
MEDIA STATEMENT

Catholic Charities Atlanta's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

ATLANTA, GA (September, 2015) – As the refugee crisis in Syria continues to escalate so does the concern for the large numbers of refugees trying to reach safety in Europe and elsewhere. The Refugee Council USA—a coalition of U.S.-based organizations dedicated to refugee protection—recently prepared a [statement](#) to President Obama which included recommendations on how the United States should respond to the crisis in the Middle East.

Catholic Charities Atlanta (CCA) provides refugee resettlement services through our partnership with the United States Council of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) Migration and Refugee Services. USCCB is a member of the Refugee Council USA. CCA supports the following recommendations of the Council which include:

1. Increase the annual ceiling of refugee admissions, thereby allowing an increase in Syrian refugees.
2. Show solidarity to our allies in Europe by resettling a number of refugees including U.S. family reunification cases, unaccompanied refugee minors, and refugees from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan who have ties to the US (NGO workers, interpreters, and people affiliated with U.S. business interests.)
3. Increase funding for the humanitarian response.
4. Encourage refugee hosting countries in the region to allow refugees to legally work.

For additional information:

- Refugee Council USA Letter to President Obama on the Syrian Refugee Crisis
<http://www.rcusa.org/uploads/pdfs/members/RCUSA%20letter%20to%20President%20Obama%20Increased%20Resettlement%20of%20Syrian%20Refugee%20%20FINAL.pdf>
- History of the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program
Visit the Refugee Council USA website: <http://www.rcusa.org/index.php?page=history>

Contact:
Stephanie Ungashick
Senior Director of Marketing and Communications
404-920-7759
sungashick@catholiccharitiesatlanta.org

70,000 Refugees are resettled every year in the United States

The United States has offered a safe haven for approximately 70,000 refugees each year for the past 10 years. Around 2,500 of these refugees are resettled in Georgia, where state and local governments, nonprofit agencies, faith-based organizations, and citizens embrace these new Americans and help them become productive members of Georgia's communities. Refugees are individuals who have fled their countries of origin and meet the United Nations' criteria of having a "well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."

Catholic Charities Atlanta (CCA) provides Refugee Resettlement Services to refugee families arriving in the Atlanta area. These services include initial housing, basic needs support, orientation to U.S. culture, access to English classes, access to health care, transportation, job readiness and job placement.

We encourage anyone who is moved by the Syrian refugee crisis to help refugees who are already resettled here in the U.S. Please see below on ways to assist refugees here in Atlanta through Catholic Charities Atlanta's resettlement program.

Ways to Support CCA's Refugee Resettlement Program

- Donate furniture or household goods (*new or used in good condition*) for a refugee apartment (i.e. furniture, pots and pans, twin size sheets and comforters, cleaning supplies, bathroom supplies). For a complete list of items needed, please visit the CCA website at <http://www.catholiccharitiesatlanta.org/community/volunteers/volunteer-projects-and-drives/>.
- Make an on-line donation to help furnish a refugee home (*Go to <https://give.catholiccharitiesatlanta.org/donate-now> and choose "furnish a refugee home" in the designation drop down box*)
- Hold a **Welcome Box** drive at your church, school, or with your favorite group (*Download a flyer for specific items needed in the Welcome Box at <http://www.catholiccharitiesatlanta.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/Welcome-Home-Project-copy.pdf>*)

Volunteer Opportunities Available

Eighty-five percent of refugee families resettled by Catholic Charities Atlanta become self-sufficient within 6 months of arrival to the U.S. Our dedicated volunteers help make that happen. Here are additional ways you can help:

Contact:
Stephanie Ungashick
Senior Director of Marketing and Communications
404-920-7759
sungashick@catholiccharitiesatlanta.org

- Become a “Family Friend” to a recently arrived refugee family and help them adjust to their new life in Atlanta.
- Be a “Strong Back for Refugees” volunteer and help us move furniture into apartments for arriving families.
- Organize a team to furnish a refugee apartment.
- Help a refugee prepare for their first job by becoming a “Job Coach.”
- Serve as a mentor for a refugee youth.

For more information about Catholic Charities Atlanta, please visit our website at
www.catholiccharitiesatlanta.org

Syrian Populations in the Context of the Syria Crisis

Background

This document is intended to provide basic background and context on the crisis to help prepare organizations for the resettlement of increased numbers of Syrians.

Syria's population is diverse and encompasses a wide variety of religious, ethnic, and linguistic groups. The Syrian conflict has led to the displacement of many different minority groups, and refugees may come from a variety of these groups.

Syria Overview



Map of Syria from the CIA World Factbook⁷

- In 2011, the World Bank estimated that the population of Syria was approximately 22 million.¹ In 2014, the CIA estimated that the population of Syria was approximately 17 million.²
- Over 4 million refugees have fled to neighboring countries and over 200,000 Syrians have died as a result of the conflict.³ Approximately 7.6 million Syrians have fled their homes and are displaced within Syria.
- Current data about the Syrian population is unreliable—the country has diminished capacity for collecting statistics in the wake of the conflict.⁴
- Syrian censuses do not cover ethnicity or religion, so it is difficult to gather exact information regarding religious and ethnic groups.⁵
- Demographics in Syria have changed drastically since the conflict began, as more than one third of the population has fled their homes.⁶

¹ Data: Syrian Arab Republic, The World Bank, 2011.

<http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?source=2&country=SYR&series=&period=>

Please note that The World Bank includes all Syrian citizens in their estimation, including Syrians living in other countries.

² CIA World Factbook: Syria, CIA, August 2015. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>>

³ Syria: The story of the conflict, BBC News, March 12, 2015. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>>

⁴ Overall level of statistical capacity, World Bank, August 2015, <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IQ.SCI.OVRL/countries/SY-XQ-XN?display=graph>>

⁵ Guide: Syria's diverse minorities, BBC News. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16108755>>

⁶ Pinhas Inbari, How the Syrian War is Reshaping the Region, Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, June 17 2014.

<<http://jcpa.org/article/syrian-war-is-reshaping-the-region/>>

⁷ CIA World Factbook: Syria, CIA, August 2015. <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>>

Sunni Muslims

- About 74% of Syria's pre-conflict population was composed of Sunni Muslims.⁸ For more information about the differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims, please see the accompanying factsheet about Islam.
- The opposition movement in Syria has been primarily composed of Sunni Muslims. The government has been targeting Sunni Muslims for being aligned with the opposition.
- However, the government has not limited violence against Sunni Muslims to those who are involved in rebel groups. Many Sunnis have been persecuted simply for attending certain mosques or being associated with certain faith leaders. Entire Sunni communities have been bombed.⁹
- As a result, a significant proportion of Syrian refugees are Sunni Muslims.

Alawites

- Alawites are Syria's largest religious minority group, representing between 10% and 15% of the pre-conflict population. Alawites practice a branch of Shia Islam.
- President Bashar Al-Assad is Alawi, as was his father Hafez Al-Assad. The government and high-level officials from Assad's regime are largely drawn from the Alawi population, so Alawites are often assumed to support the Assad regime.¹⁰
- However, not all Alawites have backed the regime throughout the conflict. In fact, many Alawites have been victims of the regime. Tens of thousands of Alawi men have been forced into military service for the regime and died in the conflict.¹¹
- Sunni refugees, or refugees from other minority groups, may have negative assumptions about Alawites due to their assumed affiliation with the Assad regime.

Kurds

- The Kurds are Syria's largest ethnic minority group, making up about 10-15% of the pre-conflict population.¹² Most Kurds are Sunni Muslims.
- The Kurds have historically been politically repressed by the Syrian government. Prior to the conflict, many Kurds living in Syria were officially stateless under Syrian nationality laws. During the conflict, the regime granted more Kurds nationality in an effort to maintain their loyalty to the regime.¹³
- The Kurds have fought against both the government and rebel groups to maintain an autonomous area of land in Northern Syria.¹⁴
- **Yazidis** are ethnically and linguistically Kurdish but form a distinct religious minority practicing Christianity. In 2013, there were about 80,000 Yazidis living in Syria.¹⁵ They have recently been

⁸ International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013. <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222313#wrapper>>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Joshua Hersh, The Dilemma of Syria's Alawites, The New Yorker, October 13, 2013. <<http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-dilemma-of-syrias-alawites>>

¹¹ Sam Dagher, Syria's Alawites: The People Behind Assad, Wall Street Journal, June 25, 2015. <<http://www.wsj.com/articles/syrias-alawites-the-people-behind-assad-1435166941>>

¹² Syria, Minority Rights Group, October 2011. <<http://www.minorityrights.org/5270/syria/kurds.html>>

¹³ International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013. <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222313#wrapper>>

¹⁴ Harald Doornbos and Jenan Moussa, The Civil War Within Syria's Civil War, Foreign Policy Magazine, August 28, 2013. <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/28/the-civil-war-within-syrias-civil-war/>>

¹⁵ International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013. <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222313#wrapper>>

the target of ethnic cleansing by ISIS. The UN has reported that over 5,000 Yazidi men have been murdered and 5,000-7,000 Yazidi women have been abducted by ISIS.¹⁶

- There are also significant Kurdish populations in Iraq and Turkey. The Kurds in Iraq have been an important regional ally to the United States and have played a key role in refugee protection in Northern Iraq. In July 2015, the Turkish government again began fighting with the Kurds in Turkey.¹⁷

Christians

- Before the conflict, an estimated 10% of the Syrian population was Christian. This is now estimated to be 8% or less, as large numbers of Christians have fled Syria.¹⁸
- There are several Christian groups in Syria including Assyrians, Armenians, Arab Christians, and Greek Christians. The largest denominations are Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholic.
- There are Christians all across Syria. Before the conflict, Christians were especially concentrated in Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia.¹⁹
- Prior to the start of the conflict, Christianity was tolerated in Syria and Christians held senior positions in the Syrian government. The 1973 Syrian constitution included religious tolerance for Christians.
- Throughout the conflict, Syrian Christians have been divided politically; some have supported the government, while others have participated in opposition groups.
- Christian minority groups have been the target of both the regime and opposition groups. Many churches and Christian villages have been attacked in Syria and it is not always clear who is perpetrating these attacks. Christians seen as a threat to the regime have been detained and tortured by the Syrian government since the beginning of the conflict. Rebel groups have targeted Syrian Christians because they did not join the opposition movement and because of their religion.²⁰
- There were a significant number of Iraqi Christian refugees living in Syria before the conflict, but most of them have fled the country.²¹

Other Minority Groups

- Before the conflict, the **Druze** numbered between 500,000 and 700,000 in Syria (3-4% of the total population). The Druze are an Arabic-speaking ethnic and religious group. They practice a monotheistic religion derived from Ismailism that incorporates a number of elements from other religions.²² Druze have been targeted by ISIS and Jabat al-Nusra, and Druze men have been conscripted by the Assad regime.²³
- Before the conflict, the **Ismailis** in Syria numbered around 200,000, approximately 1% of the total population. Ismailism is a sect of Shia Islam. Ismailis have been targeted by ISIS.²⁴

¹⁶Richard Spencer, Isil carried out massacres and mass sexual enslavement of Yazidis, Telegraph, October 14, 2014. <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/islamic-state/11160906/Isil-carried-out-massacres-and-mass-sexual-enslavement-of-Yazidis-UN-confirms.html>>

¹⁷Turkey v Islamic State v Kurds: What's going on? Neil Arun, BBC News, July 28, 2015. <<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33690060>>

¹⁸International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013. <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222313#wrapper>>

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Druze, Encyclopedia Britannica, November 2014. <<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Druze>>

²³International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013. <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222313#wrapper>>

²⁴Alison Meuse, Syria's Minorities: Caught Between Sword of ISIS and Wrath of Assad, NPR.

<<http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/04/17/400360836/syrias-minorities-caught-between-sword-of-isis-and-wrath-of-assad>>

- About 500,000 **Palestinians** were living in Syria before the conflict; about half lived in refugee camps. Palestinians in Syria were a vulnerable population even before the outbreak of conflict.²⁵ Now, Palestinians have been forced to flee out of Syria. Political leanings within the Palestinian population have been mixed; some have backed the government, others the opposition.
- **Circassians** form an ethnic minority in Syria but have mostly assimilated into the Syrian population (estimates of their total population vary). They have a distinct language and practice Sunni Islam. Many Circassians have fled to Russia.
- There was a small **Jewish population** of about 100-200 living in Syria in 2011, and most lived in Damascus and Aleppo. There are an estimated 50 or fewer Jews remaining in Syria.²⁶
- Political leanings among **Sufis** are mixed (see factsheet about Islam for more information about Sufism). ISIS has destroyed many Sufi holy sites and targeted Sufis.

Final Notes

- Syria's civil war has been extraordinarily complicated and individuals from many different groups have been impacted.
- Though there is a significant sectarian element to the conflict, it would not be accurate to assume an individual's political leanings or role in the conflict based on their religion or ethnicity. Many scholars and observers have noted that the conflict did not begin as sectarian, but religious and ethnic identities have been increasingly politicized throughout the course of the conflict as they have faced mounting pressure to take sides.
- Many minorities face the dilemma of whether to seek protection by aligning with the government or risk being attacked by ISIS and other groups.
- Similarly, refugees and displaced people come from many different groups and we cannot always assume vulnerability based upon membership in a particular group, though some groups have been targeted more than others. Additional factors such as gender, age, disability, etc. factor into vulnerability.

BBC News is one source of additional resources about the conflict - available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-17258397>

²⁵ Syria, U.N. Relief and Works Agency, <<http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/syria>>

²⁶ International Religious Freedom Report, U.S. Department of State Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2013. <<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/religiousfreedom/index.htm?year=2013&dliid=222313#wrapper>>