

UK reneges on its promise to take in Syrian refugees

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One year after former Prime Minister David Cameron promised to settle 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020, only 2,800 have arrived in Britain.

This is just over half the rate of 4,000 a year needed to meet the paltry commitment, under conditions where there are more than 4.8 million refugees from the war-torn country.

The British government's refusal to honour even its own pledge exposes its callous contempt for the millions of victims created by its participation, both overt and covert, in predatory US-led wars in Syria, Iraq and Libya—waged ostensibly to protect the people of the Middle East and North Africa from the brutality of Islamic State (ISIS) and similar Islamist forces.

The civil war in Syria, with all its atrocities, is the product of the five-year long attempt by the US and its allies to topple President Bashar al-Assad via a constantly shifting coalition of armed proxies and to install a more pliant, pro-American regime. Its purpose was to ensure US control over the Middle East as part of a broader campaign to dominate the entire Eurasian landmass, where it confronts Russia and China.

The Obama administration and its partners, including Saudi Arabia, the Gulf petro-monarchies and Turkey, turned to extreme right-wing Islamic fundamentalist forces, such as ISIS and various al-Qaeda-linked outfits, to carry out their objectives. Having played a key role in spawning such groups, the imperialist powers then exploited their existence to justify further military intervention in Iraq and Syria and attacks on democratic rights at home.

Cameron refused to take part in a broader European Union programme to relocate refugees who reached Europe. Instead, he pledged to increase humanitarian funds to refugee camps in the Middle East in order to ensure that the refugees did not make the attempt.

He grudgingly established a separate scheme—the “Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme”—to specifically take in Syrian refugees, ignoring the vast numbers of refugees from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq and elsewhere.

Cameron announced Britain's promise to accept 20,000 refugees over five years following the outpouring of public anger over the plight of Syrian refugees last summer, particularly after the heartrending image of the body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach. “Britain should fulfil its moral responsibility to help those refugees,” he said.

The scheme was to be particularly targeted at helping women and girls, survivors of violence and torture, children and adolescents, refugees with medical needs and disabilities and those at risk due to their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The proposed number to be taken under the scheme exposed his promise as a fraud, and even this minuscule number was hedged with tight conditions. The programme would only be open to refugees registered in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey, not those already in Europe. It later emerged that the scheme would be funded by the Department of International Development's refugee aid budget, with only £20,530 per annum for each refugee over their five years on the programme being made available to local authorities for their housing and education needs.

Furthermore, the implication of the five-year funding is that the programme will then be terminated. Instead of asylum and the right to residency, refugees are being offered a short term stay in a move clearly intended to evade Britain's obligations under international law, not just in this case but more broadly.

Most of the refugees have been dispersed across 118

Local Authorities, mainly in Scotland and northern England. Other Local Authorities explained that the main reason they have been unable to take part in the programme was a lack of suitable flats and houses, or childcare and school places. According to the parliamentary watchdog, the National Audit Office, an estimated 4,930 extra homes and 10,664 school places are needed for the refugees, putting the 20,000 target at risk.

An even smaller number of people from countries other than Syria—just 652—were brought to the UK as refugees under the Gateway Protection Programme in 2015.

In another token gesture, Cameron also set up a Minister for Syrian Refugees, a special cross-Whitehall post that was promptly axed by his successor as prime minister, Theresa May, in July.

Last May, at the height of criticism over his response to the plight of child refugees, Cameron promised to take in 3,000 vulnerable children and their carers, including unaccompanied minors, from the Middle East and North Africa, by 2020, approximately 700 a year. This would include a large number who had parents already in the UK.

However, the children must have arrived in Europe before 31 March 2016 to qualify—a restriction inserted to prevent parents sending their children to Britain. This is of a piece with the government’s attitude towards highly vulnerable children separated from their parents. Most of these children are in the Jungle Camp in Calais.

It is unknown how many children have entered the UK under this scheme—presumably, none at all—since the government has so far refused to say how many unaccompanied child refugees it has taken in under that commitment, even refusing a Freedom of Information request to do so. Earlier this month, the Information Commissioner ordered the government to disclose the figures, but this has not been honoured as yet.

More broadly, according to the Refugee Council, only 30 percent of children who arrived in Britain alone have been granted asylum so far this year. Typically, they are granted short term leave to remain that expires after two and a half years. The top two countries of origin for new applications in 2016 from unaccompanied children were Iran and Afghanistan.

The Council reported that so far this year, the

government has locked up 47 children in immigration detention, which only served to exacerbate their plight, despite promising six years ago to end the practice. The Government announced a few months ago that it was closing Cedars, the specialist family detention unit. Given the lack of specialist resources, this only means they will be held in facilities even less well equipped to care for them.

Last year, there were 1.25 million first-time applications for asylum in EU countries, more than double the number in 2014--mostly by Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi nationals. The UK received just 38,370 first-time asylum applications in 2015--3.1 percent of the EU total.

According to the Migration Observatory, asylum applicants and their dependents comprised a mere 7 percent of Britain’s net migration in 2014, down from 44 percent in 2002. Just 36 percent of first time asylum applicants were accepted in 2015, with 35 percent of those who appealed winning the right to stay.

A recent Home Affairs Select Committee report on the migration crisis warned that the government was unlikely to fulfil its 20,000 target of Syrian refugees. It noted the horrendous situation facing asylum seekers in the refugee camp known as the Jungle in Calais, but called for Britain to accept just 157 unaccompanied children from it who had family in the UK.

Its main concern was the need for greater “border security” and further steps to control migration. It noted that beefed up security at airports and major ports was displacing “malevolent attention” to smaller points of entry that lacked resources, and called for security to be tightened up at these entry points “as a matter of urgency.”



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