



A Syrian refugee boy smiles at an Emirati Red Crescent worker upon his arrival with his family at the new Jordanian-Emirati refugee camp, Mrajeeb al-Fhood, in Zarqa, Jordan on 10 April 2013. This is the first camp run and funded by the UAE's Red Crescent Society in Jordan.

The UAE's Response to the Syrian Refugee Crisis

by Kristian P. Alexander & Froilan Malit Jr.

Since March 2011, the Syrian civil war has continued to challenge both the moral and legal obligations of states in the Middle East, Europe and beyond. According to the UNHCR, more than 13.5 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance, of which some 4.86 million are registered refugees and 6.5 million are internally displaced persons.¹ The UAE currently hosts more than 242,000 Syrians, and given the country's demographic and economic particulars, their presence poses unique concerns.

In the field of international relations, rational choice theory assumes that states use certain cost-benefit analysis to justify an intervention approach, particularly when it comes to foreign policy decision-making.² The UAE government's decision to refuse granting refugee status to Syrians, even as it has provided development assistance totaling \$700 million and eased its residency rules to allow more than 100,000 Syrians to relocate through the kafala sponsorship system, is driven by some of these considerations. The UAE has allowed Syrian refugees to integrate economically and has provided them with temporary immigration and employment opportunities.³ However, consistent with the country's approach to all foreigners, there is no path to citizenship.

Several international rights groups, including Amnesty International, strongly criticize the UAE and the wider Gulf region's resettlement policies toward Syrian refugees. They claim that the kafala system only

allows affluent Syrian investors admittance and access to the UAE, not actual refugees.⁴ Though it is difficult to verify the alleged differential treatment, the international community emphasizes the presence of class discrimination in the Gulf states' admissions policies. The UAE government counters by emphasizing its humanitarianism and noting the populist and anti-refugee sentiments in Europe.⁵ The UAE's approach to refugee policy is a rationalist one and is the byproduct of logical calculation given geopolitical and economic constraints and the country's overarching desire to protect its image as a stable investment hub.

How rational?

National security remains a top priority across the Gulf states. Viewing the Syrian refugee crisis from a national security perspective, the UAE, to an extent, fears that a large Syrian presence may contribute to the rise of domestic terrorism (via the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood affiliated al-Islah group). This perception, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, stems from the UAE's involvement in bombing raids against the Islamic State. Because the UAE depends on stability to maintain its reputation as a global economic hub, the country is overly careful to protect its security interests.

As such, the UAE views any minor act of political disturbance as a direct threat to the stable business-friendly climate in the Gulf region. With the structural demographic imbalance—90 percent of the UAE's population are foreign workers—a potential influx of refugees (with no work permit or exit date) would threaten the precarious demographic base and further impact Emirati culture. As the researchers Michael Ewers and Justin Gengler acknowledge, “incorporating 30,000 refugees into the Gulf city-states is a much larger task than in Germany, a country of 80 million” given the state's size, governance capacity and resources.⁶ A potential influx of Syrian refugees could thus pose resource and bureaucratic constraints, and open up governance and citizenship pathway issues in the country.

In comparison to certain Eastern European countries, including Hungary, Ukraine and Romania, the UAE's decision not to admit Syrians as status refugees is not based on xenophobia. Hyper-diverse communities have long been welcome in the UAE, and Syrians are fellow Arabic speakers.

Economic concerns at the fore

The UAE's desire to ensure economic stability underpins its rational calculation toward the Syrian refugee crisis. The UAE is a major regional employment provider, and it has produced at least seven million jobs between 2000 and 2010.⁷ In 2016 alone, the World Bank estimated that the UAE was the third largest outward remittance market globally, contributing \$20 billion. The UAE thus carefully considers any factors, including the Syrian refugee crisis, that could impact its prized economic role.

In addition to domestic security and economic considerations, the UAE has the critical duty to consider other factors, including, but not limited to, persistent low oil prices, high youth unemployment and regional conflicts. These factors reinforce the UAE's protective approach and choices toward the crisis.⁹ It is also worth noting that the UAE and other Gulf states are not signatories to the 1951 UN Refugee convention, nor the 1967 Protocol, and are therefore not legally mandated to admit refugees. With the uncertain economic outlook, the UAE and other Gulf states continue to face complex governance challenges as they attempt to offset declining government revenues through new indirect taxes (e.g. VAT) to ease financial pressures and strategically adjust to deteriorating economic circumstances.¹⁰

Given the complex geopolitical and economic concerns, the UAE has sought to protect its interests by maintaining the status quo. The refugee admission culture of several European states, combined with generous social welfare systems and citizenship rights, has led many Syrians to instead prefer asylum in

The Syrian refugee crisis is the most urgent humanitarian crisis today. If properly and strategically reintegrated, refugees and other future migrant flows can contribute to the UAE's long-term economic development and well-being.

Europe than temporary residence in the Gulf—which provides no social welfare and citizenship pathways, only temporary employment through kafala irrespective of nationality. Moreover, the young and well-educated Syrian refugee population can help eliminate labor market shortages in aging European societies, particularly Germany. As for the Syrians that remain in the

Middle East, they prefer neighboring Arab countries like Lebanon and Jordan due to their geographical proximity, more lax visa rules and lower costs of living. While the incentives for Syrians to migrate to European states is higher—and the potential demand is stronger given declining birthrates and aging populations across Europe—it is crucial to differentiate Syrian refugees and their objectives in identifying destination countries.

In the future, both foreseeable volatilities and uncertainties will impact the UAE's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. First, if the price of oil continues to decline over time, the UAE and other Gulf states may impose more restrictive and limited foreign policy interventions in the context of humanitarian assistance. Given their internal challenges, Gulf states would continue to impose restrictive immigration policies toward refugees or migrants in general. Second, if both economic and political stability and development are maintained over time, then the UAE and other Gulf states may impose more proactive foreign policy interventions. At the same time, as refugee and asylum-seeker flows increase due to ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, Gulf and European states will likely face critical challenges in governing the refugee problems.

An economic boon?

The Syrian refugee crisis is the most urgent humanitarian crisis today. If properly and strategically reintegrated, refugees and other future migrant flows can contribute to the UAE's long-term economic development and well-being. The UAE and wider Gulf region, with the help of international organizations, needs to develop contingency plans to proactively respond to future outbreaks of refugee flows in the Middle East. This will help develop stronger, practical and actionable plans relating to resettling refugees and asylum-seekers in the long run.

Furthermore, the emotional debate surrounding the Syrian refugee crisis deflects attention away from a state's rational and calculated responses to its constraining environment. While there might be ideal solutions and comprehensive steps that can be taken by respective states to address the crisis, it appears that the UAE has carefully calibrated the costs and benefits associated with its actions. Although by no means comprehensive and exhaustive, the UAE seems to have based its foreign policy decisions regarding the Syrian refugee crisis on preserving domestic security and maintaining economic stability.

Kristian P. Alexander is Assistant Professor in the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at Zayed University in Abu Dhabi; Froilan Malit Jr. is an Associate at the Gulf Labour Markets, Migration (GLMM) and Population Programme.

- ¹ “UNHCR: Total number of Syrian refugees exceeds four million for first time.” *UNHCR*, July 9, 2015, <http://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2015/7/559d67d46/unhcr-total-number-syrian-refugees-exceeds-four-million-first-time.html>.
- ² Valerie M. Hudson and Christopher S. Vote, “Foreign Policy Analysis Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow,” *Mershon International Studies Review* 39, no. 2 (2007): 210.
- ³ Ray Jureidini and Latife Reda, “The Convergence of Migrants and Refugees: Western and Muslim Perspectives,” *Sociology of Islam* 5, no. 2-3 (2017): 225; Jo Jakobsen and Marko Valenta, “Mixed Migrations to the Gulf: An Empirical Analysis of Migrations from Unstable and Refugee-producing Countries to the GCC, 1960-2015,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (2017): 45.
- ⁴ “Left Out in the Cold: Syrian Refugees Abandoned by the International Community” (Report, London, Amnesty International, 2014), 9-15, https://www.amnesty.org.nz/sites/default/files/Left_Out_In_The_Cold_0.pdf.
- ⁵ Luay Al-Khatteeb, “The Gulf States Should Do More for Syrian Refugees,” *Markaz, Brookings Institution*, September 30, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/09/30/the-gulf-states-should-do-more-for-syrian-refugees/>.
- ⁶ Michael Ewers and Justin Gengler, “No (Gulf Country) for Syrian Refugees: The Kafala System and the Migration Crisis,” *Foreign Affairs*, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-10-05/no-gulf-country-syrian-refugees>
- ⁷ Samya Beidas Strom et al., “Gulf Cooperation Council Countries (GCC): Enhancing Economic Outcomes in an Uncertain Global Economy” (Report, Washington, DC, IMF, 2011), 1-15, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/cat/longres.aspx?sk=25251>.
- ⁸ Cleofe Maceda, “Revealed: Top Recipient of UAE Remittances,” *Gulf News*, February 5, 2017, <http://gulfnews.com/business/money/revealed-top-recipient-of-uae-remittances-1.1973165>; Karen Young, “Refugee Crisis and Economic Migration: Regional Economic Interdependence and the Arab Gulf States,” (Issue Paper #7, Washington, DC, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2015), 8-9, <http://www.agsiw.org/refugee-crisis-and-economic-migration-regional-economic-interdependence-and-the-arab-gulf-states/>.
- ⁹ Philip Martin and Froilan Malit Jr, “A New Era for Labor Migration in the Gulf Countries?” *Migration Letters* 14, no. 1 (2017): 113–126.
- ¹⁰ Froilan Malit Jr. and George Naufal, “Taxing Remittances: Consequences for Migrant Labor Populations in the GCC Countries,” *GLMM Explanatory Note 1/2016*, 2016, http://gulfmigration.eu/media/pubs/exno/GLMM_EN_2016_01.pdf.