



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau greets a girl and her family of Syrian refugees at Toronto Airport last December. The 25,000 refugees arriving from Syria are among many millions in a worldwide crisis of displaced persons. Adam Scotti photo

# New Leadership on the Refugee Crisis and the Long Road to September

Paul Heinbecker and Andrew S. Thompson

*The World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul produced little in terms of concrete solutions to fix the global refugee system, and there is a danger that two upcoming summits in September will do the same, unless countries such as Canada are prepared to exercise bold leadership.*

**B**y most accounts, May's World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey, was a disappointment. Granted, expectations heading into the meeting were low to begin with, and the summit lived down to its billing.

The intention behind the event was to revitalize the global humanitarian system, which is teetering under the

strains of the Syrian civil war and a refugee crisis that has spilled over into Europe. But few world leaders took the event seriously. Even fewer—particularly Western leaders—bothered to show up at all, opting to go direct to the G7 meeting in Japan instead. And while many of the participants who did attend the summit expressed their moral outrage at the current state of affairs, few new major commitments emerged. Gains were more aspirational than material. The international community needs to do better.

Thankfully, states will soon have an opportunity to do just that. Two summits on refugee protection will be held in New York in September: the UN General Assembly High-Level Meeting on Refugees and Migrants, and a Leaders' Summit hosted by US President Barack Obama.

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Sadly, the shortcomings and failings of the current refugee protection system are becoming more pronounced by the day, and not just because of Syria. The world is struggling to cope with roughly 60 million refugees and displaced persons, with some 86 per cent of refugees living in economically less developed regions or countries. Protracted conflicts and climate change are further swelling the ranks of the displaced, with no end in sight.

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Despite both a treaty commitment under the 1951 Refugees Convention to protect those fleeing persecution and a moral obligation to do so, the international community is proving to be too woefully ill-organized and in many cases too selfishly averse to acquit either.

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It is hard to tell what the low point has been: the Hungarian police tossing food to refugees caged in like animals; the Slovakian government rejecting Muslim refugees because there are no mosques there; the confiscation of the meagre assets of refugees by Danish authorities; the British government's refusal to take in 3,000 unaccompanied child refugees; EU High Representative Frederica Mogherini's criticism of the Turks' handling of refugees when her own members were building razor-wire fences to keep Syrian refugees out; or American Islamophobia and the US Congress's reluctance to accept Syrian refugees after US military misadventures had destabilized the region in the first place.

**T**he problem is bad and getting worse. The world needs to get ahead of the curve. What is needed is a global “responsibility sharing” system that is capable of anticipating mass movements of

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This is not a new idea. Scholars and practitioners have been wrestling with ideas of responsibility sharing since the 1970s, although the concept has often been framed in terms of “burden sharing” rather than as responsibility—or opportunity. Some have pointed out the benefits of a coordinated system of sharing, including how it offers both predictability for governments and insurance against having to absorb a mass influx of asylum seekers.

Similarly, some have even proposed a sort of “quota-and-trade” system, similar to cap-and-trade systems used to apportion control greenhouse gas emissions. In such a system, countries that do not wish to host asylum seekers could buy their way out of having to take their allocated share, while countries that do

host large populations, particularly front-line states, would in return receive a transfer of funds from the international community.

In theory, such a scheme would address the massive gap between the needs of the refugee protection system and current levels of funding. In its last annual report, UNHCR indicated that it received less than half of the US \$6.5 billion that it estimates it needs in order to carry out its work. Much of the shortfall is due to structural barriers, the most obvious one being that UNHCR's budget comes almost exclusively from voluntary contributions, not the assessed contributions of UN member states. The same is broadly true for the World Food Program, UNICEF and others.

**T**he inequities of the system are immense, while the North-South divide on questions of refugee protection runs deep. According to UNHCR, sixty percent of the world's refugees—approximately 8.4 million—are hosted by ten states in the global South, while only about one per cent of eligible refugees—roughly 140,000—are resettled every year, mostly in three countries: the United States, Canada and Australia. Add to the mix the controversial European Union-Turkey deal of March 2016 which, among other things, is supposed to guarantee Turkish citizens' visa-free travel in exchange for the return of irregular migrants to Greece back to Turkey, a country that is already the largest recipient of refugees in the world—and not just Syrians—and has spent billions of its own money to house them. It is little wonder that mistrust is high.

Reform of the global refugee regime will not be easy. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon has called for a Global Compact on Refugee Responsibility Sharing that will “commit Member States to support a comprehensive refugee response whenever a large-scale and potentially prolonged refugee movement occurs.” While the overarching aim of the Global Compact is to ensure predict-

able responses to refugee crises that are consistent with international human rights and humanitarian law, it is only a partial solution.

The compact, as it is currently conceived, would be voluntary and non-binding on member states. Moreover, given the lack of consensus on issues such as resettlement and financing of the system, there is a very real possibility that states will not be able to agree to any meaningful outcome document prior to September or agree on any concrete solutions in just a few days of meetings.

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Even so, the meetings in September represent an opportunity for the international community to get ahead of the refugee curve. The demand for global leadership on refugee policy is urgent and growing, even as the supply of such leadership is static, even contracting. Given the behaviour of its member states, Europe has lost all credibility. Despite the efforts of the White House to resettle Syrian refugees, the US's standing is no better. Someone else must step up to the plate.

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But it is not enough to lead by example. The stakes are simply too high. If those who have fled persecution or who have been forced from their homes are to have any chance of one day leading lives of hope and dignity, Canada must do all that it can to propose constructive, tangible policy solutions that ensure that the September meetings avoid the same fate as the World Humanitarian Summit.

A crisis is a terrible thing to waste. **P**

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