

## **United Kingdom's Foreign Policy towards Syrian Refugees**

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### **Abstract**

United Kingdom's (UK) foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis is quite significant with reference to the entry of Syrian refugees into Europe and the strategic balance of power in the Middle East. UK being a major power in the European continent understands the importance of sharing the humanitarian responsibility for protecting, aiding and accommodating the Syrian refugees. The British Government is aware of the fact that it is not only providing humanitarian assistance to the Syrian refugees but also going to host their hostilities and affiliations in the ongoing conflict inside Syria. The arrival of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in UK presents a complex case of national versus humanitarian concerns in foreign policy analysis. This research paper is an attempt to focus on the convergence and divergence of interests between UK's Humanitarian assistance policy directed towards Syrian refugees and the British national security interests with reference to the strategic balance of power in the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Syrian Refugees, UK Foreign Policy, National Interest, Humanitarian Responsibility

### **Introduction**

United Kingdom's (UK) foreign policy towards the Syrian crisis is quite significant with reference to the entry of Syrian refugees into Europe and the strategic balance of power in the Middle East. UK being a major power in the European continent understands the importance of sharing the humanitarian responsibility for protecting, aiding and accommodating the Syrian refugees. The British Government is aware of the fact that it is not only providing humanitarian assistance to the Syrian refugees but also going to host their hostilities and affiliations in the ongoing conflict inside Syria. The arrival of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in UK presents a complex case of national versus humanitarian concerns in foreign policy analysis.

The civil war in Syria which began in 2011 has harbored a state of human insecurity for the civilians at large. The fight between the Assad forces, the coalition opposition forces, the radical jihadist forces of the Islamic State of

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Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Kurdish forces has led to more than 400,000 casualties, resulting in the forced migration of millions of Syrian civilians from their homeland (Fisher, 2016). United Nations special envoy in Syria, Staffan de Mistura, is also of the view that UN's initial assessment of death toll of 250,000 casualties in Syria should be revised to 400,000 deaths of war (Hudson, 2016). According to a report published by Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR), the death toll in Syrian civil war amounts to 470,000, making 11.5 % of the population either killed or injured due to the ramifications of the ongoing conflict (SCPR, 2016). At the local level, there are around about 6.3 million internally displaced people in Syrian Arab Republic (OCHA, 2017). At the regional level, there are 2,910,281 Syrian refugees in Turkey, 1,011,366 in Lebanon and 656,170 in Jordan, requiring immediate humanitarian assistance (UNHCR, 2017). 10% of Syrian refugees are seeking human security in Europe (OCHA, 2017). In consideration of human rights and international law protocols, humanitarian responsibility to protect (R2P) is an essential pre-requisite for ensuring the survival of Syrian refugees both at the local and the regional level. Former United States (US) Secretary of State John Kerry has himself highlighted this state of human insecurity in Syria in addition to the plight of millions of refugees all around the globe which has led to the emergence of greatest humanitarian crisis that the human history has seen after World War 2 (Rudaw, 2016).

UK's 2020 plan for the resettlement of Syrian refugees in UK, UK's humanitarian financial aid assistance to the internally displaced people in Syria, UK's humanitarian financial aid for the resettlement of Syrian migrants at the regional front and the British political assistance for a multilateral peace settlement of Syrian crisis are going to be some of the policy issue areas that are going to be addressed in this paper.

This research paper is going to focus on the convergence/divergence of interests in between UK's Humanitarian assistance policy directed towards the Syrian refugees and the British national security interests. This research paper is also going to focus on the absence of a British military approach and its implications for the conflict resolution of Syrian civil war.

### **Conceptual Framework**

From a historical point of view, the European refugee crisis created as a result of the World War 2 provided an opportunity for the states and their respective leaders to devise an international protocol which could deal with an exodus of such massive scale. This particular protocol i.e. The 1951 UN Refugee Convention provides a definition, role and rights of a refugee. According to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, a refugee can be defined as "Owing to well-

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founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it"(UNHCR, 2010, p. 14).

Kunz's (1981) typology can be of great assistance in defining the character of different refugee groups. Kunz has divided the refugee groups based upon their motivations into three groups. They are (Collins, 1996):

- Majority Identified Refugees
- Events Related Refugees
- Self-alienated Refugees

According to Kunz(1981), majority identified refugees can be described as the group of people who have left their homeland based on social and political motivations which might include support of majority at home with reference to the cause for which they have left their motherland. They keep in touch with their homelands and try to contribute to the local resistance/liberation movements. If their effort for political change becomes successful, they prefer to return back to their homelands as repatriates. Such behavior was being exhibited by the Algerian refugees in 1950's, Zimbabwean refugees in 1970's and Nambian refugees in 1980's.

According to Kunz (1981), the event related refugees are such who face active or latent discrimination based upon their minority status. These type of refugees do not have the same level of affiliation or patriotism that is being exhibited by the majority identified refugees. The discrimination against such refugees can be based upon religious or ethnic differentiation. the refugees from Rwanda in neighboring African countries can be considered as an example of event related refugees.

According to Kunz (1981), self-alienated refugees leave their homeland on account of multifarious individual reasons. They do not show societal group psychology.

Weiner's (1992-1993) work in addition to Kunz's work can help us a lot to understand the motivations and the desires which can become a cause for a citizen to become a refugee. Weiner characterizes three types of motivations which can make a citizen to become a refugee. They are(Weiner, 1992-1993):

- Politically motivated refugees
- Economically motivated refugees
- Environmentally motivated refugees

The majority identified refugees and their motivations can be explained in terms of politically motivated refugees. The refugees who are seeking economic security and move to a richer country to achieve it are economically motivated refugees. Floods, earthquakes, famines, global warming and other environmental disasters can also become a source of environment based migrations.

Weiner's work is also of great significance not only explaining how refugees leave one country and enter another but also mentions that how entering a new place creates certain level of opportunities and constraints of the state receiving refugees. These constraints can range from cultural assimilation to economic burden, from border safety to the internal security threats.

In this paper, UK's foreign policy towards Syrian refugees is going to be understood not only from the humanitarian perspective but also from the national security perspective as well.

### **Historical Contextualization**

The Syrian crisis started in the year 2011 and still continues on. The major conflicting parties at the local level are:

- Assad regime
- Coalition opposition groups
- ISIS

The Arab spring also had its impact on the political spectrum of Syria in 2011. Assad and his family had been ruling Syria for many years. Assad's father, Hafez al-Asad had ruled Syria from 1971 to 2000 till his death (Biography.com, 2014). From 2000 onwards, Assad has been ruling Syria. Assad's family belong to the Alawite Shia sect; a minority sect in Syria, which rules the majority Sunni population (Dukhan, 2014). The rule of minority over majority has created a problem for democracy and democratization in Syria. The sectarian differences of Shia versus Sunni faultiness also played huge part in the tribal nature of civil conflict inside Syria. The result came in the germination of an armed opposition against Assad and his supporters. This ongoing conflict has resulted in the death of thousands. Moreover, the addition of ISIS has led to the intensification of conflict inside Syria. The sectarian

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make up of this conflict has also resulted in the proxy involvement of the two opposing Muslim Middle Eastern nation-states i. e.

- Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
- Islamic Republic of Iran

Saudis are supporting the anti-Assad coalition forces because of their Sunni lineage whereas Iranians are supporting the Pro-Assad forces because of their Shiite lineage (BBC News, 2015). As a consequence of, the civil warfare in Syria might transit into a regional conflict, creating a prospective imbalance for the regional peace and stability in Middle East.

The global forces would not have been able to keep themselves isolated from this situation. USA under Obama administration was in favor of removing the Assad regime as they believed that Assad was chiefly responsible for this whole mess from the start(BBC News, 2015). Donald Trump, the current US President, during his electoral campaign severely criticized the Obama administration's handling of the Syrian conflict (Wehner, 2015). In his view, ISIS is a greater threat to the regional security and stability in Middle East as compared to the Assad's regime (Daoud, 2016). Russians on the other hand are of the view that any move to remove Assad's regime would be in direct conflict with the principle of non-intervention, which has been one of the binding principles for all signatories of the UN charter (BBC News, 2015). Russians are of the view that it is more important to deal with the threat posed by ISIS than to remove Assad's regime. This conflict in narrative over Syrian crisis between the global powers is another source of concern for any international effort to resolve this ongoing crisis in Middle East.

Britain being a close ally of US, a major global power and a central state in European Affairs could not keep itself aloof and isolated from this ongoing conflict inside Syria. The 10% Syrian migrants marching towards Europe required a sophisticated response in policy from Great Britain. This sophisticated response from UK in view of Syria mostly comprises of its humanitarian aid for internal and external forced displacements from Syria.

### **UK Government's 2020 plan for Syrian Refugees**

Former UK Prime Minister (PM) David Cameron announced the 2020 plan for accommodating Syrian refugees inside Great Britain on 07-09-2015(Gower & Cromarty, 2016). Richard Harrington, a British MP, was being appointed by the British Government to oversee the implementation of this 2020 plan (UK Government, 2015a). The specific ministerial post created for the Syrian

refugees in UK has been scrapped by the current British Prime Minister and the former Home Secretary, Theresa May, who has made Richard Harrington as her Pensions Minister, leaving the first ministerial post for Syrian refugees abandoned (Cowburn, 2016).

According to the UK 2020 plan for Syrian refugees, Britain will help accommodate 20,000 Syrian migrants to settle down in UK by 2020. Almost 5000 Syrian refugees have already been resettled in Great Britain since 2015, showing the British Government's strong resolve to carry out its Syrian humanitarian policy in an effective way (Goodwill, 2017). Theresa May has also vowed to continue on with the 2020 plan for the accommodation of 20,000 Syrian refugees by the year 2020.

### **UK Opposition's Perspective on Britain's 2020 plan for Syrian refugees**

There are those who think that the UK government is not doing enough to help out the Syrian refugees as compared to the refugee resettlement policies of other European states. Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour opposition leader in the House of Commons, thinks that there still needs to be done a lot in terms of helping Syrian refugees (Moss, 2015). He thinks that the number 20,000 is quite less and does not meet the urgency of helping the Syrian refugees. Yvette Cooper, the Labour party politician and MP, has also criticized the Tory government's plan and its limitations in view of handling the Syrian migration issue (Wintour, 2015). Theresa May has also been criticized for not increasing the number of Syrian refugees pledged according to the 2020 plan. She has been severely criticized for scrapping the post of first minister for Syrian refugees. Owen Smith, Labor party politician commented on this policy move by the Tory government under May in these words: "At a time when men, women and children are still drowning in the Mediterranean because of the ongoing refugee crisis, it is utterly disgraceful that the Tories have chosen to axe this important post" (RT, 2016). Even a Tory MP Heidi Allen commented on this move as "not a good start" (Waugh, 2016). Lisa Doyle from the Refugee Council has said that "What's more important than reshuffles and rhetoric are the concrete steps and action the Government takes to make a practical difference to refugee lives" (Waugh, 2016).

Images like drowned Syrian children such as Aylan Kurdi, near Turkey's shore of Bodrum have also increased domestic pressure on the UK government to help the helpless women and children among Syrian refugees (Smith, 2015). In spite of strong criticism at the domestic political frontier, Theresa May has refused to increase the specified number of refugees in the 2020 plan, citing it as more practical and feasible strategy to deal with the refugee crisis in Syria (Mason, 2016). Theresa May's firmness in 2020 plan has led political

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critics to blame her for betraying innocent helpless refugee children, especially after she scrapped the "dubs resettlement" scheme (Hawkes, 2017). Dubs resettlement scheme for the stranded migrant children across Europe was being introduced by Labour Peer Lord Alf Dubs (Warrell & Allen, 2017). Labour leader, Yvette Cooper had expressed her agony over the decision of scrapping 'dubs resettlement' by terming it as a "shameful" act (BBC News, 2017).

### **Threat Perceptions about Syrian refugees in UK**

There are those who think taking so many refugees will not only become a burden on national economy but will also jeopardize the national security particularly in the aftermath of Paris attacks in the latter half of 2015. Keith Waz, the chairman of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, although has welcomed government's policy to resettle Syrian refugees in UK, yet he has raised doubts over the capacity of the government for accommodating 4000 refugees per year, which would be higher than any recorded estimates of refugee accommodation within UK in a single year (SkyNews, 2015). What if anyone in the form a refugee is an armed militant or an ISIS terrorist who would exploit the humanitarian asylum window in UK and attack innocent British citizens? The case scenario of Tareena Shakil, a British citizen, who has been convicted for supporting and developing links with ISIS during her visit to Syria with her toddler son, manifests the threat of an armed refugee who can cause havoc in Great Britain (Snowden, 2016). The recent London terror attack near Westminster by a Muslim British citizen named Khalid Masood and ISIS claiming him to be their soldier is not only a threat alert for the British national security but also a political security threat to the essential humanitarian needs of the Syrian refugees (Spark & Jordan, 2017).

David Cameron, the former British PM, has himself explained the rationale behind limiting the number of incoming Syrian refugees inside Great Britain. He is of the view that allowing more number of Syrian refugees than 20,000 would not help in resolving the Syrian crisis as the fight still goes on inside the Arab republic (Wintour, 2015). Such an approach which includes only the maximization of humanitarian effort and minimization of political/military effort to resolve Syrian crisis will only create more number of refugees from Syria.

### **Britain's Financial Humanitarian Assistance for Syrian Refugees**

According to UN estimates, the Syrian refugees whether they are internally displaced, regionally displaced or displaced anywhere else require a financial target assistance of 8.96 billion dollars in demand for the year 2016 (UK

Government, 2016a). UK is paying 1.12 billion pounds, highest in Europe and second to US, in humanitarian financial assistance to Syrian refugees (UK Government, 2016a).UK' financial humanitarian assistance for Syrian refugees should be analyzed at two levels i. e.

- Syrian internally displaced refugees
- Syrian regional based refugees

### **UK's Humanitarian Financial Assistance for Internally displaced Syrian migrants**

UK's humanitarian financial assistance for internally displaced refugees has been announced to be 561 million pounds out of which 321 million pounds have already been spent in financially assisting the internally displaced migrants in Syrian Arab Republic (UK Government, 2016a).

### **UK's humanitarian Financial Assistance for Region based Syrian migrants**

At the regional level, UK's humanitarian financial response for Syrian refugees resettled in Lebanon is announced to be 304 million pounds out of which 146 million pounds have already been spent in financial aid (UK Government, 2016a). Similarly for Syrian refugees in Jordan, UK has announced humanitarian financial assistance amount of 193 million pounds of which 134 million pounds have already been spent to help the refugees get resettled(UK Government, 2016a). In Turkey, UK has pronounced its financial assistance amount to be 34 million pounds of which 24 million pounds have already been spend in aid(UK Government, 2016a). In Iraq, UK has pledged 19 million pounds for Syrian refugees out of which it has already spent all the money it has announced (UK Government, 2016a).

### **UK's non-humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees**

UK has been consistently supporting the opposition forces in Syria against the Assad regime by political means. UK government has announced 67 million pounds for financially assisting the coalition opposition forces in their fight against the Assad regime (UK Government, 2015b). The UK government has further provided the opposition forces with an amount of 3 million pounds to locate and eliminate chemical weapons held by Assad regime so that they can't be used against the civilians in this civil war (UK Government, 2015b). UK government has also announced 29 million pounds for limiting the spread of Syrian conflict at the regional level (UK Government, 2015b).UK



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government under Theresa May has also called on the international community to put more diplomatic pressure on the Russian government in order to check Putin's support for the alleged illegal activities of the Assad regime against the innocent Syrian civilians keeping in view the norms of the international law (Asthana, 2016).

### **UK's absence of Humanitarian/Military Intervention in Syria**

There is a humanitarian crisis in Syria going on as has been observed by UN and other international agencies and states. The situation in Syria is getting worse by each passing day. This calls for a policy based on UN's protocol for Responsibility to Protect (R2P)(UN, 2016). Although UK's conservative government is still providing financial assistance to opposition forces yet it has failed to achieve parliamentary support for military action in Syria(Strong, 2015). There are multiple reasons for lack of humanitarian/military intervention in Syria by the UK government.

Firstly, the recent experience of Libyan humanitarian intervention is still fresh in the memories of British people which ended in a worse situation as compared to the circumstances before the downfall of Qaddafi. Secondly, the involvement of Soviet Union in Syria in support of Assad has made the situation a lot more complex. There are chances that If US, UK and the allied forces also intervene militarily in Syria, the conflict will not only expand in the region on proxy basis but it might become the feared beginning of a hot war between US and Russia. Thirdly, UK's non-humanitarian assistance to coalition opposition forces in Syria has not yielded beneficial results. Fourthly, British People still remember the Blair years of Iraq war and they seem not to be ready for another fiasco like Iraq. Fifthly, in view of the sectarian nature of the conflict in Syria, if UK is going to take active part in war, it might project the notion of proxy warfare in Syria on behalf of UK. Sixthly, conservative would not like to face the same backlash that the labor party faced as a result of Blair years in Iraq.

Theresa May has herself contended that any effort to make single military intervention will not yield the desired peace settlement in Syria(Independent, 2015). In her capacity as the UK PM, she has kind of put more focus on dealing with ISIS without minimizing the political rhetoric against the Assad regime. In her speech during the UN summit on refugees and migrants, she said that "from the UK's point of view we are there to deal with Daesh, to deal with the terrorist threat that is Daesh"(BBC, 2016). In this context, Theresa May concluded a deal with Turkey for cooperation and management in lieu of the eliminating terrorists of ISIS in Syria (Culbertson, 2017). It seems for the time being that at the international front; UK has come to this political

realization that creating consensus over confronting ISIS is easier as compared to creating consensus over confronting Assad regime.

### **Comparative Analysis of UK's Syrian refugee policy with other EU states**

For convenience, UK's Syrian refugee policy is going to be compared with two major European states i. e. Germany and France. In terms of humanitarian financial assistance, UK is the biggest European state in terms of supporting Syrian refugees with an amount of 1.12 million pounds. In terms of accommodating number of Syrian refugees in Europe, UK lags behind many European states (Harding, Oltermann, & Watt, 2015). In terms of military offense, UK lags behind France especially the offensive posture French President Holland has taken in the aftermath of Paris attacks(Black, 2015). In terms of multilateral efforts for a peaceful settlement of Syrian crisis, Germany and UK, together with Kuwait and Norway have declared under the auspices of Syrian regional conference conducted in London that the peaceful settlement of Syrian crisis can only begin through political settlement in Syria wherein there has to be a transitional government facilitating the process of political transition in Syria (UK Government, 2016b).

### **Brexit and UK's Syrian refugee policy**

Britain's exit from European Union (EU) does not only signify the resurgence of nationalism in European politics in particular and global politics in general but it also signifies the radical transformations in the political attitudes towards the refugees at large. Andrew Geddes, co-editor of the social sciences migration research group at Sheffield University, while making an assessment of the political landscape in the aftermath of Brexit commented that "the UK has been marginal to many of the key EU developments [on refugees], but I think there will be implications for rights of asylum seekers inside the UK"(Siegfried, 2016). The resurgence of nationalistic tendencies in the aftermath of Brexit is also going to affect the electoral politics as the far right groups against the incoming exodus of refugees are going to gain more footing as compared to their previous track record. Brexit led to the ouster of David Cameron as the British PM. Will Brexit lead to the discontinuation of his 2020 plan? Theresa May's record on it seems a bit promising for now but for how long.

### **Findings**

Following are the findings of this research article given below:

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- UK Humanitarian financial assistance policy to Syrian refugees is the best policy exhibited by any European state in comparison.
- The number of Syrian refugees allowed in UK according to the 2020 plan is low as compared to the number of refugee intake by other European states.
- UK has limited the intake of Syrian refugees by 20,000 keeping in view of the national security threats that it might face in future.
- UK has avoided humanitarian intervention in Syria due to the Russian involvement, experience of Blair years during Iraq war and the disastrous consequences of the Libyan humanitarian intervention in recent memory.

### **Recommendations**

Following are the recommendations of this research article given below:

- UK should follow the political settlement discourse with reference to the resolution of Syrian crisis.
- UK should follow a multilateral peace settlement discourse towards the resolution of Syrian crisis.
- UK should abstain from unilateral military intervention.
- UK should allow Syrian refugees in Great Britain after they get security clearance regarding their background history of activities.

### **Conclusion**

UK's foreign policy posture towards Syrian refugees is one of humanitarian nature instead of pestering a posture of military intervention. It has helped in avoiding the escalation of conflict at the regional level. It has also kept the hopes alive for a futuristic peace settlement of Syrian crisis.

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