

A photograph of a man with a beard and a white cap, holding a baby, both looking through a chain-link fence. The man is wearing a light-colored shirt with blue embroidery. The baby is wearing a striped shirt. The fence is in the foreground, creating a grid pattern over the image.

**HUMAN
RIGHTS**
in Focus

Human Rights in Focus: Refugees

Michael V. Uschan

Contents

Introduction	4
Seeking New Lives	
Chapter One	8
A Global Problem	
Chapter Two	19
Why People Become Refugees	
Chapter Three	30
The Harsh Reality of Refugee Life	
Chapter Four	41
Beginning Anew	
Chapter Five	52
Dealing Humanely with Refugees	
Source Notes	62
How to Get Involved	69
For Further Research	72
Index	74
Picture Credits	79
About the Author	80

Chapter 2

Why People Become Refugees

Focus Questions

1. Refugees flee their homes because they fear being killed during armed conflict or persecuted because of their race, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, or political beliefs. What situation would be bad enough to force you to become a refugee?
2. Refugees experience dramatic life changes when they leave their homelands. What would change in your life if you became a refugee? Explain your answer.
3. Becoming a refugee means separating from family and friends, becoming homeless, and learning to live in a new country and culture. What do you think would be the hardest part of being a refugee for you, and why?

The decision to become a refugee is one of the hardest any person will ever have to make—it changes one's life forever. Refugees must leave the comfort and safety of their homes and communities. They become homeless for months or even years. They may never again see the friends and relatives they left behind. Because many refugees must flee quickly, they can take only what they can carry or what will fit into a small car. In very poor or rural areas, refugees might even flee on a wagon pulled by a donkey or horse. They do not know where they will end up or what their lives will be like. They only know their journey will feature hardships and danger. Despite such harsh realities, millions of people become refugees each year. They do so for many reasons that share one commonality: Leaving offers them better odds than staying.

Human Rights Violations

Many refugees flee situations because they are threatened with violence, lack freedom to express their political views, are unable to practice their religion or express their sexuality, or are denied other basic human rights. Malith Chan was fourteen years old when soldiers invaded his village in South Sudan and began

“The soldiers just beat everybody, shooting the children—kids even two years old—killing the old people.”¹⁵

—Malith Chan, who fled South Sudan at age fourteen

killing people. “The soldiers just beat everybody, shooting the children—kids even two years old—killing the old people,”¹⁵ says Chan. He and his younger brother escaped the slaughter and traveled to the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. They lived there for several years before being moved to Phoenix, Arizona, with the help of a Roman Catholic relief agency.

Clampdowns on freedom of speech also create refugee situations. Mezar Matar was a journalist in Raqqa, Syria, in 2013 when ISIS seized control of his hometown. Matar began to fear for his life after he reported on protests against ISIS. “I received threats from them,” says Matar. “I was afraid everyday, when I would walk home, I would fear from the cars that drove by me—I was scared they would abduct me.”¹⁶ Matar escaped and went to Turkey, but he hopes to return to Syria someday if ISIS can be defeated.

Selam Gebru fled her home in Eritrea for a different reason—religious persecution. Gebru was Christian in a Muslim country. “[I] was forbidden to worship,” says Gebru of her life in Eritrea. “All the churches were closed, all the Christians were being hounded by the government, so all in all I decided to flee home.”¹⁷

Sexual orientation is yet another factor that drives refugees from their homelands. Many Muslim nations discriminate against gay people, who are sometimes imprisoned or killed if their government regards homosexuality as sinful. In September 2016 the Central Okanagan Refugee Committee in Kelowna, British Columbia, welcomed a gay man who had fled this kind of persecution in Syria. “Getting across the border into Iraq gave him space from those who seemed immediately after his hide, but [the Middle East is] not a gay-friendly environment in any way, shape or form,”¹⁸ says Tom Kemp, who chairs the group.



South Sudanese refugees collect water at a camp in Uganda. For more than two decades, war has raged in Sudan and South Sudan, resulting in more than a million displaced people.

War Creates Refugees

However, the vast majority of people become refugees because of war. Indeed, the modern refugee crisis is greater than at any time since World War II, in part because there has been more war globally than at any time since then. In recent years civil wars have been fought in nine Middle Eastern and North African nations—Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, South Sudan, and parts of Turkey and Nigeria. Just as during World War II, the death and destruction of war has forced millions of people to flee for their lives.

War for control of the African nation of Sudan has raged between two tribes—the Dinka and the Nuor—off and on for more than two decades. In 2011 the country split into Sudan and South Sudan, but war continued even after that. On September 16, 2016, the UN Refugee Agency said a new surge in fighting had forced 185,000 people to flee from South Sudan very quickly. Their exodus pushed the number of South Sudanese refugees to more than 1 million.

One of those refugees is Tamma Joyce. When gunshots were fired in the South Sudanese village of Lainya, she and other people began running. Joyce ran home but could not find her parents.

Video of ISIS Life

Many refugees have come from Raqqa, Syria, and a 2016 video made secretly by two women shows why. The video shows armed soldiers of ISIS patrolling nearly deserted streets heavily damaged by fighting. One woman, Oum Mohammad, discusses the barbaric death sentences ISIS imposes for violating rules. "They execute with bullets, desecrate the body, decapitate it, stick the head on a spike and put it on display at the roundabout or they will put the body on the road and force cars to run it over until nothing is left," she says in the video. She also discusses how ISIS has severely limited women's rights and forced them to wear tent-like clothing that completely covers their bodies and faces. Mohammad says she wishes she could "take off the niqab [the face covering] and the darkness that cloaks us." The video shows the women trying to buy some hair dye in a store. Pictures of women on the dye boxes have been colored over, due to a prohibition on showing a woman's face in public. "All women like to show their faces," says Mohammad. "We've lost that option. We've lost our femininity." Mohammad and her friend were able to send the video to a Swedish news station, which posted it online so the world could see the reality of life under ISIS.

Siobhan McFadyen, "Undercover Film Shows Inhuman Existence of Women Living Under ISIS Rule in Raqqa," *Mirror* (London), March 14, 2016. www.mirror.co.uk.

Fearing for her life, she hurriedly filled a backpack with clothes, grabbed her cell phone, and ran away. The nineteen-year-old ended up in a refugee camp in Uganda. She does not know what happened to her parents, but she says, "I keep hoping to see them. I feel very bad. I just hope we are reunited."¹⁹ Somalia, too, has been a battleground since 1991, when the government collapsed. War has been fought to control various parts of that African nation and has featured the Muslim extremist group al Shabab, rival political parties, and foreign soldiers from Kenya.

Arab Spring and Winter

Most of the wars in the Middle East began after the US invasion of Iraq, and specifically after a period known as the Arab Spring. The Arab Spring was born on December 17, 2010, when Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Ben Arous, Tunisia, set himself on fire to protest his treatment by the government. For years officials had harassed him and seized his merchandise because he could not

afford a vendor's license. Bouazizi's death on January 4, 2011, sparked a backlash. People protested in the streets, sometimes violently, against the brutal way in which Tunisia's government routinely treated its citizens and denied their basic human rights. The protests were aimed at protecting these rights and at establishing a more democratic government. The prodemocracy movement was so powerful that it forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to flee to Saudi Arabia and ended his twenty-three-year reign.

Similar uprisings, protests, and riots spread quickly to neighboring Middle Eastern countries also ruled by authoritarian and dictatorial leaders. These resulted in the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen. These were leaders who had routinely and brutally denied citizens basic human rights, such as the right to publicly criticize the government and freedom from unjust imprisonment. Other countries that experienced Arab Spring-related protests or uprisings included Syria, Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia.

However, the prodemocracy tone of the uprisings did not last long. The Arab Spring quickly faded when supporters of authoritarian regimes either fought back or took advantage of the power vacuums created by the chaos. "The peaceful demonstrations that were supposed to bring democracy have instead given way to bloodshed and chaos, with the forces of tyranny trying to turn back the clock," explains Georgetown University Middle East expert Daniel Byman. "It is too soon to say that the Arab Spring is gone, never to resurface. But the Arab Winter has clearly arrived."²⁰

In Egypt the attempt to transition to democracy ended in a military coup, mass arrests, and another repressive government. Meanwhile, similar attempts in Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia ignited civil wars. The most devastating civil war by far has been in Syria. The result of the 2011 failure to overthrow President Bashar al-Assad has been continuous, savage fighting that has forced half of Syria's 23 million citizens from their homes and killed four hundred thousand people.

The threat of dying in that terrible conflict caused Hashem al-Souki, his wife, and three sons to flee their small community near Damascus, the capital of Syria. A government worker, al-Souki was arrested and imprisoned for several months in 2012



A masked soldier displays the ISIS banner in the deserts of the Middle East. The extremist group uses brutality and terrorist tactics to seize territory, which has created a flood of refugees.

because he opposed al-Assad's rule. Al-Souki was not alone in this treatment—from 2011 to 2013 at least eleven thousand people were tortured and even killed for opposing al-Assad. Al-Souki made the difficult decision to leave Syria after being freed. When his father asked him why he could not stay, he replied, "Papa, I'm sorry. But it's unbearable here. I have to go—not for me, but for my children and my wife."²¹ His family made it to safety in Egypt on June 27, 2013.

The war al-Souki fled was still raging on September 26, 2016, when more than two hundred people were killed in and around Aleppo in just a few days after a weeklong cease-fire expired. "I've never seen so many people dying in one place," said Mohammad Zein Khandaqani, a doctor. "It's terrifying today. In less than one

hour the Russian planes have killed more than 50 people and injured more than two hundred.”²² One reason Syria’s civil war has lasted so long is that the United States and Russia have indirectly joined the fighting by supporting various groups. The United States has backed Syrian rebels who are trying to overthrow al-Assad, whom Russia supports.

Continuous warfare and antigovernment sentiments have shattered some Middle Eastern nations so much that Muslim extremist groups have been able to win control of parts of them. The most powerful of these groups is ISIS, and the despotic way it rules territory has created a new flood of refugees.

Refugees Flee from War

ISIS began in 1999 as an offshoot of al Qaeda, which was founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden. It is one of several radical groups that support what is often (and controversially) called Islamic fundamentalism. This extreme outlook is based on Sharia law, which is derived from the Koran, the Muslim holy book, and the Sunna, the teachings of the Prophet Mohammed, who founded Islam in the seventh century. Sharia replaces democratic methods of government with religious rules that strictly control all aspects of life, including daily routine, family and religious obligations, and financial dealings. While most Muslims reject fundamentalism because it ignores basic human rights and is not an accurate interpretation of their religion, extremist groups like ISIS use it to further their cause.

Despite its overall unpopularity, ISIS has been able to use terrorist tactics to seize territory from several nations. Busy fighting political unrest and fallout from the Arab Spring, several nations were unable to protect large swaths of their land. In 2014, for example, ISIS took control of large parts of Libya and Iraq and declared the area an Islamic state. Many people soon began to flee because of the harsh new life ISIS imposed on them. “Life under ISIS is not good at all,” wrote one man who experienced ISIS’s rule in Mosul, Iraq. “Men aren’t allowed to cut their beards and

“It’s unbearable here. I have to go—not for me, but for my children and my wife.”²¹

—Hashem al-Souki, who left Syria in 2012 because of continuous warfare

Source Notes

Introduction: Seeking New Lives

1. Quoted in Gabe Joselow, “Team Refugees: 5 Remarkable Journeys to Rio 2016 Olympic Games,” NBC News, August 3, 2016. www.nbcnews.com.
2. Quoted in Patrick Kingsley, “‘Prisoners of Europe’: The Everyday Humiliation of Refugees Stuck in Greece,” *Guardian* (Manchester), September 6, 2016. www.theguardian.com.
3. Quoted in Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Fact Sheet No. 20, Human Rights and Refugees,” July 1993. www.ohchr.org.

Chapter 1: A Global Problem

4. Quoted in Patrice Taddonio, “How Four Child Refugees Said Goodbye to Syria,” *Frontline*, PBS, April 19, 2016. www.pbs.org.
5. Quoted in Patrick Kingsley et al., “‘I Didn’t Think I Might Never See My Parents Again’—Refugee Children Share Their Stories,” *Guardian* (Manchester), January 26, 2016. www.theguardian.com.
6. Quoted in Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, “Fact Sheet No. 20, Human Rights and Refugees.”
7. Quoted in Susmita Baral, “Refugee Crisis 2016 in Europe: Death Toll and Migrant Arrival Increases, Statistics Show,” *International Business Times*, August 10, 2016. www.ibtimes.com.
8. Quoted in Scott Anderson, “Fractured Lands,” *New York Times Magazine*, August 11, 2016. www.nytimes.com.
9. David Francis, “How Saddam Hussein Made the Middle East Stable,” *Fiscal Times*, August 26, 2013. www.thefiscaltimes.com.

How to Get Involved

By getting involved, you can make a difference. Organizations that work with groups or issues often need volunteers for a variety of tasks ranging from letter writing to organizing events. Some organizations also sponsor internships for youth.

Catholic Relief Services

228 W. Lexington St.
Baltimore, MD 21201
www.crs.org

This Roman Catholic Agency helps refugees around the world, including those who move to the United States. The agency houses refugees when they flee their homelands to nearby nations and tries to help them move to a final destination to live.

International Rescue Committee

122 E. Forty-Second St.
New York, NY 10168
www.rescue.org

This group works in the United States and other countries to help refugees. It provides housing, food, and medical care. It also offers emergency aid and long-term assistance to refugees and those displaced by war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Islamic Relief USA

PO Box 22250
Alexandria, VA 22304
<http://irusa.org>

This group works in the United States and other countries to help Muslims, including refugees, make new lives for themselves after they leave their homelands. It provides relief services such as food and medical care as well as educational opportunities.

For Further Research

Books

Patrick Kingsley, *The New Odyssey: The Story of Europe's Refugee Crisis*. London: Guardian Faber, 2016.

Gulwali Passarlay, *The Lightless Sky: An Afghan Refugee Boy's Journey of Escape to a New Life in Britain*. London: Atlantic, 2015.

Internet Sources

British Broadcasting Corporation, "Europe Migrant Crisis." www.bbc.com/news/topics/23672ac3-fcad-42c7-a557-23a954eb0e7b/europe-migrant-crisis.

Ian Bremmer, "These 5 Different Camps Tell the Story of the Global Refugee Crisis," *Time*, October 27, 2016. <http://time.com/4547918/refugee-camps-calais-zaatari-dadaab-nakivale-mae-la>.

Cable News Network, "Seeking Refuge: Migration Crisis." www.cnn.com/specials/world/migration-crisis.

Jodi Kantor and Catrin Einhorn, "Refugees Encounter a Foreign Word: Welcome," *New York Times*, July 1, 2016. www.nytimes.com/2016/07/01/world/americas/canada-syrian-refugees.html.

Nick Evershed et al., "The Lives of Asylum Seekers in Detention Detailed in a Unique Database," *Guardian* (Manchester), August 10, 2016. www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2016/aug/10/the-nauru-files-the-lives-of-asylum-seekers-in-detention-detailed-in-a-unique-database-interactive.

Brita Ohm, "Berlin Attack on the Media Stereotypes About Refugees." *Deutsche-Welle.com*, December 23, 2016. www.dw.com/en/berlin-attack-and-the-media-stereotypes-about-refugees/a-36888614.

Index

Note: Boldface page numbers indicate illustrations.

- Adhikari, Prabhat, 59–60
- Aitoon, Mohammed, 45–46
- Ali, Fouad Haj, 60
- Al-Ali, Motab, 51
- Al-Ali, Sabha, 51
- Alsado, Abdelbary, 47
- Amnesty International, 53–54
- Arab Spring, 13
 - birth of, 22–23
 - civil wars in wake of, 14
 - rise of ISIS and, 25
- al-Assad, Bashar (Syrian dictator), 14, 23–24, 60
- Asseni, Hendiya, 5
- asylum/asylum seekers, 42
 - process of assessing, 42–44
- Australia, 38
- Awad, Nihad, 50

- Ben Ali, Zine El Abidine (Tunisian dictator), 23
- Bhutan, 59
- Biel, Yiech Pur, 4, 14
- Bier, David, 47
- bin Laden, Osama, 25
- Birky, John, 50
- Boko Haram (extremist group), 27, 48

- Bouazizi, Mohamed, 22–23
- Brexit, 57
- Al-Bukaie, Asmaa, 48
- Bush, George W., 11–12
- Byman, Daniel, 23

- Catholic Relief Services, 69
- Chan, Malith, 20
- Chiengjiek, James, 28
- child refugees, 12, 16, 40
 - education of, 44–46
 - in Greek refugee camp, **9**
 - as percentage of total refugee population, 8
- Christians
 - at Mass in Iraq, **15**
 - as refugees, 20
 - from ISIS, 15–16, 26
- civil wars
 - in wake of Arab Spring, 14, 23
 - See also Syrian civil war
- Council on American-Islamic Relations, 50

- Dieng, Adama, 31
- displaced persons, 9, 10
- Dobbs, Leo, 32
- Doctors for Human Rights, 33

- Economides, Spyros, 55