

# **Parliamentary Field Visit to Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon**

**10–19 November 2014**



**Members of the Delegation:**

The Hon Philip Ruddock MP (Delegation Leader)

Mr Chris Hayes MP (Delegation Deputy Leader)

## **Parliamentary Field Visit**

The Parliamentary Field Visit to Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon (see Figure 1) was the inaugural visit of its type by the Australian Parliament. The Parliamentary Field Visit format is designed to allow parliamentarians to explore and examine a particular issue in depth through meetings with dignitaries, officials, NGOs and members of the public, and site inspections.

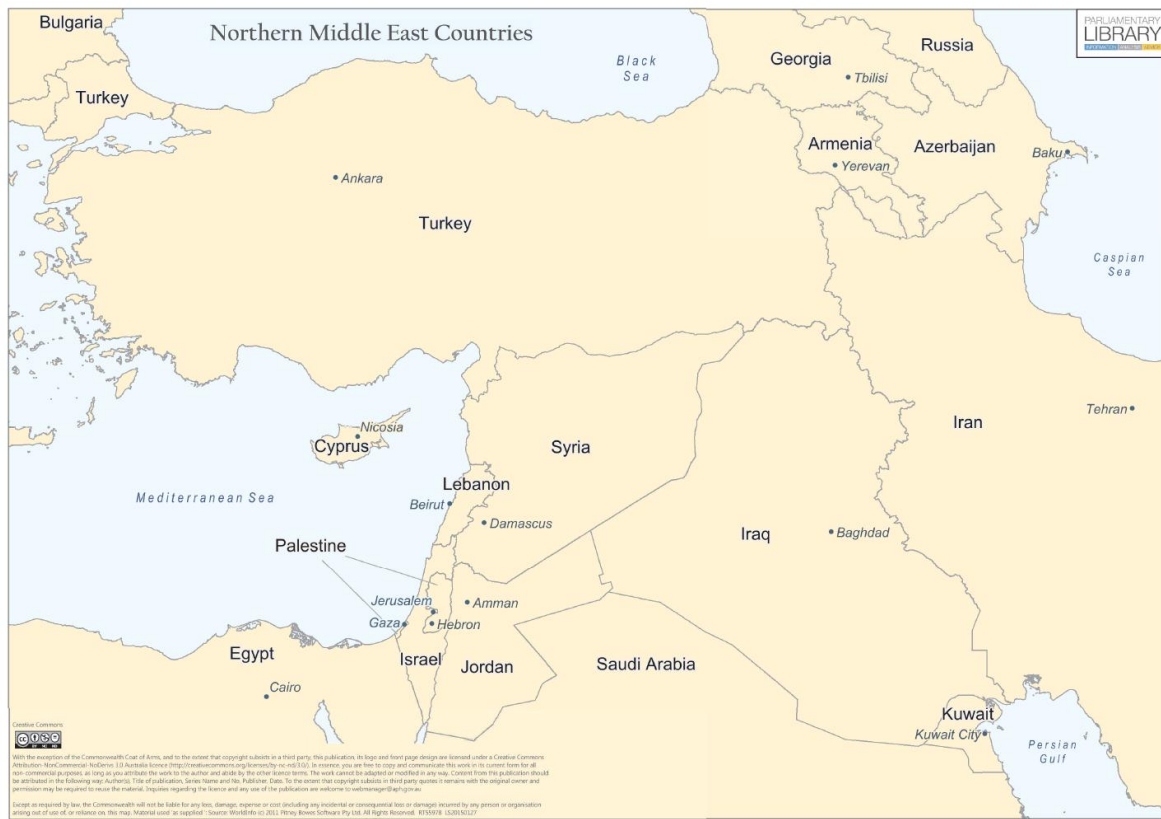
### ***Objectives of the Parliamentary Field Visit***

The theme of this visit was 'people movements including asylum seekers'. The delegation's aim was to develop a thorough understanding of the current conflicts in Syria and Iraq which have resulted in the movement of large numbers of people; the impact this has had on both refugees and neighbouring countries; and consider how the humanitarian crisis might be supported and ultimately brought to an end.

The program included meetings with Government Ministers and officials, representatives of United Nations' agencies and other non-government organisations (NGOs), parliamentarians, community leaders, academics and refugees, as well as site visits to refugee camps and settlements.

The delegation appreciated the many frank discussions held and views shared during the field visit. Such discussions gave delegation members a thorough appreciation for the challenges currently facing Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, and those anticipated or feared as the conflicts in Syria and Iraq continue. A number of recommendations and requests were made and these are recorded in this report.

*Figure 1: Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon*



### **Acknowledgement**

The delegation thanks all of people with whom it met and who gave generously of their time and expertise. In particular, the delegation thanks:

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- HE Dr Ibrahim Saif;
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- Lieutenant Colonel Abdelrahman Al-Amoush;
- Mr Hovig Etyemezian;
- Mr Gavin White;
- Ms Dorte Jessen;
- Mr Lucio Melandri;
- Ms Amber Savage;
- Mr Mohamad Al Asmar;
- Brigadier General Saber Taha Al-Mahayreh;
- Mr Edward Kallon;

- Mr Roger Davies;
- Mr David Terzi;
- Mr Michele Servadei;

**Turkey:**

- Mr Kamal Malhotra;
- Ms Safak Pavey;
- Mr Atilla Toros;
- Ms Carol Batchelor;
- Ms Lieke Van De Wiel;
- Mr T. Ziyaeddin Akbulut;
- Dr Fuat Oktay;
- Mr Naci Koru;
- Mr Raul Rosende;
- Ms Nathalie Fustier;
- Mr Veysel Dalmaz;
- Mr Harun Sarifakiogullari;
- Mr Sinan Atakan;
- Mr Vito Trani;
- Mr Ramadan Assi;
- Mr Raoul De Torcy;
- Mr Ibrahim Cem Kurt;
- Ms Christine Clarence;
- Archbishop Yusuf Cetin;
- Mr Murat Yetkin;

**Lebanon:**

- Mr Jean Nicolas Beuze;
- Mr Luciano Calestini;
- Ms Fitriana Nur;
- Archbishop Issam John Darwish;
- HE Mr Rashid Derbas;
- HE Mr Nabih Berry;
- Ms Anita Delhaas-van Dijk;
- Ms Marion McKeone;

- 
- Dr Tarek Mitri;
  - Dr Maha Yahaya;
  - Ms Wendy MacClinchy; and
  - HE Mr Gebran Bassil.

During meetings and site visits the delegation was accompanied by officers of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) stationed in each of the countries. The professionalism, knowledge and guidance of these officers were very much appreciated. The delegation extends its particular thanks to:

- Ms Heidi Venamore PSM, Ambassador (Jordan);
- Mr James Larsen, Ambassador (Turkey);
- Mr Lino Strangis, Consul General (Turkey);
- Mr David Windsor, Charge D'Affaires (Lebanon);
- Ms Lisa Brown, Humanitarian Officer (Jordan);
- Ms Hiba Taffal, Protocol Officer (Jordan);
- Ms Ana Centilmen, First Secretary and Visit Liaison Officer (Turkey);
- Ms Christine Mackay, Second Secretary (Turkey);
- Dr Oytun Deliktas, Senior Research Officer (Turkey);
- Mr Cagil Ergul, Senior Consular Officer (Turkey);
- Mr Ed Russell, Second Secretary (Lebanon); and
- Ms Rita Yahchouchy, Interpreter (Lebanon).

The delegation also wishes to thank the other embassy staff, drivers and security personnel who assisted with the field visit.

Photographs in this report are provided courtesy of the delegation members and the delegation secretary.

## **The conflicts in Syria and Iraq**

### ***The Syrian civil war***

The conflict in Syria began in March 2011 with protests in the southern city of Dara'a calling for the release of political prisoners and for political reform.<sup>1</sup> Despite government repression and the nominal enactment of reforms, the protests spread to other Syrian cities and Syrian security forces responded with a violent crackdown against protestors. Through 2011 and 2012, the violence spiralled into a civil war between the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and rebel groups opposed to Assad's

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1 M Harris, *International responses to the Syrian uprising: March 2011–June 2012*, Background Note, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 13 July 2012, p. 1.

rule. The conflict continues today, and observers expect it will continue for some years yet.

### ***Impact of the civil war on the Syrian people***

In August 2014, a UN study estimated that over 191 000 people had been killed in the Syrian conflict.

As at November 2014, it was estimated that 10.6–10.8 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance inside Syria, including approximately 6.5 million internally displaced people (IDP). Another 2.9–3.2 million Syrians were registered or awaiting registration with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as refugees outside the country. In addition to these, there are a significant number of Syrian refugees who are not registered with the UNHCR.

The United States Congressional Research Service calculates that 97% of Syrian refugees have fled to countries in the immediate surrounding region, including Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt.<sup>2</sup> It is estimated 80–85% of Syrian refugees are residing in host communities rather than refugee camps or other formal settings. In August 2014, UNICEF calculated that there were 1.6 million child refugees, representing around 50% of the total Syrian refugee population.

By the end of 2014, the UN expected there to be 3.59 million Syrian refugees.

### ***Daish***

Other refugees are fleeing their homelands in Syria and Iraq in response to the spread of Daish (also known as Islamic State (IS) or the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL / ISIS):

...a transnational Sunni Islamist insurgent and terrorist group that has expanded its control over areas of northwestern Iraq and northeastern Syria since 2013, threatening the security of both countries...The Islamic State has thrived in the disaffected Sunni Muslim-inhabited areas of Iraq and in the remote provinces of Syria torn by the civil war.<sup>3</sup>

Whilst Daish has garnered support in some areas of Iraq and Syria, some observers have suggested that it has limited support in much of the region with Daish's 'brutal behaviour' cited 'as a key reason for its lack of support in Syria and Iraq'.<sup>4</sup> Daish's violent persecution of minorities has contributed to the thousands of refugees fleeing Syria and Iraq: during September 2014, 64% of Syrian refugee arrivals in Jordan

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2 R Margesson and S Chesser, *Syria: Overview of the Humanitarian Response*, Congressional Research Service Report, Washington DC, 30 May 2014.

3 K Katzman, C Blanchard, C Humud, R Margesson and M Weed, *The "Islamic State" Crisis and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Service, Washington DC, 8 December 2014, p. 4.

4 W Bruere, *The Islamic Caliphate and Australia*, FlagPost, Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 25 July 2014.

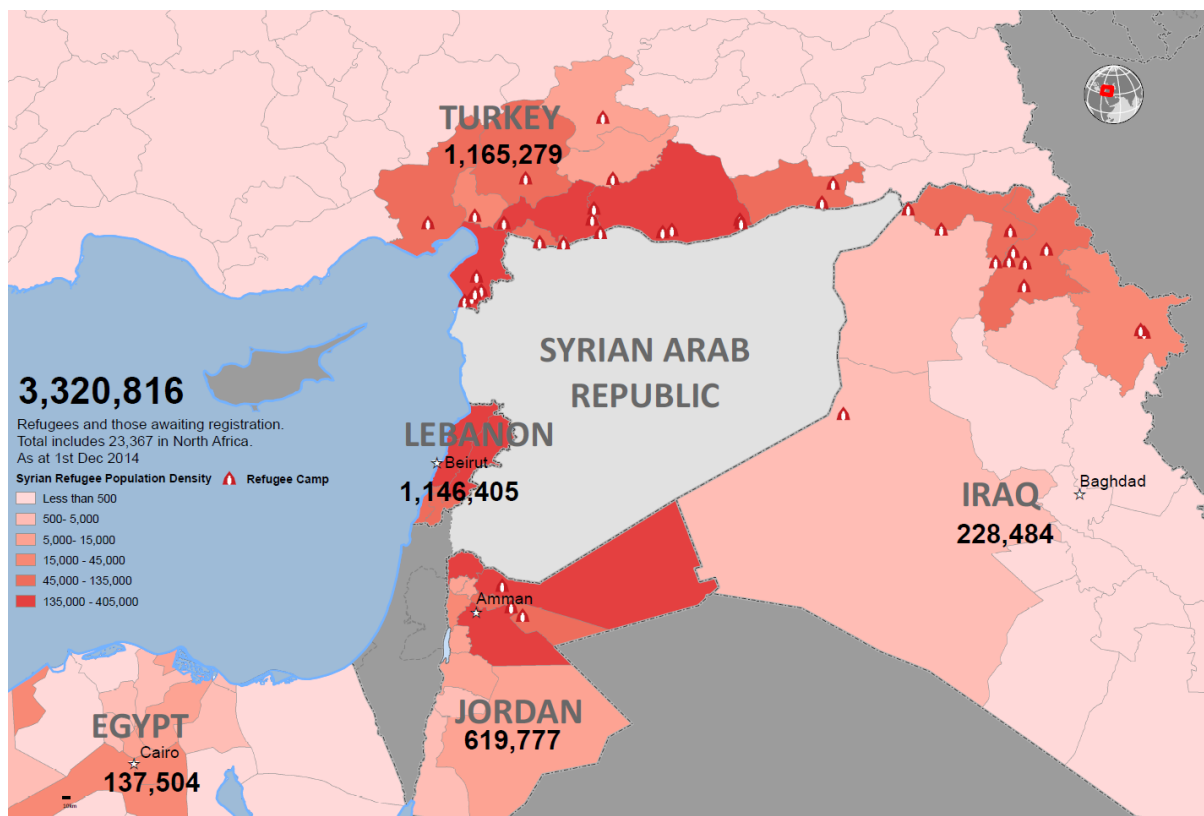


indicated Daish-related flight whilst 59% of Iraqi refugee arrivals during late October / early November 2014 indicated Daish-related flight.<sup>5</sup>

## People movements in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon

As outlined above, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have resulted in the movement of large numbers of people to neighbouring countries. Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon have borne the greatest burden: the UNHCR has estimated there are 1.17 million refugees<sup>6</sup> in Turkey, 1.15 million in Lebanon and 620 000 in Jordan (see Figure 2).<sup>7</sup>

Figure 2: Refugees in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon



To put these figures and the humanitarian crisis in the Middle East into context, in 2010—prior to the conflicts in Syria and Iraq—the UNHCR reported 33.9 million

5 P Stromberg, *UNHCR Jordan Refugee Response*, Presentation, UNHCR, Amman, 11 November 2014.

6 The terms 'refugee' and 'asylum seeker' refer to people in different circumstances; however, for ease and brevity, these terms are used interchangeably in this report.

7 UNHCR, *Syria Regional Refugee Response: Regional Overview*, available: [http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php#\\_ga=1.132953294.135840099.1421711180](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php#_ga=1.132953294.135840099.1421711180) (accessed 20 January 2015).

people of concern globally.<sup>8</sup> In mid-2014 the UNHCR reported that globally there were 46.3 million persons of concern:

...compared to 42.9 million at the end of 2013. The total number of refugees under UNHCR's mandate was 13.0 million by mid-year, the highest since 1996. This is almost 1.3 million persons more than at the start of the year (11.7 million) and 2.1 million more than in June 2013 (11.1 million). During the same period, the total number of IDPs protected or assisted by UNHCR reached a new high of 26.0 million. That was up from 23.9 million just six months earlier and 5.2 million higher than one year earlier (20.8 million).<sup>9</sup>

At the outset, the delegation would like to thank the governments and people of Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon for welcoming refugees to their countries and providing support to them. It is preferable that displaced people remain as close as possible to their homes and the world is indebted to countries neighbouring Syria and Iraq such as Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon for the burden they bear; without their willingness to accept refugees, the humanitarian crisis would be far worse and its impact felt more keenly around the globe.

The acceptance of refugees by Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon has, however, placed a significant burden on them. The delegation heard that at the commencement of the Syrian conflict, neither governments nor NGOs anticipated that the conflict would last for such a long period. Rather, the expectation was that the conflict would last for a matter of months and therefore refugees fleeing would need support and accommodation for a relatively short period. Four years on, this has sadly not been the case and the conflict is not expected to be resolved in the near future.

### **Resolving the crisis in the Middle East**

The enormity of the current conflicts in the Middle East cannot be overstated. The crisis itself will not be resolved in the near future and its impacts will be felt for a generation: refugees will be unable to return to their homelands for years to come; children's lives and educations have been so disrupted their prospects for higher education and future careers are grim; and the destructive legacy of militant groups such as Daish will be difficult to erase.

Before discussing possible solutions to the Middle East crisis, the delegation emphasises Australia's role in bringing those solutions to fruition. Australia is geographically removed from the Middle East and it would be easy to disengage from the crisis on the basis it is of little relevance. It would also be naïve. Australia has already experienced the ramifications of the crisis in the Middle East with an

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8 The UNHCR uses the term 'persons of concern' to describe all people whose protection and assistance needs are of interest to the organisation. It encompasses refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons and returned refugees.

9 UNHCR, *UNHCR Mid-Year Trends 2014*, June 2014, pp 3–4.

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increased threat of home-grown terrorism and approximately 90 Australians travelling to the Middle East to be foreign fighters,<sup>10</sup> resulting in the deaths of 20 Australians.<sup>11</sup> Australia cannot pretend that it is unaffected by the instability and threats posed by the Middle East crisis, and the delegation iterates that, as a member of the international community, Australia must do its part in finding solutions.

Throughout the field visit, people suggested ways in which the crisis in the Middle East might be resolved. Overwhelming, stakeholders of all kinds preferred options that involved international cooperation and officials in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon all stated the need for greater support from the international community. As discussed later in this report, the value of education as a means to limit the spread of radicalisation was emphasised by government and non-government stakeholders alike.

Other stakeholders discussed political solutions and some offered specific suggestions such as the establishment of a no-fly 'buffer zone' and a Kosovo-type temporary resettlement scheme. These are discussed in the following sections.

### ***Political solutions***

In Syria, the Assad regime, supported economically (and probably militarily) by Russia, Iran, Hezbollah and China, will likely consolidate its power to strategic territory within the country. Mr Raul Rosende, Deputy Regional Humanitarian Coordinator for the UN in Gaziantep, Turkey and who had spent time in Syria suggested that the Assad regime will consolidate its control of the "back bone" of Syria: economically important territory from Damascus in the south through Homs to Aleppo in the north, with a corridor to the westerly port of Latakia. The regime does not currently have control of Aleppo but has besieged and taken other cities and this may be the approach in Aleppo. If Aleppo falls, approximately 300 000 people are expected to flee the city.

Mr Rosende explained that the advance of Daish and Jabat al-Nusra in Syria indicates the shrinkage of secular forces such as the Free Syria Army (FSA), and while Daish and al-Nusra are currently fighting one another it is not unrealistic to expect there may be an alliance between them in the future. Mr Rosende informed the delegation that whilst the Assad regime wants to contain Daish it is also uninterested in regaining control of some areas now controlled by the group.

Mr Rosende suggested that resolution of the Syrian conflict should rely in part on the international community influencing friends of the Assad regime, in particular Russia and Iran, to bring about a political (rather than military) solution.

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10 The Hon Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 10 February 2015, p. 23.

11 The Hon Julie Bishop MP, Minister for Foreign Affairs, *House of Representatives Hansard*, 10 February 2015, p. 23.

Mr Rashid Derbas, Lebanese Minister for Social Affairs, stated that humanitarian assistance would become useless and unsustainable if a long-term solution for Syria is not found. He cautioned against focussing solely on resettlement to the detriment of finding a political solution. HE Nabih Berry, Speaker of the Lebanese Parliament, similarly opined that only a political, and not military, solution will work in Syria. HE Gebran Bassil, Lebanese Minister for Foreign Affairs, specifically suggested that the international community should supervise elections in Syria so that Syrians may choose between the Assad regime and alternatives that are not terrorist organisations.

In relation to Iraq and the spread of Daish, Dr Maha Yahaya, of the Carnegie Middle East Center, suggested pressure should be put on the Iraqi government to include Sunni Muslims in the political system and, more broadly, to decentralise government. Dr Yahaya argued that people in Iraq need to have confidence in their government and in public institutions and this would help to limit the extent to which they turned to Daish. Dr Yahaya also suggested that friends of Syria and Iraq, such as Russia and Iran, should be urged to develop and implement plans to bring the conflicts in Syria and Iraq to a conclusion.

### *A no-fly 'buffer zone'*

Turkish officials repeatedly recommended the creation of a no-fly 'buffer zone' or 'safe haven' near the Turkey-Syria border in which to accommodate asylum seekers within Syrian territory. The officials argued that such a buffer zone should be established by the international community and the people within it protected from the air.

UN representatives informed the delegation that a similar proposal had been suggested by Lebanon. The Lebanese Minister for Social Affairs, HE Rashid Derbas, told the delegation that one solution was to encourage Syrians to return to safe areas within Syria by asking refugees to nominate the area they wished to return to and then returning them with the assistance of the UNHCR and other agencies.

The delegation explored the no-fly buffer zone suggestion. In particular, the delegation questioned Turkish officials about the creation of a buffer zone and its implications for Turkey's border with Syria, as well as how the international community via the UN might reach agreement to create and defend a buffer zone.

Many stakeholders were critical of the suggestion to establish a no-fly buffer zone. UN representatives predicted that implementing a no-fly buffer zone would require backing from the UN Security Council and that Russia and China—friends of the Assad regime—would likely veto such a motion. Others suggested that, from a humanitarian perspective, it would be wrong to assume that people fleeing the conflict in Syria would seek refuge in a buffer zone on the Turkish border rather than flee to other places within Syria or the region.

### *Keeping borders open*

Whilst none of the three countries explicitly stated to the delegation that they had or were planning to close their borders to refugees, the delegation came away with the

impression that this was the case, in large part in response to the pressures and impact on host communities. In Jordan, the delegation met with the Jordanian Border Guard Forces on the Syrian border (see Figures 3 and 4). The number of border crossings between Syria and Jordan has been reduced from 45 to five and those border crossings still open are located in the far north east of the country meaning Syrian refugees have to travel large distances to reach them. The Jordanian Border Guard Forces—which have provided much assistance to Syrian refugees crossing the border—cited security concerns and the risk of Islamist extremists posing as refugees entering the country as the reasons for the crossing closures.

*Figure 3: The Jordan-Syria border with a plume of smoke from artillery fire*



*Figure 4: Delegates and the Australian Ambassador with Brigadier General Saber Taha Al-Mahayreh, Commander of the Jordanian Border Guard Forces*



In Turkey, the government is responsible for registering refugees and has implemented a temporary protection system offering safe haven visas so it can be difficult for outside observers to accurately ascertain the movement of people across the Turkey-Syria border. UN representatives informed the delegation that the Turkish government does not keep statistics on people moving across the border with Syria and that historically there have been few restrictions on people doing so. HE Naci Kory, Deputy Foreign Minister, was unequivocal when he told the delegation that Turkey was not intending to close its borders. The delegation is, however, aware

Of press reports from September and October 2014 claiming that Turkey had closed its border.<sup>12</sup>

In Lebanon, UNHCR representatives informed the delegation that there had been a decrease in the number of refugees entering the country at legal entry points since August 2014. Mr Bassil told the delegation that Lebanon wanted to reduce the number of registered refugees in the country by about half to 600 000. The delegation notes that on 5 January 2015, new restrictions were placed on Syrian refugees entering Lebanon requiring them to obtain a visa:<sup>13</sup>

Lebanon enforced new immigration controls at the Syrian border on Monday in a move to gain control of the steady stream of refugees from its much larger neighbor.

...

A senior security official said on Saturday that Syrians would have to apply for entry permits for the first time and provide information about the purpose and length of their stay.

...

Syrians will now have to apply for one of six types of entry permit -- tourist, business, student, transit, medical or short stay. Each permit requires specific documentation, such as hotel bookings and \$1,000 for tourists or an invitation from a Lebanese company for business people.<sup>14</sup>

UN and other NGO representatives voiced concern about the closure of borders with Syria, citing the increased risk to people trying to flee the conflict. Asylum seekers are

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- 12 See for example: 'Syrian refugees stranded in no-man's land as Turkey closes border', *euronews*, 12 October 2014, available: <http://www.euronews.com/2014/10/12/syrian-refugees-stranded-in-no-man-s-land-as-turkey-closes-border/> (accessed 29 January 2015); Mark Lowen, 'Turkey clamps down on Syria border after Kurdish unrest', *BBC News*, 22 September 2014, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-29306088> (accessed 29 January 2015); Rebecca Collard, 'Turkey breaks up crowds at Syrian frontier protesting Islamic State, border closings', *The Washington Post*, 22 September 2014, available: [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-locks-down-border-after-refugee-surge-from-syria-fleeing-islamic-state/2014/09/22/b087222a-4244-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-locks-down-border-after-refugee-surge-from-syria-fleeing-islamic-state/2014/09/22/b087222a-4244-11e4-b47c-f5889e061e5f_story.html) (accessed 29 January 2015); and Karam Shoumali and Anne Barnard, 'Refugees Flood Turkish Border as Islamic State Steps Up Attacks on Syrian Kurds', *The New York Times*, 28 September 2014, available: [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/29/world/middleeast/refugees-flood-turkish-border-as-isis-steps-up-attacks-on-syrian-kurds.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/29/world/middleeast/refugees-flood-turkish-border-as-isis-steps-up-attacks-on-syrian-kurds.html?_r=0) (accessed 29 January 2015).
- 13 See for example Issam Abdallah, 'Lebanon implements new controls at Syrian border', Reuters, 5 January 2015, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/05/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-refugees-idUSKBN0KE10C20150105> (accessed 30 January 2015) and Paul Wood, 'Syrians entering Lebanon face new restrictions', *BBC News*, 5 January 2015, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30657003> (accessed 30 January 2015).
- 14 Issam Abdallah, 'Lebanon implements new controls at Syrian border', Reuters, 5 January 2015, available: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/01/05/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-refugees-idUSKBN0KE10C20150105> (accessed 30 January 2015).

already vulnerable and at risk, particularly as they are largely women and children with limited resources. UN representatives stressed the importance of borders remaining open and urged the international community to continue supporting Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon so that they are in a position to provide ongoing assistance to asylum seekers.

### ***A Kosovo-type solution***

The delegation also discussed with stakeholders a medium-term solution similar to that employed during the Kosovo conflict where asylum seekers are temporarily removed from the region for periods of approximately three years. It seemed to the delegation that such an approach had not been given widespread consideration in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, and that humanitarian aid and long-term resettlement continued to be the primary strategies for protecting asylum seekers.

The delegation understands that Germany has implemented a program for temporary safe haven, the 'Humanitarian Admissions Programme', providing temporary protection to 15 000 displaced Syrians<sup>15</sup> 'until such time as they are able to return home in safety and dignity or find other durable solutions'.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Delegation comment***

The crisis in the Middle East will not be resolved quickly and stakeholders in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon confirmed the delegation's view that it is highly unlikely refugees from Syria and Iraq will be able to return home safely for many years yet. Not only does this mean that lasting political solutions must be found, but asylum seekers must be afforded protection in the medium-term either within the region or outside with the support of the international community.

The delegation agrees that resolving the conflicts in Syria and Iraq requires cooperation from and collaboration between members of the international community. In particular, the delegation believes that resolving the Syrian conflict must comprise political strategies so that military conflict can be ceased and political stability returned to the country, and in the interim medium-term solutions for protecting people who have fled from the civil war must be put place.

The delegation is cognisant of the financial cost and pressures experienced by Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon as a result of accepting large numbers of refugees fleeing

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15 See UNHCR (Germany), *Humanitarian Admission Programme Syria*, available: <http://www.unhcr.de/unhcr/in-deutschland/aufnahmeprogramm-syrien.html> (accessed 2 March 2015) and [http://www.unhcr.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/dokumente/02\\_unhcr/thap2013e.pdf](http://www.unhcr.de/fileadmin/user_upload/dokumente/02_unhcr/thap2013e.pdf) (accessed 2 March 2015).

16 International Organisation for Migration (IOM), *Germany offers temporary stay to 5,000 Syrians*, available: <http://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/news-and-views/press-briefing-notes/pbn-2013/pbn-listing/germany-offers-temporary-resettl.html> (accessed 2 March 2015).



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conflicts in neighbouring countries. As stated earlier, the world is indebted to Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon for their generous responses to the refugee crisis in the Middle East. The delegation appreciates the security concerns associated with the movement of large numbers of people across borders and the risk that some of these will be unidentified Islamic extremists.

Nonetheless, the delegation is concerned about the closure of borders with Syria. Their closure limits the ability of people at risk to move to areas of safety still within proximity to their homeland. The delegation believes it is vitally important that the international community, including Australia, shares the burden of the humanitarian crisis and continues to do its part to support Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon so that they are able to keep their borders open and provide ongoing assistance to asylum seekers.

With regard to medium-term protection for refugees, the delegation believes the approach taken during the Kosovo conflict and that currently adopted by Germany (a 'Kosovo-type solution') are worthy of consideration. Noting that it is preferable for refugees to remain close to their homeland, the temporary removal of refugees from the Middle East to countries outside the region with the intention of their safe return home in the future or to find other 'durable solutions' could simultaneously reduce pressure on Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon and provide safety for refugees whilst the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are brought to a resolution.

## **Recommendation 1**

**1.2 The delegation recommends that the Australian government explore with its international partners a Kosovo-type solution for providing medium-term protection to displaced people in the Middle East.**

### **Child refugees**

The majority of refugees fleeing Syria are children: UN estimates indicate that 50–55% of the refugee populations in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon are minors.

It is an understatement to say that the lives and educations of these children have been disrupted: the psychological and physical trauma they have sustained may never be healed, their prospects for attaining an effective education are bleak and their futures seem beset by personal, social and financial challenges. These children are frequently described as a 'lost generation'.

The impact of this lost generation is not just devastating for those children apart of it, but also for their homelands and the future of the region. In addition to re-building physical infrastructure, returning peace and stability to Syria and Iraq will require citizens with life skills, education and technical expertise to re-build political and social structures. Whether the generation of now children faced with this challenge have the skills and expertise to do so is a question difficult to answer and an answer will only become apparent in decades to come.

### *Education and life skills*

The value of education was a topic oft-cited during the delegation's field trip. The importance of child refugees having the skills and knowledge to establish a secure and stable life back in their home country in the future and education as a means of inoculating children against radicalisation were key concerns.<sup>17</sup>

In Jordan, Syrian refugees who have registered with the UNHCR are entitled to access public services including health and education. Refugees within refugee camps, such as Za'atari (see Figure 5), have access to schooling and life skills training provided, for example, by Save the Children.

*Figure 5: Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan*



In the 24 government-managed refugee camps in Turkey, there are around 220 000 refugees in total including 80 000–90 000 school-aged children. AFAD, the Turkish government agency responsible for the camps, provides services including school, social and cultural classes and vocational training. AFAD told the delegation that approximately 70 000 children in Turkish refugee camps are attending the school

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17 The delegation was told, for example, that members of the Free Syria Army (FSA), Daish and Jabat al-Nusra are moving freely amongst refugees in Turkey and actively seeking to recruit children.

classes provided. During its visit to the refugee camps at Nizip (which host approximately 33 000 refugees of which around 10 000 are school-aged children) the delegation attended some of the school classes being run (see Figure 6). The children are taught mostly by Syrian teachers but there are also Turkish teachers: language classes are taught with a view to overcoming the language barrier and Syrian children integrating into Turkish schools in the future.

*Figure 6: A class at Nizip refugee camp in Gaziantep, Turkey*



Similar language difficulties are encountered in Lebanon. UN representatives informed the delegation that there are 400 000 school-aged child refugees in Lebanon. Approximately 100 000 of these children are in government schools; however, part of the school curriculum (maths and science) in Lebanon is taught in either French or English presenting a language barrier for Syrian children.

The delegation visited Hosh Al Omara Intermediate Public School in Zahle (see Figure 7).<sup>18</sup> There are 284 students at the school, 101 of whom are Syrian. The school day is divided into two different "shifts": morning classes from 8.00 am to 1.45 pm are currently for Lebanese students and afternoon classes from 2.00 pm to 6.00 pm are for Syrian students, with different teachers for the different shifts.

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18 Australian Aid has contributed to renovations of the school buildings at Hosh Al Omara Intermediate School.

*Figure 7: A class at Hosh Al Omara Intermediate Public School*



School administrators told the delegation that most of the Syrian children at the school have experienced trauma or other psychological problems, and many are victims of domestic violence. The school was also concerned about lice, scabies and polio and, in addition to UN and Lebanese-government vaccination programs, had started offering medical and dental check-ups for Syrian students.

School administrators explained the reaction by some Lebanese parents to the enrolment of Syrian children. Some parents are concerned about communicable diseases, others that the parents of Syrian children may be involved in militant groups. There is also sensitivity about Lebanon's historical relationship with Syria. Hosh Al Omara school has seen a lower number of Lebanese students enrolled since the attendance of Syrian students, and the delegation heard that some Lebanese parents have started to enrol their children in private schools to avoid friction with Syrian students. In accordance with Lebanese government policy that the number of Syrian students at a public school cannot exceed the number of Lebanese students, a reduction in the number of Lebanese students inevitably means a reduction in the number of Syrian students which can be enrolled.

The delegation heard that, in order to attend high school, students in Lebanon must attain an intermediate school diploma and sit official exams. To date, not many Syrian students in Lebanon have been able to meet these requirements and therefore are not getting a secondary school education. It was suggested this was due to both the disruption to their earlier education and the language barrier. School administrators

also informed the delegation they were seeing a trend of fewer female Syrian students in later grades.

Whilst in Zahle, the delegation also had the opportunity to visit a UNICEF centre located near an informal refugee settlement. At the facility, UNICEF provides school classes as well as life skills training and psychosocial support from counsellors and social workers (see Figure 8). Children at the centre were engaged and enthusiastic in their academic classes as well as music and drama workshops where they were learning about the importance of things such as hand-washing and vaccination.

*Figure 8: A class at the UNICEF centre in Zahle*



### *Girl refugees*

Outcomes for Syrian girls were raised in Jordan and Lebanon where the delegation was told about increasing incidents of underage marriage. The motivation for this appears to be partly financial and partly about security: in some instances, parents who have exhausted their own financial resources see the marriage of a daughter as shifting the financial burden for her to another family and ensuring her financial stability; in other circumstances, parents see the marriage of a daughter as a way of protecting her against sexual predators.

### *Delegation comment*

The delegation was struck by the dedication and enthusiasm of teachers, social workers and volunteers working with refugee children in various settings in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. In particular, the affection and mutual regard between the staff and refugees (children and adults alike) at the Save the Children centre in Za'atari, Jordan and the UNICEF centre in Zahle, Lebanon was impossible to miss and a delight to experience.

The delegation applauds efforts by the governments of Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon and UN agencies to provide access to education for refugee children. The delegation agrees that education is vital to ensuring not only the safety and security of individuals into the future, but also the region. As discussed above, education is an effective and long-term strategy to reducing radicalisation. The delegation urges the international community, including Australia, to acknowledge the importance of education for child refugees and to continue supporting efforts to provide free and effective education for them in the Middle East.

In regard to girl refugees, the delegation cannot claim to fully understand the financially and socially vulnerable situations in which many refugees find themselves and the desire to reduce that vulnerability when so much about the future is uncertain. It is regrettable that in some instances the marriage of an underage daughter is seen as the only option. The delegation would like to see, wherever possible, appropriate support and safe environments available to refugees to limit circumstances in which the marriage of an underage daughter is used in an attempt to shore up a family's financial position or ensure that daughter's safety. The delegation acknowledges that this is not necessarily easy, particularly outside refugee camps where there is limited visibility of living conditions for refugees; irrespective, the delegation would like to see refugee families have access to appropriate support to reduce the prevalence of underage marriage.

### **Recommendation 2**

**1.3 The delegation recommends that the Australian government acknowledge the value and importance of education for child refugees and work with its international partners to support efforts to provide free and effective education to child refugees in the Middle East.**

### **Impact on host communities, services and infrastructure**

In Jordan, the delegation met with HE Ibrahim Saif, Minister for Planning and International Cooperation, and HE Atef Tarawneh, Speaker of the House of Representatives. Both Mr Saif and Mr Tarawneh expressed Jordan's commitment to helping those forced to flee Syria and Iraq. Mr Saif voiced concern that the conflict in Syria does not appear to be abating and highlighted the large number of Syrian refugees in Jordan, representing a 10–20% increase in the country's total population. Such numbers of refugees—most of whom are residing within the Jordanian community and not refugee camps—place pressure on services and infrastructure such

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as schools, the health system and water resources. He explained that there had been water shortages, resulting in some protest activity, and that more broadly the Jordanian system was stretched to capacity but in general the Jordanian community had been tolerant of these pressures. Mr Saif advised the delegation that the Jordanian government was cognisant of the 'fatigue' on the part of host communities and had developed national resilience plans which focus on supporting these.

Another source of potential tension raised by Mr Saif was unemployment, particularly youth unemployment, and the perception that Syrian refugees are prepared to accept lower rates of pay and are therefore being employed in low-paid jobs over Jordanians.

Mr Tarawneh voiced similar concerns about the pressures on Jordanian host communities. He described the burden on the economy and state budget as well as the high cost of energy in Jordan. Mr Tarawneh thanked Australia for its support but stated that financial support received from all donors did not cover one fifth of the costs incurred by Jordan in supporting refugees. Mr Tarawneh argued that more financial support from international donors is needed to support refugees and the Jordanian system.

The Turkish government is similarly providing support to a large number of refugees: 1.3–1.6 million Syrian refugees (220 000 in refugee camps and 620 000–790 000 based in the community) as well as approximately 70 000 Iraqi refugees (see Figure 9). Turkish Ministers and government officials informed the delegation that the government has spent US\$3.5–4.0 billion in support of refugees and by comparison has received little financial support from the international community (approximately US\$250 million). In Gaziantep, a city in the south of Turkey near the Syrian border, the influx of refugees has resulted in an increase in the cost of living. UN agencies indicated that the relationship between refugees and host communities in Gaziantep had been harmonious until late 2014 when incidents of violence against refugees had occurred.

*Figure 9: Nizip tent refugee camp*



Lebanon is hosting the largest number of refugees per capita in the world with 1.2 million UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees and possibly up to 2 million refugees in total in the country. Syrian refugees in Lebanon reside in the community or informal settlements (see Figure 10). The scale of the needs of refugees has consistently outstripped available resources and capacity, resulting in rising tensions within Lebanese host communities. During a visit to Hosh Al Omara Intermediate Public School in Zahle the delegation heard from school administrators that initially Lebanese people felt pity for Syrians fleeing the conflict but this has turned to bitterness and resentment in response to the support being provided to refugees. Press reports have suggested that many Lebanese fear that 'the presence of more than a



million refugees in the small fragile country might eventually trigger a renewed civil war'.<sup>19</sup>

*Figure 10: An informal refugee settlement on the outskirts of Zahle, Lebanon*



Whilst in Lebanon the delegation met with HE Rashid Derbas, Minister for Social Affairs, who discussed the pressures on the electricity network, roads, waste water infrastructure and education system. For example, according to the UNDP, households in Lebanon have been getting on average two hours less electricity per day as a result of the pressure on infrastructure. Mr Derbas explained that much of Lebanon's infrastructure was planned to last until 2024 but the additional pressure placed on it by the influx of refugees means it may not last until 2016.

Both Mr Derbas and HE Gebran Bassil, Minister for Foreign Affairs, raised concerns about the employment of Syrians and claims of refugee status by some Syrians when instead it is believed those people are in Lebanon for 'economic reasons'. The delegation heard that prior to the Syrian conflict there were approximately 400 000 Syrians working in Lebanon. The delegation was informed that since the commencement of the conflict, the Ministry of Interior has calculated that 80% of

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19 Paul Wood, 'Syrians entering Lebanon face new restrictions', *BBC News*, 5 January 2015, available: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30657003> (accessed 30 January 2015).

these have registered with the UNHCR and that in total 800 000 Syrians are now working in Lebanon. According to Mr Derbas, at least 40% of Syrians currently in Lebanon are there for work purposes. As in Jordan, competition between Syrian refugees and locals for jobs is a source of potential conflict between host communities and refugees.

### *Delegation comment*

The delegation acknowledges the requests from both government and NGO representatives in Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon for greater financial contributions from international donors to assist with ongoing support to refugees.

The delegation is very much of the view that the burden of the conflict in the Middle East should be shared by the international community and that Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon must be supported in their efforts.

The delegation understands that the next UNHCR Pledging Conference is planned for 8 December 2015.<sup>20</sup> For the reasons outlined earlier in this report and to support Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon, the delegation recommends that Australia do its part in sharing the burden and make appropriate commitments at the upcoming UNHCR Pledging Conference.

## **Recommendation 3**

**1.4 The delegation recommends that the Australian government do its part in sharing the burden of the crisis in the Middle East and make appropriate commitments at the upcoming UNHCR Pledging Conference.**

### **Christian minorities in the Middle East**

The delegation met with Archbishop Yusuf Cetin, Spiritual Leader and Patriarchal Vicar of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Istanbul and Ankarra (see Figure 11) and the Most Reverend Archbishop Issam Darwish of the Melkite Catholic Archdiocese of Furzol, Zahle and the Bekaa (see Figure 12). At these meetings there was discussion about the experience of Christians affected by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq and the outlook for Christians in the Middle East.

The Archbishops emphasised that the Middle East was the birthplace of Christianity and that Christians have lived in the region for thousands of years. They also expressed their concern about negative attitudes and behaviour towards Christians in recent years and the risk of the Middle East being denuded of Christians.

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20 UNHCR, *UNHCR Organized Meetings and Meetings with UNHCR Participation*, 12 March 2015, available: [http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opensslPDFViewer.html?docid=4002b8054&query=Pledging Conference](http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opensslPDFViewer.html?docid=4002b8054&query=Pledging+Conference) (accessed 19 March 2015).

Archbishop Cetin told the delegation that Syriac Christians lived in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Palestine<sup>21</sup> and that the Church's patriarch split his time between Syria and Lebanon. Prior to the Syrian conflict the Syriac patriarch could travel around Syria in full robes and he was afforded respect; Archbishop Cetin told the delegation that now even in Church the patriarch was not safe. Archbishop Cetin also informed the delegation that prior to the conflict there were approximately 250 000 Syriac Christians in Syria but now it is unknown how many remain. Those who have fled, Archbishop Cetin told the delegation, do not want to return because there is no stability and no certainty about the future.

*Figure 11: Delegates with Archbishop Yusuf Cetin*



21 There are also many Syriac Christians residing outside the Middle East in places such as India, Germany and Sweden.

*Figure 12: Delegates with Archbishop Issam Darwish*



Archbishop Cetin suggested that a partitioned area or enclave should be established for Christians in the Middle East and that such an area should be protected. He indicated that this was, in his opinion, preferable to the alternative of evacuating Christians from the region, possibly never to return. Archbishop Cetin stated that many different ethnic and religious groups have been living together in the Middle East for more than 5000 years and that Christians and Arabic people can live together harmoniously.

Archbishop Darwish told the delegation that many Christians in Syria had been displaced internally or had fled to neighbouring countries. His Church in Zahle was assisting approximately 800 Syrian Christian families. The delegation heard that mostly these families do not like to register with the UNHCR and so are reliant on

private or informal assistance. The Archbishop indicated that his Church tried to convince Syrian Christians to return Syria and told the delegation that Syrian Christians were safe in Damascus.

**The Hon Philip Ruddock MP**  
**Delegation Leader**

**Mr Chris Hayes MP**  
**Delegation Deputy Leader**

