Europe’s refugee crisis is America’s problem, too

By [Adam Taylor](http://www.washingtonpost.com/people/adam-taylor) September 4, 2015 The Washington Post

A photograph of a dead Syrian toddler washed ashore in Turkey this week has served as a much needed jolt for the world, stirring outrage that European nations aren't doing more to help those making perilous journeys in the hope of a better life on the continent. An uncomfortable truth, however, is that this isn't just a problem for Europe. It's a global problem, one in which the United States is involved, too.

According to [the International Rescue Committee (IRC)](http://www.rescue.org/press-releases/international-rescue-committee-us-commitment-accept-8000-syrians-not-enough-26191), 1,541 Syrian refugees have been resettled in the United States since the civil war began five years ago. That number may seem to compare favorably to Britain, a key European nation that recently announced it had [resettled 216 Syrian refugees](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/britain-takes-in-so-few-refugees-from-syria-they-would-fit-on-a-subway-train/2015/09/01/af427190-4b34-11e5-80c2-106ea7fb80d4_story.html). But it looks less impressive when you consider that the United States has five times the population of Britain. It also fails to take into account the almost 5,000 other Syrians who were granted asylum in Britain after making their own journeys there.

The example of Germany, which is expected to receive around 800,000 migrants and refugees in 2015, gives an indication of how both Britain and the United States appear to be not pulling their weight. In total, more than 4 million Syrians have fled their homeland; most have ended up in the neighboring countries of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, where the state is struggling to cope and conditions are often bad.

The U.S. government recently indicated that it will take in from 5,000 to 8,000 Syrian refugees in 2016, but groups like the IRC say that this can only be the first step and that ultimately America should take tens of thousands more. One [online petition](https://petitions.whitehouse.gov/petition/authorize-and-resettle-syrian-refugees-us) asks for the United States to resettle at least 65,000 by next year.

America does take in relatively large numbers of asylum seekers overall, with about 70,000 applications accepted each year. It's a popular place for asylum seekers – in 2014, only Russia and Germany [received more](http://www.unhcr.org.uk/about-us/key-facts-and-figures.html) applications – but refugees often find the process confusing and painfully slow. Nadeen Aljijakli, a Cleveland-based Syrian American lawyer, recently [told The Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/syrian-asylum-seekers-face-long-waits-in-backlogged-us-system/2015/06/13/1c730384-1047-11e5-9726-49d6fa26a8c6_story.html) that her Syrian clients can end up in limbo. “If we don’t get an interview within six weeks, that means it’s probably gone to the black hole,” she said.

Part of this is due to a backlog caused by a surge in applications for asylum over the past few years from refugees from Central America. Security concerns are also an extra weight on applicants from the Middle East.

"A lot of people are asking me: Is it safe to bring refugees from these countries to the United States?" Anne Richard, U.S. assistant secretary of state for population, refugees and migration, [recently told NPR](http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/06/16/414898818/of-4-million-syrian-refugees-the-u-s-has-taken-fewer-than-1-000). "So I have to explain that these cases are the most carefully vetted of any travelers to the United States, and nobody comes in without having a Department of Homeland Security interviewer agree that they are, in fact, bona fide refugees."

These factors may well get worse as the United States nears the 2016 election, where immigration is already a key issue in the presidential campaign. The leading Republican candidate, Donald Trump, has proposed building a wall along the country's southern border with Mexico, a move that parallels[similar moves recently made in Europe](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/08/28/map-the-walls-europe-is-building-to-keep-people-out/). While the drowning death of Syrian refugee toddler Aylan Kurdi [has sparked anguished](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/09/03/image-of-drowned-syrian-toddler-aylan-kurdi-jolts-world-leaders/) statements from a variety of world leaders, U.S. politicians have been notably quiet.

Perhaps it's easy to argue that these problems are far away and that these migrants are either the problem of their home state or Europe. That suggestion, however, ignores America's admirable history of resettling refugees and embracing migrants – not to mention all the other ways that the country is involved in the region. It's also worth noting that Aylan's death appears to have been partially the result of a failed asylum application in Canada, America's northern neighbor.

Europe is within reach of illicit, dangerous journeys from Africa and the Middle East, and so people with little other option will try to make it there. The world, including the United States and many other nations, could save lives by providing more options. In response to the photograph of the Syrian little boy, Britain is said to be [planning to resettle](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/sep/03/cameron-bows-to-pressure-to-allow-more-syrian-refugees-into-britain) thousands more Syrian refugees. Perhaps the United States will rethink its policy, too.