

UNDERSTANDING THE SYRIA CRISIS

and the role of the church

By Rich Stearns





*The LORD is a refuge for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.*

—Psalm 9:9 (NIV)

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INTRODUCTION

The war in Syria was in its second year when I first traveled to a refugee camp in Jordan and met with children affected by the crisis. Until I saw it for myself, I couldn't have understood the vast scale of this disaster unfolding on the other side of the globe. The conflict has now killed nearly a quarter of a million people and displaced roughly 12 million, and it may spell the end of historic Christianity and other minority religions across huge sections of the Middle East.

As the plane descended toward Amman, Jordan, I wondered whether anything could really make a difference. I've seen up close the intricacies of Middle Eastern politics. Could a political solution to this crisis be found? I was doubtful. In the meantime, would any effort to assist refugees be more than a band-aid on a gaping wound?

And even if we could make a difference, would anybody want to help? Americans seemed to have similar questions: World Vision's efforts to assist refugees had so far garnered only a little support. Indeed, World Vision U.S. raised barely \$700,000 in each of the first four years of the Syria conflict. This stands in sharp contrast to the compassion Americans have displayed during other crises, such as natural disasters. For example, we saw \$8 million in donations in just the first week after the April 2015 earthquake in Nepal.



Syria poses serious challenges to our willingness to get involved. There is a religious dimension in which one faith is set against another. And this is a man-made disaster, in which there are few “good guys” and instead a bewildering array of rebel groups, dictators, and terrorists.

Because the scope of the crisis is mind-numbing, we often focus on the details of the diplomatic intrigue and lose the perspective of the individuals—12 million mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons—whose lives have been torn apart. The heartbreaking stories of these innocent victims are only rarely told in the media.

As the plane landed, I was weighed down by questions about the complexity of the situation, shaped by the news and statistics I’d absorbed. I would have very different questions, and a very different burden, after meeting a 10-year-old girl named Haya. Coming face to face with her brought the situation into sharp focus. Now I was faced with a *person*—someone created and loved by God, who had suffered terribly—as well as questions about what my response should be to her need.

What would I do for boys and girls like Haya? And more importantly, does the church have a role to play?

Haya's story

Haya, along with her sister and mother, lived in a cramped apartment near a camp that swelled with tens of thousands of refugees streaming into Jordan from Syria. The U.N. and humanitarian agencies had constructed the camp in the middle of the desert on land no one else wanted. By the time of my 2013 visit, the camp had become a virtual city of nearly 100,000 inhabitants where a year before there had been only sand and rock.



Haya, age 10, Jordan

The previous 12 months had seen Syria's Arab Spring protests turn into revolution and then civil war: cities bombed; young men recruited to fight; fathers interrogated and tortured; women and children forced to run for their lives in the middle of the night, taking only what they could carry.

That was Haya's story. Her father had been killed in the fighting in one of Syria's southern towns. She had fled with her mother and sister across the border with nothing but the clothes they wore. Winter was approaching, and Haya and her sister had nothing to keep them warm at night, so they simply huddled together in the small basement apartment.

Haya and several other girls her age were prepared for my visit. They read letters to me, telling me of their harrowing escapes from the war. Seven-year-

old Rahma told me, "In the name of God, I don't know how to start or where to start ... Should I start with the children who were killed and slaughtered? ... Should I talk about our home that burned down or speak of my room, my toys, or my notebooks?"

A 7-year-old should never experience such terror and loss.

They told me of the hardships of their lives as refugees. They weren't able to go to school. They missed their loved ones who had died, and they simply wanted to be home with their friends, family, and familiar toys and bedrooms.

Each girl spoke with eloquence about her own experience. But then Haya sang me a song she had written, and as I listened, tears welled in my eyes. "Syria is in pain," Haya sang. "Syria is bleeding. Syria is crying for her children. Her children were her candles, and they have faded out."

The last line has echoed in my ears ever since.

I couldn't fix everything for Haya, but there was one thing I could give her: a backpack filled with supplies so she could continue her education. She was thrilled to have the notebooks and pencils—yet what she loved most was the blanket stuffed in the bottom of the pack. Finally, something to keep the winter cold at bay.

It was meeting Haya and the other children that clarified for me what is really happening in the region. Children—an entire generation of children—are being blown out like candles. This is not merely a diplomatic failure, or Middle Eastern politics as usual. It's a crisis that is threatening the lives of 12 million individual people—more than half of them children.



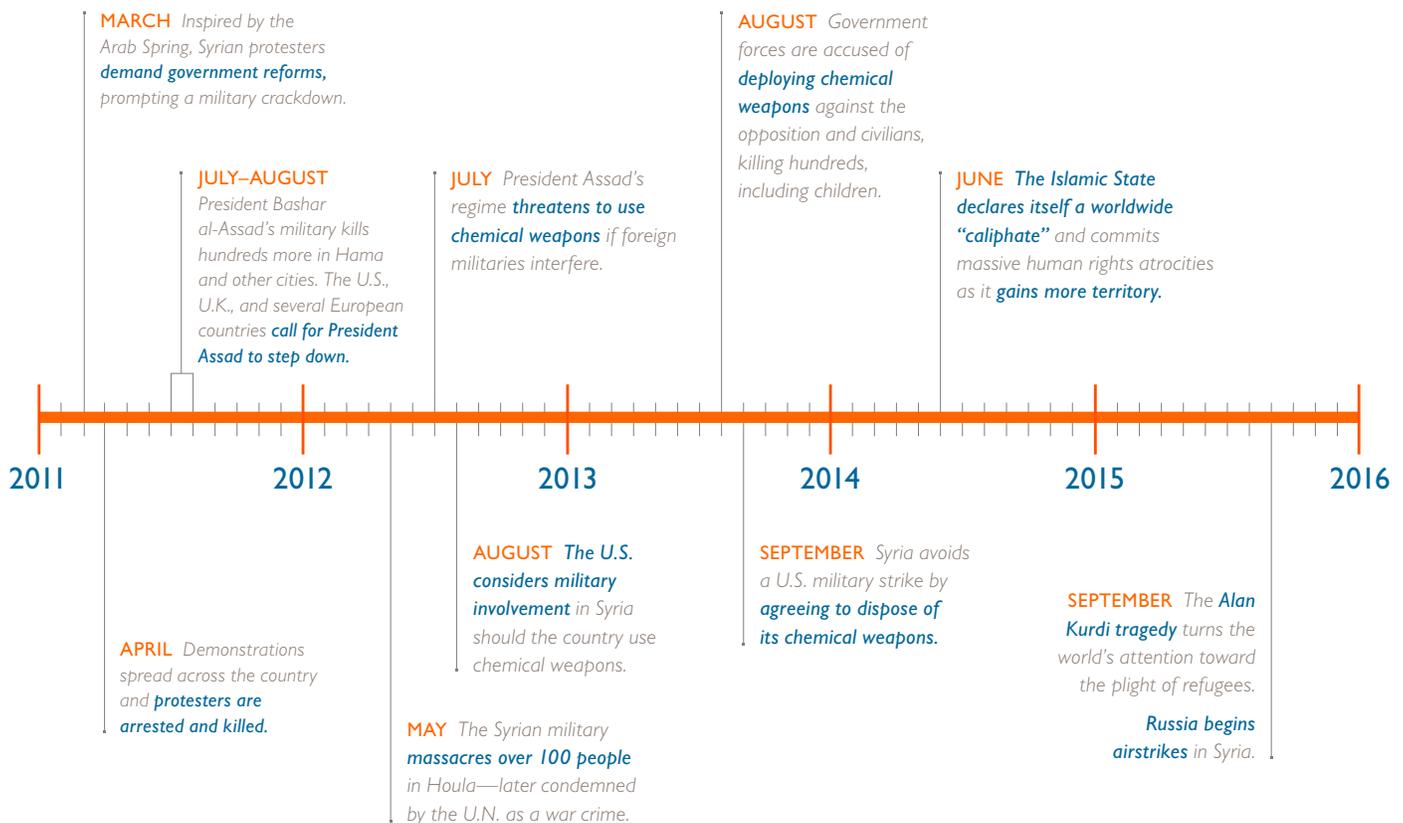
Today's defining humanitarian emergency

Many Americans have taken a journey similar to mine, from vague awareness to compelling, personal concern, as they've begun to see the Syria crisis in individual terms.

In early September 2015, news organizations around the world published a photo of Alan Kurdi, a 3-year-old boy who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as his family sought refuge in Europe. The tiny boat filled with refugees capsized on the passage between Turkey and Greece.

Alan's body washed ashore back in Turkey, and the photo of him lying lifeless in the sand spoke powerfully of the desperation of Syrian families. After years of war, many are hopeless about the prospect of a future in Syria. They risk their lives by staying. And the future looks at least slightly brighter, despite the risks, if they can make it to Europe.

SYRIA » FROM PROTESTS TO INTERNATIONAL WAR

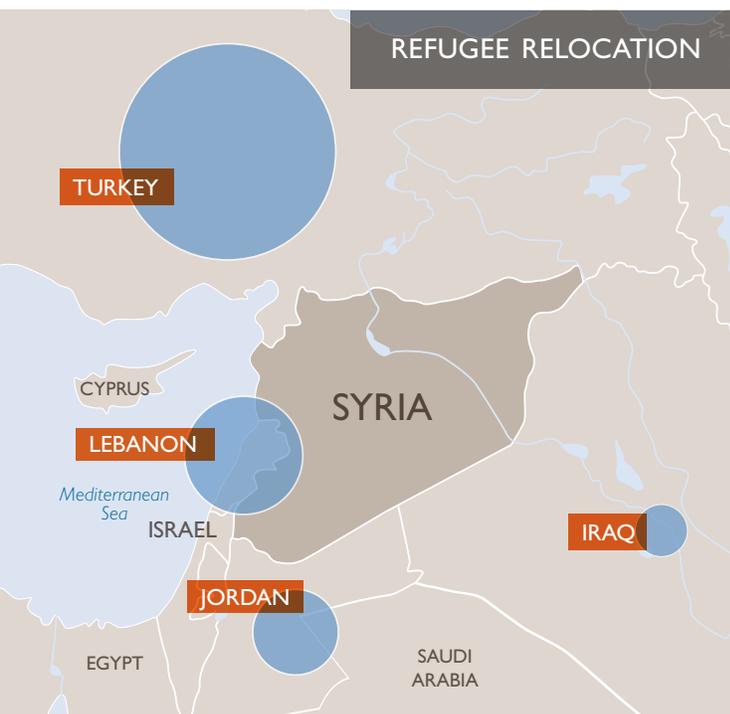


The tragedy of Alan's death finally brought the world's attention to the plight of Syrians, which has been escalating for years.

Syria's civil war began as unrest spread from North Africa and across the Middle East during the Arab Spring in 2011. In March of that year, peaceful protests began in several Syrian cities, but by May they had turned violent. Syrian tanks were sent to put an end to the demonstrations, but the effort only inflamed tensions.

A year later, full-scale civil war was underway, and rebels held the northern city of Aleppo. Several armed groups, including some the U.S. government considers terrorist organizations, are now holding different areas across the country. Many of the factions are reportedly receiving support from other governments, making this a proxy war of various competing interests.

More than half the Syrian population of 23 million have been forced from their homes by the fighting that has destroyed city after city. That's like everyone in New York City and Los Angeles being homeless.



Of those displaced, more than 4 million are now living outside of Syria, with nearly 2.3 million in Turkey, over 1 million in Lebanon, and 600,000 in Jordan. About 800,000 have applied for asylum in Europe.¹ While European countries have been overwhelmed by the increase in refugees in 2015, the scale of the crisis remains far greater in and around Syria.

In fact, the human toll of the Syrian war has contributed to the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today. In large part because of

¹ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

Syria, there are more refugees globally—nearly 60 million—than ever before. To understand the scale, consider other emergencies that have captured the world’s attention.

- » The 2010 earthquake in Haiti impacted 3.5 million people.
- » The 1994 Rwanda genocide affected 4.3 million people.
- » The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami affected 5 million people.

The Syrian war has disrupted the lives of *12 million people and counting*. Yet before Alan Kurdi’s photo was published, only 17 percent of Americans who were asked about these disasters understood that the Syria crisis is by far the largest of them.

Despite growing public awareness and an outpouring of new support in 2015, our consciousness of the disaster still pales in comparison to its size. Even at the time of this writing, after months of constant news coverage and public attention, World Vision found that a full 12 percent of Americans—more than one in 10—were still not even aware of the crisis.

We have a long way to go before the awareness and response are adequate to address the need on the ground.



More heartbreak



Abir and her children in Lebanon

In Lebanon, where I visited in 2015, the situation remains appalling. Just like the families I met in Jordan, refugee families have had to flee with only the clothes on their backs, often without their husbands and fathers. This was the case for Abir, one woman who shared her story with me.

Abir's home in Syria had three bedrooms, a kitchen, and a fenced backyard with a garden. Her husband had provided well for her and their five children—but there was nothing he could do in the face of war.

When the family ran out of food, the two of them made the gut-wrenching choice to send their three oldest children to Lebanon to live with family. Abir told me that her husband was too proud to shed tears when they left, but she heard him weeping at night.

Even this drastic measure was not enough. While she was out one day with her youngest children, Abir was wounded by a sniper, and she knew she had to leave for their safety. With the children in tow, she walked eight hours to the border—leaving her husband behind. In Lebanon she was reunited with her older children, but they couldn't stay with her brother, who had seven children of his own. So today, Abir and her five daughters live in a tent settlement. It's a life of hardship, and of fear.

Like so many other refugees I met, Abir holds on to her house keys. On the day she left, she packed the most essential belongings, locked her front door, and put the keys in her pocket. She still clings to the hope of returning home.

Today, Lebanon is littered with settlements of a few hundred refugees each, living in tents provided by the U.N. and humanitarian organizations. The country has a long history of hosting refugees, and that has meant friction at times when the system is overtaxed—as it is now. Over 1 million Syrians are taking refuge in Lebanon, a country of only 4 million people.

Lebanon is made up of a delicate ethnic and religious mix; Christians, Sunnis, and Shiites share power according to a 1920s-era agreement, which means that any concessions to the millions of people who have fled to Lebanon over the last few decades could inflame ethnic divisions. The government doesn't allow formal refugee camps, and refugees don't qualify to hold jobs or become citizens. In fact, they can't officially join the Lebanese community at all. Many Syrian children are unable to attend Lebanese schools. And Syrian and Lebanese children experience the same tensions and hostilities that simmer between the adult populations of the two groups.



Abir and her girls now live in a one-room tent smaller than a typical American child's bedroom. Unable to work, they live on assistance from humanitarian agencies. During my visit, the World Food Program had cut its distribution to just \$13 per month for each refugee.

This puts many families in desperate circumstances. Some feel they must give young daughters away in marriage so they have one less mouth to feed. Boys are being sent out to work illegally, where they are often abused. It is a situation ripe for human trafficking.

“The girls ask me to get them out of this prison,” Abir said to me. They don't leave the tent settlement out of fear for their safety—sometimes the tension flames up into fights, and refugee children are beaten. “When I shop,” said Abir, “I leave the girls here, and I shut the door.” Her life has now shrunk to an even smaller existence. “We cannot plan for more than today. We live hour by hour.”

Perhaps the most difficult blow is that she has lost contact with her husband. They haven't been able to reach him for months, and he doesn't know where they are. He might have been conscripted into the fighting; he may have been forced to flee elsewhere; or he could be dead.

“I miss him a lot,” Abir told me. “I'm always scared for the girls. It is a very big responsibility for me.”



Semer, age 2, Jordan



Jordan

A ray of hope

Stories like these, despite their tragedy, can help us get our minds around the Syrian disaster. From a global perspective, the situation is complex, and it may feel hopeless. But when you meet girls like Haya and mothers like Abir, solutions to individual needs come into focus. Children need protection. They need basics like food and adequate shelter. They need safety and the opportunity to attend school so that their futures aren't marred forever.

The millions of children uprooted by this crisis—including Abir's daughters—are at risk of becoming a lost generation. Without basics like protection and education, they become increasingly vulnerable to a future in which they are unemployable and more likely to be seduced by extremist ideology. They're at risk of exploitation and trafficking. They're at risk of putting their hope in the hands of a smuggler, who may steal their money or abandon them on the journey to Europe.

Underlying all of these essentials, refugees need to know that someone cares. They left tight-knit communities, with family nearby and neighborhoods shared with their teachers, grocers, mechanics, and long-time friends. Now they are ostracized in the countries where they live. Even refugee settlements and neighborhoods are filled with strangers, a constantly changing array of the displaced in a country whose citizens mostly just want them to go back where they came from. Often they are lonely.



That’s what I found remarkable about Pastor Joseph.² A Lebanese citizen, Joseph wanted to help the refugees despite the fact that many of his countrymen cared little for them. He had nothing to offer, however—no food, no shelter, no schooling. The only thing Joseph had, it turned out, was the one thing refugees needed most.

“The secret is love,” Joseph told me. He made a habit of visiting refugees and inviting them to his church. “We love you and want you to be part of our family,” Joseph would tell them. He has become famous for the love he showers on people—and his church has grown by leaps and bounds as a result. New visitors tell him, “We’ve heard how much you love the people.” Jesus’ love seen in the compassionate actions of His followers “brings us hope,” the daughter of one refugee told me.

² Name changed to protect identity



Overcoming our fears

There is so much we can do to alleviate the suffering of people like Haya and Abir and millions of others. Humanitarian organizations need financial support to provide the basics of survival, such as food and shelter. World Vision has already provided water, food, sanitation, shelter, healthcare, and more to 2 million refugees, but there is so much more to be done. Government leaders need to know that Americans want the Syrian crisis



Rana, age 10, Lebanon

to be a top diplomatic priority, and that the suffering of the Syrian people should not be allowed to continue. Churches, like Pastor Joseph's in Lebanon and others across the region, need support as they reach out to refugee communities. And all these people—refugees, churches, humanitarians, and government leaders—need our prayers.

This is not a hopeless cause. We serve a God who turns death into

life, ashes into a crown of beauty. A God who is always on the side of the outcast, and who—despite being Creator of the universe—became a refugee Himself. As a child, Jesus was forced to flee with His family to escape violence perpetrated by a dictator who was willing to slaughter children to protect his own position. Certainly, Jesus can understand the plight of Syrian refugees.

We worship the Creator-turned-refugee, a God who declared Himself the defender of those forced to flee. “You shall not oppress a sojourner,” God said to Israel. “You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt” (Exodus 23:9, ESV).

Many in America see the crisis in Syria as a problem created by Muslims, and therefore theirs to fix. But we mustn't take that approach. We shouldn't blame "the other." In the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus calls us to take personal responsibility across human divides. The Good Samaritan was not a Jew, but he rescued one. He was not a religious professional, like the priest and Levite, but he was more obedient to God. The wounded traveler was religiously and ethnically different, but the Good Samaritan reached out in compassion. We are called to do the same.

This is what Christians in Lebanon are doing, though many have seen and experienced civil war between Christians and Muslims. I met another church leader who is urging Christians to welcome the Syrians who have flooded into their country. "We couldn't follow Jesus and ignore the plight of these desperate refugees," said Nabil Costa, executive director of the Lebanese Society for Educational and Social Development (also known as the Lebanese Baptist Society).

Costa admits that when the Syrians began to arrive, suspicions were high, both because Lebanese and Syrians don't always get along and because Christians can be apprehensive of Muslims.

"We have overcome our fears," Costa said, "and shared the love of Christ through practical action like providing food, bedding, heaters, and schooling for young children. It has not been easy, but through it God has broken down barriers between communities and encouraged both Christians and Muslims to see each other in a more compassionate light."



My Lebanese friend Costa issues a challenge to me, and us: “How will you respond? Is Christ for Christians only?”

How *will* we respond to the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today?

I believe that now more than ever, Jesus is leading His church into the margins of our world, where the suffering is greatest and expressions of His love are most needed. The crisis in Syria is just the tip of the iceberg. Syria’s refugees are among the 60 million worldwide who have been forced from their homes by violence and other threats—tens of millions of families in need of compassionate care.

This great need requires an even greater response. I believe Jesus is calling us to address the incredible suffering faced by these uprooted families. Haya, Abir, Pastor Joseph, and millions of others are waiting for us to act.



Lebanon