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POLICY BRIEF:

Obama, King Salman & the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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“What is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia.”

-The late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, 2011

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The rich Gulf Cooperation Council countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have deliberately ignored the tragedies of the Syrian refugees by denying access to anyone with a Syrian passport. At the same time European countries like Germany awaits Syrian refugees with food, shelter, and open arms.

US Policy: Firm Leadership

The United States should quickly adopt a policy of pressuring the GCC governments to take in the millions of Syrian refugees trapped in camps and/or stuck on the European borders, and end this urgent humanitarian crisis.

The United States' leadership in providing a regional solution to this massive humanitarian crisis is urgently needed. If Saudi Arabia is being portrayed as the leader of the Arab and the Muslim world, it should provide leadership in hosting these Arab and Muslim refugees. The GCC has the wealth, the space, and the means to absorb these refugees into their countries with minimal disruption while gaining economic and cultural benefits as well.

The US should work the European Union countries to ensure that GCC governments accept as many Syrian refugees as possible.

President Obama should firmly ask Saudi King Salman to take as many Syrian refugees into Saudi Arabia during their meeting Friday. Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies can easily take up to three million Syrian refugees within one year. Obama should not miss this opportunity to spare the lives of millions.

The Crisis

An estimated 230,000 people have been killed since the beginning of the Syrian civil war. This has led to the largest refugee migration crisis since the Second World War. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has documented over 4 million Syrian refugees and 2.8 million Syrians forced to relocate within their country, 30% of the total population.

When they are not faced with a closed border with newly installed razor wire, they have to endure overcrowded camps with a lack of food and resources like in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Tragedies seem to come from the Mediterranean every day: on Saturday August 29th the bodies of 105 refugees washed ashore the Libyan coast after an overcrowded boat capsized with 100 more are missing and presumed dead.

The Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi whose body washed ashore in Turkey pulled at the hearts of millions around the world. The smuggling routes across the Mediterranean have become more lethal even within the past year; smugglers take advantage of the fact that refugees will pay any expense and suffer all hardships to escape. The rate of death for illegal migrants traveling across the Mediterranean has drastically increased since 2001, inherently causing some to call it “The Grave of the Mediterranean Sea.” Why would they risk everything, when a safer solution lies across their southern border?

As of now, the GCC countries have not officially admitted a single Syrian refugee.

Syrians Economic Advantage

The governments of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait, with a combined GDP of \$2.8 trillion¹, can help abate the human suffering by opening their borders to fleeing Syrians and giving them jobs in their countries. The efforts made thus far by these countries through the UNHCR have been feeble at best: Qatar has donated only \$2.5 million to Turkey, \$2.7 million from Saudi Arabia to Lebanon, and \$2.2 million from the UAE to Jordan.² Meanwhile, the U.S. and over 30 other countries have donated over \$540 million to the regional countries affected by the conflict to support the refugees. These aren't the only contributions the Gulf countries have made, but they are the only humanitarian funds donated to the Syrian refugees. Once diplomatic mediation through the Arab League proved ineffective in 2012, Saudi Arabia and Qatar began funding and arming opposition groups to the Syrian government which quickly began to compete with each other in ideology and leadership, fragmenting their purposes and further complicating the conflict.

Worker not Refugees

Most Syrian refugees can enter the GCC countries as workers and not as refugees with minimal economic burden on GCC governments. Vis versa, Syrian workers would provide the GCC economies with a major boost. Over five million non-Arab Asians already live as expatriate workers in the GCC and have greatly benefited these economies.

Cultural Parallels

Many Syrians can trace their heritage back to the Arabian Peninsula, that's why they will not face many cultural and linguistic barriers if they move to the Gulf countries. This is not the case in Europe where they will have to adapt to the new cultures, languages, and religious atmospheres.

Religious Demography

Sunni Muslims consist of 74% of the religious demography within Syria, the accepted religion of Saudi Arabia.³ The overwhelming majority of the Syrian refugees are practicing Sunni Muslims. The GCC countries could easily provide refugees the sought after protection. Surprisingly, the GCC governments have advocated for the protection of minorities as stated on the Joint Statement from the Camp David summit on May 14th 2015.

“...there is no military solution to the regions’ armed civil conflicts, which can only be resolved through political and peaceful means; respect for all states’ sovereignty and non-interference in their internal affairs; the need for inclusive governance in conflict-ridden societies; as well as *protection of all minorities and of human rights.*”⁴

This excerpt only highlights the hypocrisy of the Gulf States: on paper they advocate for peaceful resolution and humanitarian protection but in reality they arm rival militias and factions which only exacerbate the conflict. The GCC could become a global example of peacekeeping if they put their money where their mouths are and take in refugees to work in their countries instead of leaving them to the waves of the Mediterranean.

There is more than ample space for Syrians in the Gulf, in Saudi Arabia there are only 14 people per square kilometer and Syria has an average of 127 people per square kilometer.¹ Saudi Arabia specifically is experienced with the migration of millions of people to their country every year for the Hajj; they could use those same resources to bring Syrian workers to shelters and work sites. These Syrian skilled workers could contribute to the skilled-labor-poor GCC economies. Economically, it makes little sense for Syrians to seek refuge in neighboring countries like Jordan where the Gross National Income (GNI) per capita is less than \$5,000 USD a year, a lower-middle income economy with poor economic prospect.¹ Syrian workers would end up competing with Jordanian workers who are already clamoring for job opportunities in their own country – in the GCC they won’t be competing with the locals for employment.

Refugees should not risk their lives when equally sustainable Gulf countries lay only hundreds of kilometers away. Qatar, with a GNI per capita of \$90,420 (almost twice that of Germany), is booming with private construction projects and will be for the next few decades.¹ Hardworking Syrians would gladly work in the GCC private sector if allowed the necessary refuge that can only be offered in Europe presently.

Syrian workers in GCC countries could benefit these countries economically and culturally if the ruling families of these countries could overlook their sectarian differences and agendas and accept the best humanitarian and economic alternative.

¹Economic and Geographical Indicators provided by The World Bank

²Country contribution levels to UNHCR for 3RP located at
<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>

³“International Religious Freedom Report for 2013.” *U.S. Department of State*. U.S. Department of State, 2013. Web. 3 Sept. 2015.

⁴Office of the Press Secretary. “U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement.” *The White House*. 14 May 2015. Web. 3 Sept. 2015.