

COMMENTARY

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Refugees and Regional Security Interests

By Katherine Kidder

Asad's decision to use chemical weapons on his own civilian population evokes a strong sense of humanitarian outrage – and rightfully so. Yet the toll of conflict on the civilian population began well before the use of chemical weapons. Since conflict broke out in 2011, the official civilian death rate continually registers in at 5,000 per month – likely a low estimate, given the difficulty of data collection in the war-torn country. At least 6,561 of those deaths were children; 1,729 were children under 10 years old. For many, the risks associated with staying in their homes is deemed too high.

Humanitarian impulse aside, any long-term strategic plans for a response in Syria must take into account the impact of the conflict on the civilian population, and—more importantly – subsequent implications for regional stability. Of particular importance is the increased flow of refugees throughout a region already wracked by conflict and unrest. Approximately 2 million Syrians have fled the country since the beginning of the war; 1 million of them in first half of 2013, with projections of another 1.5 million by year's end. The five largest recipients of Syrian refugees are Lebanon (708,046), Jordan (520,287), Turkey (440,773), Iraq (155,258) and Egypt (109,845). The financial burden on the host countries tops out at \$5 Billion USD—a difficult amount to absorb, even if host economies were thriving. Within host countries, tensions run high among the refugee community due to scarce housing and unemployment; within U.N.-run refugee camps, depleting food rations create an environment of insecurity.

The impact of refugee flows on regional stability is measurable, particularly in the case of Iraq.

Since August 15, more than 50,000 Syrians have sought refuge in Iraq. The cross-border movement masks a more menacing trend: the

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influx of Syrian al Qaeda forces into Iraq. The state of chaos in Syria provides a degree of sanctuary to al Qaeda, who is able to attract jihadi recruits, train them in Syria, and send them into Iraq. The result is a 300-600% uptick in sectarian violence within Iraq, threatening hard-fought gains in stability.

The reality is that the decision to intervene- or the decision not to intervene- has significant ramifications on regional dynamics and stability. Continuing with the status quo essentially guarantees that the mass exodus throughout the region will persist. An intervention-particularly an intervention that is not nested within a larger strategic context- poses the risk of increasing chaos and displacement without a plan for reintroducing stability to Syria or the region. A beneficial intervention can only be accomplished with clear end goals and a roadmap with which to achieve them. The Obama administration must articulate a sound strategy before implementing operations; our interests – and the Syrian people – depend on it.

Katherine Kidder is a Research Associate at the Center for a New American Security.

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Center for a New American Security
1152 15th Street, NW, Suite 950
Washington, DC 20005

TEL 202.457.9400
FAX 202.457.9401
EMAIL info@cnas.org
www.cnas.org