

# A NEW START FOR GLOBAL REFUGEE PROTECTION? HOW A TRANSATLANTIC ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES, CANADA, AND THE EU COULD BE A GAME CHANGER

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## ISSUE OVERVIEW

The world is in bad shape right now, especially for the millions fleeing war, violent conflicts, and persecution. According to the U.N. refugee agency (UNHCR), the number of forcibly displaced people in the world has risen to 80 million. This is an all-time high and almost twice as many people as in 2012 when 42.7 million were seeking refuge. The vast majority of the forcibly displaced (86 percent) are hosted in developing countries.

UNHCR estimates that 1.4 million refugees are particularly vulnerable and should be resettled to countries more able to take care of them. Particularly vulnerable means that these are refugees with increased protection needs, i.e. because they are survivors of violence and torture, unaccompanied minors, women on their own with their children, or refugees with particular physical and medical needs. Despite the high number of refugees in need of better protection, there is a significant gap between resettlement needs and actual resettlements. In 2019, only 63,726 refugees were resettled. In 2020, the number plummeted to 22,800, especially due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**GLOBAL REFUGEE PROTECTION NEEDS A RESTART. WHILE 80 MILLION PEOPLE HAVE BEEN FORCIBLY DISPLACED FROM THEIR HOMES, THIS HAS NOT LED TO ENOUGH GLOBAL BURDEN SHARING NECESSARY TO FACE THIS CHALLENGE.**

Strikingly, 67 percent of the world's refugees come from just five countries of origin. 6.6 million people have fled the ongoing war, terror, and persecution in Syria. The war in Afghanistan has caused 2.7 million refugees to flee the country. 2.3 million people have fled from South Sudan and 1 million Rohingya were forced to escape Myanmar. 3.7 million people have fled from Venezuela.

## POLICY OBJECTIVE

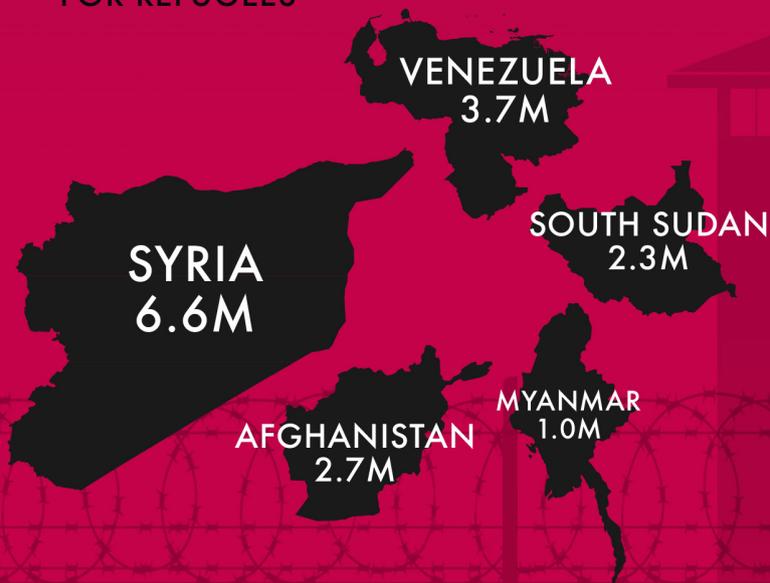
Global refugee protection needs a restart. While 80 million people have been forcibly displaced from their homes, this has not led to enough global burden sharing necessary to face this challenge. The U.N. Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), adopted in 2018, was an important attempt to foster solidarity and improve the situation of refugees. Since then, however, there was a lack of political momentum to achieve these goals.

To make things worse, the COVID-19 pandemic has hit refugees particularly hard and hampered efforts to protect and resettle the most vulnerable among them. With the advent of the Biden

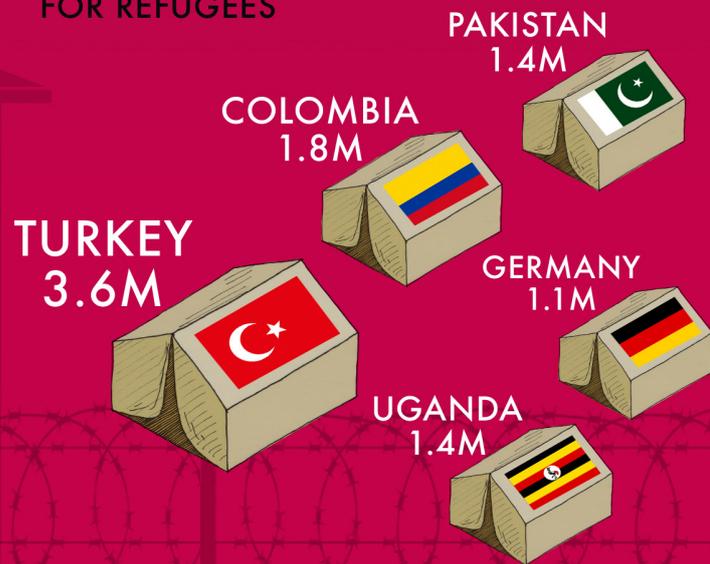
# A PLACE TO CALL HOME

The world is particularly volatile at the moment, especially for those fleeing war, violent conflicts, and persecution. As millions of people have been driven from their homes, potential host governments around the globe are grappling with how to address this challenge. Some search for ways to resettle and integrate refugees, while others pursue policies that shirk their international obligations. As new push factors bubble to the surface, the urgency to reverse this trend has already arrived. This infographic provides a snapshot of who is on the move and where they're headed.

## TOP 5 COUNTRIES OF ORIGIN FOR REFUGEES



## TOP 5 HOST COUNTRIES FOR REFUGEES



## FORCIBLY DISPLACED PEOPLE WORLDWIDE

80M



## FORCIBLY DISPLACED CHILDREN

30-34M



## NUMBER OF REFUGEES RETURNED OR RESETTLED

120K



<sup>1</sup><https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>

administration, however, the outlook has become much brighter. Together, the United States, Canada, and the EU could lead the way and revitalize efforts to protect refugees. The formation of a **new transatlantic alliance on refugee protection** could be a game changer and inspire other willing states to join the endeavor to help save refugees around the globe. To achieve this, the new transatlantic alliance would need to focus on three key objectives:

1. Strengthening the states who host the most refugees
2. Enhancing resettlement capacities to save the world's most vulnerable refugees
3. Addressing the causes of forced displacement by rethinking foreign policy

## **ACTION ITEMS**

### **1. Strengthening the states who host the most refugees**

According to UNHCR, around seventy-three percent of refugees are hosted in neighboring countries. Often, these countries are not financially wealthy, but they have shouldered most of the responsibility. The states that host the majority of refugees (in absolute numbers) are Turkey (3.6 million), Colombia (1.8 million), Pakistan (1.4 million), Uganda (1.4 million), as well as Germany. Germany is an exception in this list given its financial strength, but it has processed 1.8 million first-time asylum applications since 2015 according to the German Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF). Looking at the more precise measure of refugees as a percentage of a country's population, Lebanon and Jordan top the list of refugee hosting states in the world. In Lebanon, it is estimated that 25 percent of the population are refugees, including an estimated 1.5 million refugees from Syria. Jordan has also received a disproportionately high number of refugees in relation to its population size, including at least 660,000 refugees from Syria who are registered with UNHCR.

The data illustrates that wars and violent conflicts in a country of origin have enormous economic

and political impacts for neighboring states. Thus, it is essential to better support the countries that host the majority of refugees. Support should include **tailor-made financial contributions for integration projects, especially on housing, health care, education, and labor-market integration**, as well as strengthening international organizations on the ground (i.e. UNHCR, World Food Program). Support measures must avoid reproducing protracted situations for refugees. Instead, they need to enable refugees to become independent contributors to their host societies quickly. Access to health care, education, and the right to work should be priorities. Top refugee-hosting states should also receive priority access to vaccines against COVID-19.

### **2. Enhancing resettlement capacities to save the world's most vulnerable refugees**

Supporting refugee-hosting states is crucial, but not enough. To better protect the world's refugees, it is essential to prioritize resettlement, which offers controlled legal pathways to safety for the most vulnerable. Refugees are chosen based on vulnerability criteria by UNHCR in cooperation with states that are willing to host them. Prior to their arrival, they are properly vetted and screened for health issues.

While 1.4 million refugees are particularly vulnerable and need to be resettled, resettlement numbers are very low right now, especially because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The decrease in resettlements, however, was also a consequence of former U.S. president Donald Trump and his administration's retreat from saving refugees. For decades, the United States was the strongest actor in the field, helping hundreds of thousands of displaced people. This dramatically changed in 2017 when refugee admissions were cut year after year to just 18,000 places in 2020 compared to 85,000 places during President Barack Obama's last year in office.

The presidency of Joe Biden, however, is a game changer. He has pledged to restore the United States' historic commitment to be a safe haven

and to resettle 125,000 refugees per year. The EU has the ability to join this effort and increase its capacities. In cooperation with Canada, which has been a leading example and global champion for resettlement, the EU could offer 125,000 resettlement places. Together, the transatlantic alliance could **provide shelter to 250,000 refugees per year**. Resettlement would also benefit community building in host states, as there have been promising community sponsorship programs with civil society groups helping refugees integrate into society.

### **3. Addressing the causes of forced displacement by rethinking foreign policy**

Five countries in the world are responsible for almost 70 percent of all refugees, with Syria at the top of this notorious list. However far away these and other wars and conflicts may have seemed, it has become evident that they directly affect us — or may do so in the future. The key question is: How do we, as a transatlantic alliance, address the gross violations of human rights that are causing people to flee? While there is no silver bullet, one thing is clear: Any effective policy must involve stopping the supply- and money chains that enable the perpetrators of human rights violations.

The World Refugee Council has made a compelling proposal to freeze and seize the assets of the creators of refugee situations. Magnitsky-style legislation, which was also introduced in the EU at the end of 2020 (“Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime”) could be expanded to use frozen assets to help refugees and limit the powers of those who violate human rights.

The transatlantic alliance could also set up a **working group on fighting human rights violations and combatting root causes**. This would help us have a more comprehensive discussion on expanding and improving our foreign policy toolbox. Combatting root causes is not just a “refugee issue.” Essentially, it is about our strength as democracies to uphold human rights in a

world that has been witnessing a steady rise in aggressive authoritarianism.