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Hosted by MICHAEL SERAPIO



# NEWS IN REVIEW

## IN THIS ISSUE

### **Syrian Refugees: A Humanitarian Crisis (Duration: 16:59)**

Millions of Syrians are being forced to flee their own country in the midst of a three-year civil war and the growing violence of ISIS — or the Islamic State terrorists. Nearly half of Syria's population has fled to neighbouring countries that are struggling to cope with the influx. Many have criticized the international community for its lacklustre response to the crisis.

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## SYRIAN REFUGEES: A Humanitarian Crisis

### Note to Teachers

The classroom must promote a safe place for students to discuss sensitive issues such as violence and death. Prepare students for the topics that will be discussed. Allow for individual reflective time in addition to small group activities where students can safely process their thoughts and emotions.

### MINDS ON

Imagine you are living a comfortable life with your family in a middle class neighbourhood. Now think what your life would be like if your neighbourhood was attacked and you and your family were forced to leave only taking what you could carry. Now move ahead to three months later and you find yourself in a refugee camp. You live in a tent and are surrounded by thousands of other displaced families. You rely totally on aid groups to provide you with basics. You have no idea what your future holds.

This may be an imaginary scenario for you, but it is a reality facing thousands of Syrians today living in refugee camps in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon. As the number of refugees increases, the host countries are asking for international help to deal with this humanitarian crisis. What do you think the challenges would be in providing relief? Why should assistance come from countries not located in the area?

### ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS

This mass exodus of Syrians began in 2011 when a popular protest against the government was violently suppressed. More demonstrations began and quickly spread to other Syrian cities. The government of Bashar al-Assad labeled the protesters as terrorists and sent in the army to dismantle this opposition. Soon the country fell into civil war with some members of the Syrian



army defecting to the rebels. It quickly became clear that this was not solely a political conflict but also one based on religious affiliation. The ruling Assad family are Alawite Muslims supported by Syrian Christians that had enjoyed protection and freedom to practice their faith. The majority Sunni Muslims have long been persecuted by the government. Since the conflict has worsened the anti-government forces have not been able to form a common front. Special interests and religious conflicts have only resulted in a military stalemate and a massive dislocation of the population.

Sunnis believe that succession to the prophet Mohammed (d. 632) rightly followed through the line of his most able and pious companions. Alawites follow the Shiite interpretation, claiming that succession should have been based on bloodlines. According to Shiite Islam, Muhammad's only true heir, imam, was his son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib.

But Alawites take a step further in the veneration of Imam Ali, allegedly investing him with divine attributes. Other specific elements such as the belief in divine incarnation, permissibility of alcohol, celebration of Christmas and Zoroastrian New Year makes Alawite Islam highly suspect in the eyes of many orthodox Sunnis and Shiites.<sup>1</sup>

## The Human Face of the Crisis

When Syrian refugees are asked why they left their country they respond that fear of constant attacks by both sides of the conflict left them little choice. Making the decision to leave is only the beginning of the refugees' plight. They are often forced to walk to safe havens and may even have to bribe their way in. Currently over two million Syrian refugees have sought safety in neighbouring countries. The majority have settled in Turkey, which has provided basic shelter to thousands. Life in refugee camps is a constant fight to stay warm, acquire food and water. Many of the children in the refugee population have witnessed atrocities and suffered psychological damage. These children have not been to school in years and often have few activities to engage them in the camps. Syria faces losing a generation of its youth to gangs, terrorists or other extremists. In other nations refugees have been met with opposition from locals who believe the newcomers are taking away jobs by accepting lower wages. Women also face the threat of being assaulted or economically exploited. In some cases young girls are being offered as brides by their parents as the only way to ensure the family's protection.

## The International Response

As the extent of the refugee flight from Syria became apparent, neighbouring nations called on the international community to assist them in providing services. The response has taken three forms:

- providing immediate relief to establish and maintain camps;
- trying to stem the tide by sending relief into Syria; and
- allowing large number of immigrants to be accepted into European and North American nations.

Thus far money has come from a variety of sources. The European Union has donated \$42 million and the United States over \$500 million, while Canada has pledged \$100 million. Some countries have hesitated to contribute because they cannot be assured that the money will go to those who need it the most. A variety of organizations claim to assist refugees but some sell aid supplies on the open market or use aid money to purchase weapons. The situation has further deteriorated with the capture of large portions of Syria and Iraq by ISIS forces. There is no guarantee that aid supplies will not fall into their hands. The United Nations has called on nations to accept more refugees, especially the most vulnerable such as religious minorities, orphaned children and members of the gay community.

## Seeking a New Home

Some Syrian refugees no longer hold any hope that they can return home. Instead they are looking to start again in a new country. The



question is: are other nations willing to give them that opportunity? One obstacle is that nations that might receive Syrian refugees fear the pressure such large numbers would exert on their own social services. Some American leaders have raised the fear that terrorists could infiltrate refugee groups and carry out attacks in the host nations. Not all citizens of potential host countries feel the need or obligation to provide a new home to Syrians. Canada said it would take over a thousand Syrian refugees but has not met

that target, even as it promises to greatly extend that number over the next few years. Some have even accused the Canadian government of giving preference to Christian refugees over Muslim ones.

Source:

1. Manfreda, Primoz. The Difference Between Alawites and Sunnis in Syria. Retrieved from [middleeast.about.com/od/syria/tp/The-Difference-Between-Alawites-And-Sunnis-In-Syria.htm](http://middleeast.about.com/od/syria/tp/The-Difference-Between-Alawites-And-Sunnis-In-Syria.htm)

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1. Is the conflict in Syria political or religious?
  2. What rights should refugees expect to have?
  3. Has the international response to Syria's refugee crisis focused on short- or long-term solutions?
  4. Can the obstacles to resettlement of Syrian refugees be overcome?
  5. By restricting immigration of Syrian refugees is the global community creating a generation of disaffected individuals who will only resent their exclusion?
  6. What may be the short- and long-term effects of prolonged fighting in Syria?

## VIDEO REVIEW

### Pre-viewing

1. Prior to viewing the video, brainstorm and note the challenges faced by both Syrian refugees and the potential host countries for these refugees. Keep track of your ideas compared to the reality.

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2. What obligation, if any, do you feel the world has in dealing with this crisis?

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### While viewing

1. What psychological scars were inflicted on Syrians prior to their departure?

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2. How have lives of Syrian refugees changed since they arrived in the camps?

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3. What are some of the difficulties that women face in the Zaatari camp?

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4. Why do the women in the camps worry for their children?

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5. What do you think refugee Hasan Abdalla means when he says, “no family properly live together now in Syria”?

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6. Why might countries such as Canada be hesitant to accept large number of refugees?

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7. Why is Canada in particular being singled out to accept a greater number of Syrian refugees?

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### Post-viewing

1. The Canadian government has indicated that although it has allocated over a thousand refugee spaces to Syrian refugees, sixty per cent must be privately sponsored.

a) If you and a group decided to sponsor a refugee family, what do you think you would need to provide the family?

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b) Check out the following Government of Canada website and compare your list to the requirements they outline:

[cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/ref-sponsor/section-2.asp#a2.6](http://cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/ref-sponsor/section-2.asp#a2.6)

Did you miss anything on your list? Are there items you feel the government should provide?

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2. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is seeking financial assistance for refugees. A section of their website dedicated to showing the human face of the Syrian refugee crisis features a series of photos from refugee camps.

a) Before you view these photos, suggest what images you would expect to see there:

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On the UNHCR site, take a look at the section entitled Refugee Voices, pictures and captions:

[data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/syria.php)

b) Do the pictures meet your expectations? Why or why not?

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c) Are the photos effective in promoting the UNHCR appeal? Do you feel the exhibit may be missing some aspects of refugee life? Why or why not?

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3. Gaining immigrant status is only one step refugees must face as they begin a new life. What other challenges do you think immigrants face coming to a country such as Canada? Use the organizer to help you identify the issues and offer some potential solutions?

What psychological issues might immigrants face?	Potential solutions
e.g. Fear of police/soldiers	e.g. Arrange for a meeting with local police
What cultural challenges might immigrants face?	Potential solutions
e.g. Different language	e.g. Provide language classes



4. Some commentators have suggested that nations could benefit from allowing increased immigration. For example Jordan has accepted many Syrian immigrants with skills important to the country's economy, individuals such as craftsmen, doctors and teachers. Canada has a point system for potential immigrants. Skilled immigrants are given higher points and those with the highest point totals are given priority for immigrant status.

a) Is this system equitable?

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b) What occupations would your community welcome if new immigrants were to arrive?

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c) Do we have an obligation to accept refugees no matter what their skills? Why or why not?

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