

Few Syrian refugees yet to arrive in Australia

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10 September 2016

Only 1,868 refugees from war-ravished Syria and Iraq have been brought to Australia since the Liberal-National government promised, nearly a year ago, to settle 12,000 people. With 4.8 million Syrian refugees now living in camps across Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, this is a contemptible response.

For all the government's claims to be fighting in Iraq and Syria for humanitarian motives—to protect the people of the Middle East from the atrocities of ISIS—its reaction to the fate of those displaced by the war underscores its true attitude toward the millions of victims of the predatory US-led war in Iraq and Syria.

Announcing Australia's 12,000 additional places last September, then prime minister Tony Abbott said: "Our focus will be on those most in need—the women, children and families of persecuted minorities who have sought refuge from the conflict in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey." Since Malcolm Turnbull replaced Abbott later that month, the government's claim has continued to be a fraud.

In reality, this war, and all its atrocities, is the outcome of the drive by the US and its allies since 2011 to overturn the regime of Syrian President Assad. Its purpose is to ensure American control over the Middle East as part of Washington's aims to dominate the entire Eurasian landmass, where the US confronts Russia and China.

The US and its partners, including the Saudi, the Persian Gulf and Turkish regimes, turned to extreme right-wing Islamic fundamentalist forces, like ISIS, to carry out their objectives. Having helped create ISIS, the imperialist powers then exploited its existence to justify further military intervention in Iraq and Syria and attacks on democratic rights at home.

There was an outpouring of public support for the refugees last year, particularly after the horrendous image of the body of Alan Kurdi, a toddler washed up on a Turkish beach.

Despite this, the Australian government only agreed to take 12,000 victims of the war. Since then, it has used the Syrian refugees as guinea pigs for a draconian new regime of politically vetting and maintaining life-long

surveillance over all immigrants, resulting in the delay in hand-picking the 12,000 intake.

A document leaked in February revealed that the government's measures include stricter "security checks" by the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) on the Syrian and Iraqi refugees, with "these additional screening criteria to be applied to the entire Humanitarian Program." A "visa risk assessment tool" includes "an intelligence-led threat identification and risk profiling capability."

Once again, the Australian government is setting new precedents for the inhuman treatment of refugees and the violation of their basic asylum rights, just as successive governments have done since the Labor Keating government imposed "mandatory detention" on all asylum seekers in 1992.

Immigration and Border Protection Minister Peter Dutton last week bluntly defended the delay in settling the refugees, saying, "Our focus has been on security and, given the international terrorist threat, we've cut no corners. We have applied the most rigorous security checks of every person under the program."

The global scare campaign over the threat of terrorism is being utilised not only as the pretext for wars but also to overturn democratic and legal rights in the name of "national security." Vulnerable refugees already registered by the UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, are being denied asylum, while priority is given to selected religious groups and to "skilled" refugees whose labour can be most readily exploited by employers.

In June, the Refugee Council of Australia criticised the government for having "failed to deliver" on its "promises." CEO Paul Power said: "UNHCR's figures show that Australia, in fact, helped fewer refugees in 2015 than the previous year." He said 9,339 refugees were settled last year, a decrease of 2,171 from 2014.

Earlier, the council accused the government of "cherry-picking" refugees to favour Iraqi Christians, even though the vast majority of those fleeing the war are Muslim. The head of the UNHCR in Lebanon, Andrew Harper, made

similar comments and criticised the government for not taking refugees already processed by the UNHCR.

According to UNHCR statistics, the global refugee crisis, the worst since World War II, has seen more than 65 million people forcibly displaced. Australia's intake in 2015 equated to just 0.01 percent of the total. Of the 2.45 million people of those who were resettled or had their refugee status confirmed, just 0.48 percent (11,776 people) were assisted in Australia.

By contrast, the countries with the largest registered refugee populations are impoverished or in economic crisis. The top five are Turkey (2.54 million), Pakistan (1.56 million), Lebanon (1.07 million), Iran (979,437) and Ethiopia (736,086). Millions more people are not counted or do not have their refugee status recognised.

Last year's one-off offer to take 12,000 war victims was accompanied by the Australian government's refusal to lift its annual refugee and humanitarian visa quota of just 13,750.

The snail's pace of Australia's intake process has led to promotion of the "humanitarian credentials" of another US ally, Canada. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Liberal government reportedly met its quota of 25,000 Syrian refugees, but that is also a tiny fraction of the need. Moreover, some of the selected refugees were privately sponsored, and now have debts of up to \$10,000 to the Canadian government. Dozens of refugees also have been imprisoned in Ontario jails, a practice pioneered by Australian governments.

The increasingly brutal treatment of refugees worldwide flows directly from the national "border protection" regimes adopted by all the capitalist states. The victims of this catastrophe, and all working people, must be afforded the right to flee war and persecution and seek protection wherever they choose, with full political and social rights.



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