



# Refugees and Asylum

James Gallagher

Immigration  
**ISSUES**



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# The Dangerous Life of a Refugee

For residents of Homs, a major industrial center of about eight hundred thousand located in western Syria, simply leaving the house became a dangerous ordeal during the spring of 2011. In March and April angry Syrians in Homs and other cities had begun protesting the harsh rule of Bashar al-Assad, demanding that the Syrian dictator relinquish power. The Syrian protests were part of a larger wave of popular uprisings, known as the Arab Spring, that had resulted in the end of long-standing dictatorships in nearby Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. But unlike the leaders of those countries, Assad refused to step down. Instead, he instructed government forces to fire on demonstrators, killing hundreds of civilians in Homs and elsewhere. Armed Syrians began to fight back against the Assad regime. Soon other groups, including Islamist extremists, had joined the fight to overthrow Assad, and a full-fledged civil war was under way.

The Assad regime cracked down on suspected rebels with increasing brutality. In November 2011 Syrian soldiers rounded up the workers at a sugar factory in Homs, accusing them of supporting the insurgency. Although the soldiers had no proof that the men were rebel sympathizers, they executed them anyway, throwing their bodies into the rubble-strewn street as a warning to those who would challenge the Assad government's authority.

The next day Gasem al-Hamad and his pregnant wife, Wajed, left Homs with their three children. Gasem's brother

had been one of the men executed at the sugar factory. A few weeks earlier another one of Gasem's brothers had been killed by a bomb that government forces dropped on his neighborhood in Homs. Wajed's brother had also been killed in the conflict. Gasem and Wajed moved their family to Palmyra, a city in Syria that is about three hours away, where they could live with relatives.

People who leave their homes to escape violence but who remain within the borders of their country are known as internally displaced persons (IDPs). Like Gasem and Wajed, millions of other Syrians were internally displaced as a result of the civil war. However, staying within the country is not necessarily safe. Under international law, the Syrian government was still responsible for helping IDPs, rather than international organizations like the UNHCR.

For Gasem and Wajed, there was little chance that they would ever return to their old home. After they arrived in Palmyra, friends from Homs sent photos showing that their house had been destroyed by a bomb. As the fighting in Syria continued, Gasem and Wajed decided they were not safe in Palmyra either. After a few months they decided to flee Syria altogether.

### **Reaching a Safe Country**

The journey to a safe country can be long and dangerous due to natural hazards or bad weather, food or water shortages, and challenging terrain. Sometimes, refugees must travel on foot or in makeshift boats and find shelter along their route. Refugees often have to deal with human hazards as well, such as accidentally straying into areas where military forces are active, or being attacked and robbed by predatory thugs. There is also an ever-present danger of being caught by authorities, who may imprison or execute them.

Refugees often cross borders illegally. Under normal circumstances, a person who wants to travel to another country must have a passport and usually a visa granting them permission to enter. However, it is nearly impossible for refugees fleeing combat



zones to obtain visas, mostly because when conflicts begin, most foreign embassies withdraw their staffs, who are responsible for processing such documents.

In Syria, legal international travel was not an option for Gasem and Wajed. Instead, they paid most of their remaining money to smugglers, who promised to help them avoid government check-points and cross the Syrian border into Jordan. Gasem and Wajed made it across the border and in April 2012 arrived at the Jordanian city of Al Mafraq, where they could stay with relatives.



*Angry Syrians began protesting the harsh rule of Syria's dictator Bashar al-Assad in 2011. The Syrian protests were part of a larger wave of uprisings known as the Arab Spring.*

Soon after arriving, Gasem and Wajed visited a UN office in Jordan's capital, Amman, where they formally registered as refugees. UN officials held an in-depth interview with the couple then conducted background checks to confirm that they were eligible for asylum. Once Gasem and Wajed showed that their plight was legitimate, the family would be allowed to stay in Jordan and receive help.

Registration of refugees helps the UNHCR as well as the host country's officials and nongovernmental organizations plan appropriately to care for the refugees. This enables them to determine the appropriate amounts of shelter, food, water, health and sanitation facilities, and financial aid that will be needed. Registration also helps weed out people who are trying to defraud the system or are involved in human trafficking. Refugees benefit as well. Once refugees are registered, some host countries will issue them identity documents, which show that they are legally allowed to be in the country. In some cases these documents give refugees greater freedom of movement within the host country or permit them to find work, open a bank account, or rent a home.

### **Life in a Refugee Camp**

After being processed, refugees are settled in new homes within the host country. Often, camps are created to accommodate large numbers of refugees. Many of these camps are located on the outskirts of urban areas. The government of the country that is hosting the refugees sets up the camps, but they are usually managed by the UNHCR, with aid from international organizations such as the Red Cross, Oxfam, and the United Nations Children's Fund.

Although 85 percent of refugee camps are located in developed nations, some camps are located in less developed countries that can barely feed, clothe, and shelter their own people, much less support a large population of refugees. This is the case in Cameroon (which hosts refugees from the Central African Republic), Uganda (home to refugees from South Sudan), and Chad (home

to refugees from the Darfur region of Sudan.) Additionally, because the camps are often located near the border of the country where conflict has produced refugees, the camps are vulnerable to attack. In May 2016, for example, Syrian combatants bombed the al-Kamouna refugee camp near the Turkey-Syria border, killing at least thirty people. (Both government and rebel forces claimed the other side had carried out the attack.)

Life in a refugee camp can be disorienting and traumatic as refugees try to adjust to a new way of life. UNHCR workers often set up schools and other social activities to help children adjust. However, despite the best efforts of aid workers, conditions in refugee camps tend to be appalling. Many refugees are sick or hurt when they arrive. The camps have limited medical facilities, and poor sanitation is common, so the risk of disease and infection is high. Living conditions are squalid and overcrowded and provide little privacy for families, many of whom fear for the safety of their children and women. “I started to cry to myself about the situation after the first three days,” commented one Syrian refugee living in the Zaatari camp in Jordan. “How could things come to this?”<sup>8</sup>

## **Living Outside a Refugee Camp**

As a result of the poor conditions in refugee camps, many refugees look to leave the camps as soon as they can. In 2019 the UN estimated that over 70 percent of the global refugee population lived in apartment-type private housing with their families.

Most of these refugees are in urban areas of developing countries like Jordan or Turkey.

Living outside a camp places a significant economic burden on refugees. In the camp, they receive food, water, shelter, and medical care funded by the UNHCR. When refugees are granted permission to live outside the camp, they remain eligible for certain benefits, including food

“I started to cry to myself about the situation after the first three days. How could things come to this?”<sup>8</sup>

—A Syrian refugee in the Zaatari camp in Jordan



## Internally Displaced Persons

Not all people forced to leave their homes are able or willing to leave their countries. Instead, some people resettle temporarily in safer areas within their country. Such people are known as internally displaced persons, or IDPs. In 2019 the UNHCR estimated that more than 41 million people were internally displaced due to armed conflicts, human rights violations, or natural disasters such as floods or typhoons.

Remaining within their home country may sound more appealing than becoming a refugee. However, there are important differences between IDPs and refugees. Once refugees have crossed their country's border, they are entitled to certain protections under international law and can receive help from the UNHCR, the Red Cross, and other aid agencies. On the other hand, IDPs remain under the jurisdiction of their country's government, which limits the amount of assistance that international organizations can provide. IDPs depend on their government to protect them from violence—even though, in some cases, that government is causing the violence that forced them to leave their homes in the first place. “The overwhelming majority of internally displaced persons are women and children,” notes the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. “More often than refugees, the internally displaced tend to remain close to or become trapped in zones of conflict, caught in the cross-fire and at risk of being used as pawns, targets or human shields by the belligerents.”

Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Questions and Answers About IDPs.” [www.ohchr.org](http://www.ohchr.org).

rations and modest stipends for housing and travel. However, due to limited budgets and rising demand, this assistance is usually not enough to fully cover the expenses of a family living outside the camp, so once they go out on their own, refugees must find a way to earn money for rent and food. Although living outside of UNHCR camps can be a challenge, some refugee families are so discouraged by conditions in the camp that they simply leave without permission. They try to blend in to the society of the host country and forgo additional support from the UNHCR or other organizations.

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9. Quoted in Bellamy et al., “The Lives and Livelihoods of Syrian Refugees.”
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# Organizations and Websites

**Alight** — [www.wearealight.org](http://www.wearealight.org)

For more than forty years, this organization has helped refugees and displaced people survive conflict and crisis by providing humanitarian aid.

**American Red Cross** — [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)

The American Red Cross provides first aid, medical services, food and water, shelter, and other essential relief supplies to refugees and families displaced by conflict.

**Amnesty International** — [www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)

Amnesty International works to ensure justice and fair treatment for refugees and others who face discrimination throughout the world.

**Migration Policy Institute** — [www.migrationpolicy.org](http://www.migrationpolicy.org)

The Migration Policy Institute is an independent, nonpartisan think tank dedicated to analysis of the movement of people worldwide. The institute publishes books, reports, fact sheets, and the online journal *Migration Information Source*.

**National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights** — [www.nnirr.org](http://www.nnirr.org)

The goal of the National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights is to promote a fair immigration and refugee policy in the United States and to defend and expand the rights of all immigrants and refugees, regardless of immigration status.

**Refugee Council USA** — <http://rcusa.org>

Refugee Council USA is a coalition of two dozen organizations that work to protect refugees and help them resettle in the United States.

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