared "Year of Giving"**

The current leadership in the UAE has recognized giving and philanthropy to be a central part of Emirati culture and this was made clear when the President His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan designated 2017 to be the “Year of Giving.”

This shows a dedication towards harnessing these values and incorporating them as a theme into the vision of the country by promoting giving as a mindset, a way of life, and a way of business.

According to a statement on the UAE Cabinet website, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum elaborated: “Giving’ is a value we cherish and saw personified in the UAE’s Founding Father Sheikh Zayed. We continue to see this philanthropic legacy embodied by his sons and ingrained in the DNA of our society.” He calls on individuals, businesses, and government to dedicate this year to giving for the purpose of making a positive impact and a lasting legacy.

The strategy for the year is to focus on three major areas: strengthening social responsibility in the private sector, promoting the spirit of volunteerism in all segments of society, and strengthening the concept of serving the nation in future generations (Gulf News, 2016).

### **Present-day Giving in the UAE: Humanitarian and Development Aid**

As giving practices evolved over time, the UAE has established itself as one of the most generous countries in the world when it comes to humanitarian and development aid.

From the establishment of the UAE in 1971 up until 2015, 178 countries have benefitted from its humanitarian and development aid (Ministry of International Cooperation and Development Report, 2016). Some recipients have included Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Haiti, the USA and Japan. (el-Aswad, 2015). While Middle Eastern countries are the most frequent recipients of aid, the UAE also has a track record of donating to global causes.

Statistics from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) show that in 2013, the UAE became the world's largest donor in relation to its gross national income. It surpassed Sweden, Luxembourg and Norway and achieved a ratio of official development assistance (ODA) to GNI of 1.25 percent (Aid to Developing Countries Rebounds in 2013 to Reach an All-Time High, 2014).

The following year, in 2014, the UAE secured its position for the second time in a row as the number one donor of ODA in relation to GNI (MICAD, 2016). This demonstrates that the UAE is committed to more than just achieving the status of a leading donor, but also of maintaining this position.

Philanthropic donations come from different areas in the UAE: in 2014, UAE individuals, foundations and corporations gave \$337 million USD which accounts for around 38% of all philanthropic donations coming from the GCC in 2014 (Coutts, 2015).

In 2016, private donors in the UAE donated \$ 10,649, 483 USD to the UNHCR alone (UNHCR, 2017).

## **Zooming into the Syrian Refugee Crisis: UAE Support?**

The conflict in Syria started in 2011 and has created the largest humanitarian crisis of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ongoing fighting has killed civilians, destroyed infrastructure and the economy, and widespread violence has included attacks on schools, hospitals and homes. More than 400,000 people have been killed, 12.3 million people are displaced and 13.5 million are in need of emergency assistance within the country. Syria has produced the largest number of refugees fleeing a single country (International Rescue Committee, 2017).

How has the UAE been involved in supporting Syrians?

According to the website of the UAE Embassy in Washington DC, the official strategy has been wide-reaching and encompasses a range of activities listed below:

1. Extended residency permits to over 100,000 Syrian nationals to enter the UAE since 2011
2. Provided over 530 million USD in humanitarian aid and development assistance to address the Syrian crisis, directly and through the Syria Recovery Trust Fund established by the UAE, US, and Germany since 2012
3. Pledged an additional 100 million USD to support refugees and distributed almost half already

4. Finances the Marajeb Al Fhood refugee camp in Jordan, which accommodates over 4000 Syrian refugees.
5. Contributed some USD 72 million over the past two years to various refugee camps hosting Syrians, in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Turkey.
6. Provided USD 38 million of funding for relevant UNHCR programs since 2011.
7. Undertaken substantial measures in order to achieve sustainable stability and lasting peace in Syria, through its support for the Global Coalition against Daesh (ISIL) and its role as a co-lead for the Coalition Working Groups on Stabilization and Strategic Communications. (UAE Embassy website, 2017).

In addition to this, UAE media also reports that an Emirati Red Crescent camp was set up in northern Iraq, refugee camps have been opened in Greece, and the UAE has funded a field hospital in Jordan (UAE media, 2016).

When analyzing the UAE strategy, it appears to be a comprehensive approach that includes collaboration with international partners both agencies and governments, financial assistance being provided to programs both within Syria and in refugee-hosting countries, an effort to accommodate Syrians inside the UAE and even steps being taken to promote stability and peace within Syria.

However, there has been criticism of current policy. According to a report in *Philanthropy Age* by Joanne Bladd (2016) as well as various media outlets, the GCC has been criticized for not formally hosting refugees or asylum seekers. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain and the UAE are not signatories of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, which means they are not held by any legal obligation to do so (Norris & Malknecht, 2015).

Bladd clarifies the position of the GCC, explaining that they have indeed taken in thousands of Syrians since the start of the conflict, granting them entry as foreign workers rather than ‘refugees’ (Bladd, 2016).

Part of the confusion leading to this criticism lies in the terminology. The GCC do not recognize “refugee” as a legal category, as De Bel-Air notes in her article “A Note on Syrian Refugees in the Gulf: Attempting to Assess Data and Policies” (2015, p. 3). She argues that most Gulf states have actually passed measures helping facilitate the entry and stay of Syrians as of 2011 in addition to being major donors to refugee-hosting countries.

According to figures shared by the UAE government, 100,000 new Syrian entrants were received since 2011, bringing the number of Syrians within the UAE up to 242,000. This is a 13% increase from 2011 to 2013 (De Bel Air, 2015). This is a dramatic increase and supports the idea that it has been part of UAE strategy to help accommodate Syrians fleeing the conflict.

In a statement in *The National* newspaper, Ahmed Al Attar of the Delma Institute points out that “the UAE has allowed 123,000 Syrians to relocate to the UAE since 2011. Contrasted with the fact that there are only circa one million Emiratis in the UAE, this number is one of the highest in the world” (Malek, 2016).



The UAE has indeed provided safe haven to thousands of Syrians since the start of the crisis but seemingly as foreign workers, just like any other expat community in the UAE. It can be assumed that they have been mainly skilled professionals coming to work, often accompanied by families and not holding the legal status or categorization of “refugee.”

A recent announcement was made that symbolizes a groundbreaking new approach towards refugees as the UAE prepares to take in 15,000 Syrian refugees.

### **New Announcement: UAE to Welcome 15,000 Syrian Refugees**

At the Leader’s Summit on Refugees at the UN headquarters in New York in September 2016, Reem Al Hashimy, Minister of State for International Cooperation announced that the UAE will be welcoming 15,000 Syrian refugees over the next 5 years (Gulf News, 2016).

In her announcement, Reem Al Hashimy emphasized the need to provide immediate assistance while also offering longer term sustainable solutions, and essentially providing hope to those displaced so that they can achieve the shared goal of returning to their home countries and rebuilding their lives there: “This takes a simultaneous development and humanitarian approach, where we consider both near-term urgency and the tools for longer-term empowerment” (Gulf News, 2016, para. 6).

This step reinforces the UAE’s role as a leader in the region and displays a readiness to play a much more influential role in the international community. It also raises a series of questions about what kind of plans are in place for handling this influx of refugees.

15,000 is not an insignificant number in a country with a population of less than 10 million. To put this number in perspective, the United States had accepted 10,000 Syrian refugees as of August 2016 (Statement by National Security Advisor Susan E. Rice on Syrian Refugee Admissions, 2016). Japan had accepted six Syrian refugees as of 2016, according to figures from the Japanese Ministry of Justice (Taylor, 2016).

This announcement marks a positive development from a humanitarian perspective, and an international diplomacy perspective. From a security standpoint, it has been suggested that leaving refugees to languish in camps for decades could create more radicalization, while resettling them in stable countries and allowing them to pursue education and work, could decrease the risk of violence or extremism (Nowrasteh, 2017).

In her article “Migration as Diplomacy: Labor Migrants, Refugees, and Arab Regional Politics in the Oil-Rich Countries,” Thiollet states that “migration policy should be analyzed as an indirect form of foreign policy that uses the selection of migrants and quasi-asylum policies as diplomacy” (2011, p. 110). So for the UAE, the act of welcoming refugees into the country can be seen as a diplomatic gesture and a willingness to share the responsibility of the global crisis, as well as setting an example for other GCC countries.

### **Literature Review: From Migrants to Refugees**

Due to the lack of academic research done on refugee policy in the UAE, the literature review will examine three articles related to migration policy in the UAE. This will raise questions as to how previous policy may or may not apply to the question of refugees.

**The first article reviewed is by Nasra M. Shah called “Labour Migration from Asian to GCC Countries: Trends, Patterns and Policies”.**

Shah’s article explores labour migration patterns to the GCC from Asian countries, and examines the trends and policies of both the receiving and sending countries.

Historically, the waves of migration to the GCC started when wealth from oil enabled new projects and required a labor force. With low indigenous populations and little participation of women in the work force, there was a need for foreign workers (Shah, 2013).

The trend was for GCC countries to take in more Asian than Arab workers. This was partially due to the lower cost but also because of their “easier manageability” and the desire of host countries to diversify the countries that they accepted migrants from (Shah, 2013 p. 38). According to ILO data, as of 2005, the UAE workforce consisted of 87.1% Asian workers and 8.7% Arab workers (Shah, 2013, p. 45).

Based on the United Nations Survey from 2009, the UAE considered the immigration level to be too high and developed policies to lower it (Shah, 2013, p. 56). This leads to Shah’s main argument, which states there is a contradictory nature to the migration policies. She states that the UAE needs a labor force, but what they are actually doing is setting policies to limit migration. She also notes the contradictory intents of the sending versus receiving countries. The sending countries are aiming to increase outflow while the receiving countries are trying to limit inflow and nationalize their work force.

Shah mentions specific policies that GCC countries are using to limit migration, including putting taxes on foreign workers, amnesties to reduce the number of illegal workers, stricter visa regulations, incentives to private sector for employing nationals, and establishment of quotas (Shah, 2013, p. 57).

How does the UAE decision to take in 15,000 Syrian refugees follow on or break from previous policy? One way could be the legal status of the incoming population. A ‘refugee’ is a different legal category from an ‘economic migrant’ and could come with different

According to Shah, the GCC wants to reduce migrants, but in the case of the Syrian refugees, they UAE is actually volunteering to bring them in- the difference here could be the intent. Rather than economic purposes this plan is for humanitarian reasons.

Shah states that one of the main reasons for curtailing migration is due to the fact that migrants may be taking jobs away from local job-seekers. Would this rationale apply to the Syrian refugee community? Depending on the qualifications of the incoming refugee communities, they may or may not pose a threat to other job-seekers within the UAE. If they represent an unskilled labor

force, they may actually end up displacing South Asian laborers, which could lead to resentment within those communities.

With the migrant workers, the purpose was very clear: the UAE needed a work force. When it comes to taking in refugees, the purpose is not as clear: is it purely for humanitarian purposes?

Shah mentions the temporary nature of many of the migrant workers' contracts, and this leads to the question of how long the refugees would be allowed to stay in the UAE for, and in what capacity.

**The second article reviewed here is called “The “Tiering” of Citizenship and Residency and the “Hierarchization” of Migrant Communities: the United Arab Emirates in Historical Context” by Manal A. Jamal.**

Jamal states that the UAE is a unique example as its laws have “diverged from the anticipated “opening” of nationality and citizenship policies that some assumed would accompany globalization” (Jamal 2015, p. 601). She argues that in a globalized world where most nations are revisiting their immigration policies and liberalizing them, the UAE has laws and policies that do the opposite, and attempt to limit nationality and citizenship. She explores the historic factors that shaped these policies including the British involvement in the founding of the UAE.

Looking to the future, with the UAE poised to welcome 15,000 refugees, how does this plan diverge from their traditional stance on migrants?

First, Jamal states that migrants from countries experiencing civil unrest were limited, so as not to bring instability into the UAE. “The “hierarchization” of migrant communities fluctuates depending on the state’s security considerations and perceptions at different historical junctures” (2015, p. 603). Bringing in refugees from a country experiencing civil war with various politically-inspired parties goes against this.

Second, they promoted the idea of bringing in migrants that would benefit their own economy, as this was in the best interest of the development of the UAE. With the Syrian refugees, it’s not immediately clear how they will economically benefit the UAE, as they could be coming from unskilled communities. The humanitarian benefit is obvious, but the economic benefit is not so straightforward.

According to Jamal, the UAE carefully balances their migrant communities, limiting or increasing certain numbers in order to maintain a hierarchy. She states that “migration flows into the UAE are carefully engineered so that no one homogenous group prevails” (2015, p. 603). Would an increase in the number of Syrians affect other migrant population groups? Would another community have to decrease in order for the Syrian number to increase and would this potentially lead to resentment among communities?

If a decision were made to limit the number of Syrians, where would they go at that point? Traveling back to your home country if it is India or the Philippines is very different from the prospect of traveling back to a home country that is experiencing conflict.

**The third article reviewed is called “Demography, Migration, and the Labour Market in the UAE” by Francoise De Bel-Air.**

This article examines some of the ways the migration system in the UAE has evolved over time.

De Bel-Air states that the UAE has reformed its migration policies as of 2010 for a number of reasons, including the Emiratization of the labour market, security concerns over migrants from unstable countries, calls by human rights organizations, and the creation of the Emirates Identity Authority as a means of more closely monitoring the expatriate populations. (2015, p. 5).

She highlights positive reforms in the system, including action plans to raise awareness on labour issues among government and private sector, as well as police facilities to monitor human trafficking. She mentions a Wage Protection System set up by the Ministry of Labour and a Decent Work Programme set up with the ILO. Further reforms included the abolishment of the no-objection certificates for workers who had been in a job for two years under the sponsorship system. There was also an approval of legislation to address protection of domestic workers (De Bel Air, 2015, pp. 5-6).

These developments show a readiness on the side of the UAE to revisit some policies. This is in line with the recent announcement to welcome refugees into the UAE, and also shows the potential for growth and development to meet new demands and concerns.

## **Interviews with Experts**

Interviews were conducted with two experts to collect insight and analysis on the role the UAE has played and can play going forward in the Syrian refugee crisis. Ahmed Al-Attar of the Delma Institute provided analysis from a security perspective while Ameera Azzam of the UNHCR provided a humanitarian perspective.

### **Interview with Ahmed Al-Attar, Assistant Director, Delma Institute**

Ahmed Al-Attar is Assistant Director at the Delma Institute, an international affairs research house based in Abu Dhabi. He provided his views and analysis on the UAE role in the refugee crisis with a focus on security.

Al-Attar pointed out that the UAE has already absorbed thousands of Syrians since the start of the crisis- but noted a critical difference in the way they are defined. Many of the Syrians that are already in the UAE are skilled professionals and productive contributors to the labour force, and many of the Syrians who joined post-2011 were either family members or similarly skilled individuals fleeing the conflict. This ensured a smooth and almost unfelt transition where more than 120,000 Syrians entered the UAE in 2-3 years. However, currently, as most of the highly skilled Syrians have already resettled in other countries and it would be considered inhumane to filter out refugees based on skillsets alone. The main concern in the GCC related to taking in

unskilled refugees is that the GCC states have limited tools at their disposal to integrate these refugees into their economies and limited ability to provide them with the benefits that would ensure they do so, something which the GCC is not comfortable doing.

From a security standpoint, Al-Attar listed several more challenges that could arise if the UAE hosts refugees.

Difficulties could arise during the selection process, as it would be challenging to verify credentials and documents from refugees. He noted the ease with which a Syrian passport can be obtained these days and said that there is a very real possibility that people could forge documents to gain entry to a state.

Al-Attar also noted that as a result of the civil war, many Syrians may have become radicalized which is problematic for the UAE, that takes an “anti-Islamist” stance. He highlighted the need for vetting processes to ensure that this demographic does not bring their political ideologies into the country.

Challenges aside, Al-Attar’s view was that 15,000 is a manageable number to vet. Taking into account the fact that permanent residency and eventual citizenship is not something the UAE will be offering, he did not foresee any legal complications that would hinder their entry to the country, suggesting that they could possibly come through government sponsorship. He also said that regardless of their legal status there should definitely be an option for them to work, and that best practices from other refugee hosting countries should be applied.

In terms of overall strategy on Syria, Al-Attar’s view was that the ability of the UAE to impact the situation on the ground is very limited, being a small country in a highly volatile and increasingly financially insolvent region. From this “precarious” position, he emphasized that the most that can be done is continue to provide financial humanitarian assistance and take in a manageable number of refugees. (A. Al-Attar, personal communication, February 7, 2017).

### **Interview with Aameera Azzam, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees**

Aameera Azzam is a Protection Officer at the UNHCR office in Abu Dhabi. She provided insight and analysis from a humanitarian standpoint. She also had new information to share about the upcoming plan.

Azzam listed a number of ways the UAE has been assisting refugees both officially and unofficially.

- Through generous donations to the UNHCR both from the government and the private sector. From 2012- 2016 private donors in the UAE gave over 30 million USD to the UNHCR.
- Azzam pointed out that the UAE is currently hosting around 200,000 Syrian refugees already. According to the way the UNHCR defines refugees, all Syrians currently living

outside Syria cannot return and thus are categorized as refugees. So although the Syrians living in the UAE may be there by choice, or may have migrated prior to the conflict, and may not be registered with the UNCHR, they are still considered ‘refugees’ and the UAE has provided these 200,000 refugees with safe haven.

- The UAE allows them unofficially stay in the country with expired visas, and when these cases are brought to the UNHCR they request the authorities to waive the fines associated with this and the requests have always been accepted.
- No one has been refouled to Syria and authorities have not conducted roundups of Syrians (or Iraqis).
- There have been cases where refugees are stranded in airports while transiting through the UAE, and authorities are proactive in referring them to the UNHCR immediately for assistance.
- The UNHCR has done much capacity building in the UAE and doubled training sessions in 2015 to authorities. This resulted in a huge increase of referrals from airports to assist stranded refugees. No written referral mechanism exists; instead an informal system is used based on personal contacts.

### **The plan going forward: 15,000 Syrian refugees coming to the UAE**

The UNHCR is involved in the plan to welcome 15,000 Syrian refugees into the UAE, and Azzam shared some updates about the status of the initiative. She explained that the government is working heavily on this, and is committed to ensuring that their story is a success story and that the refugees have a high quality of life in the UAE. They are currently in the planning and learning phase. Committees have been established and are gathering information about the reintegration process, and they have already visited Canada and Germany to familiarize themselves with best practices.

The plan is for the first 3,000 Syrian refugees to arrive in 2017, with 3,000 more following each year as part of the 5-year plan. The refugees will not be coming directly from Syria, but from other countries. Other than that, it has not yet been decided how the selection process will work.

In terms of the social integration process, Azzam’s view is that the UAE context will provide a smoother transition than European countries as there will be no language barrier, and the new Syrians will easily blend in with the rest of the large expatriate population. As for the economic transition, this will depend on government choices.

One important distinction to make is that the refugees will not be coming to the UAE under the traditional UNHCR system, which aims to bring an end to refugee status and ultimately provides naturalization. Instead, they will be coming through a ‘complimentary pathway system.’

Due to the unprecedented numbers of refugees, there has been a necessary paradigm shift in the way states approach resettlement activities, and a drive to find new solutions to scale up resettlement. In 2016, the UNHCR appealed to states to design new processing modalities and create ‘complimentary pathways’ outside the traditional resettlement framework to address the high need. Possible pathways could include special humanitarian visas, private sponsorship programs, family reunification, labour mobility schemes, and academic scholarships (UNHCR, 2016).

These would be temporary solutions; a legal channel for refugees to gain admission and stay until they can safely return to their countries.

The UAE will be the first (and so far the only) Arab country to offer complimentary pathways. Authorities are currently working on finding ways to incorporate this plan to fit with existing laws and practices in the UAE.

### **Why is the UAE pursuing this?**

Azzam believes this plan is very much in line with UAE vision and strategy. She noted that a key theme in the UAE is tolerance, and that the history of tolerance has been proven in the way the country has welcomed foreigners, allowing them to make up over 80% of the population.

She pointed out that the UAE also has the means to provide humanitarian assistance and has been doing a great deal over the years to assist humanitarian issues, much of which has not been publicized. Rather than seeing this as a novel and ground-breaking initiative, Azzam sees this plan as a continuation of what the UAE has already been doing, just in a new form. (A. Azzam, personal communication, February 7, 2017).

### **Going forward: Policy Recommendations**

- Many nations have viewed refugees as a burden on the system, economically. The UAE should view this demographic as a new source of human capital, as an investment that can add value to society and add productive contributions to the economy.
- The UAE should be the first of the Gulf countries to put a comprehensive plan in place for their Syrian refugee resettlement program. This would reinforce its status as a humanitarian leader in the GCC and provide a model that could be adopted by other Gulf countries in order to have a cohesive strategy.
- Create a government department or committee that deals specifically with refugee resettlement in the UAE, to ensure that their entry and settlement happens in a way that

incorporates lessons learnt from best practices in other countries, for example Canada and Germany.

- Develop innovative ways of incorporating refugees into the social and economic fabric of the country. Building public-private partnerships and having government team up with companies to help establish housing, employability training, and job placement could be ideas to consider.
- Ensure that their stay in the UAE will equip them with skills necessary to rebuild their lives and communities once they return to Syria. Explore possible industries that will require labor once the war in Syria is over and the rebuilding phase begins: possibly construction, architecture, urban planning, infrastructure building. This will support the UAE goal of essentially ensuring that in the long-term, refugees will return to their home country rather than settle permanently in the UAE.
- To have a sustainable and lasting impact, any complementary pathways that the UAE opens to refugees should not be of a very temporary nature. Plans should allow for a longer-term stay bearing in mind that the average amount of time refugees spend outside their home country is 17 years. The end goal should be to support them in returning to Syria when it is safe, but working on a realistic timeline to ensure lasting impact.



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