



American ideals. Universal values.

February 7, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear President Obama:

I am writing to urge that you use your meeting next week with King Abdullah II to advance protection for refugees fleeing the unrelenting violence in Syria. In particular, I urge that you both press the King to cease restrictions and border closures that are trapping thousands of civilians inside the war zone, and offer increased support from the United States to alleviate the crisis, including a commitment to resettle at least 15,000 Syrian refugees annually in the United States.

The war in Syria has produced the greatest refugee crisis in the past three decades. Ultimately, the solution to this crisis lies in cessation of the violence that is causing innocent people to flee for their lives. But the Assad regime is escalating attacks on civilians, and the Geneva II process has yet to produce concrete results. In addition to the moral imperative of protecting those who have fled the brutality in Syria, robust American leadership on this issue could help to bolster our nation's credibility in a region where perceptions of the United States are increasingly negative.

Civilians fleeing violence in Syria face major barriers in crossing the western border into Jordan. Human Rights First visited Jordan in November 2013 and documented a number of illustrative cases of those [turned away](#) by Jordanian officials at border crossing points, including:

- A Syrian woman and her five-year-old child who were prevented from rejoining their family in Jordan when trying to cross at Jaber in October 2013;
- An elderly woman who tried to enter via the Nasib crossing in August 2013 and was turned away along with about 35 other Syrians and told to return in a month; and
- A young Orthodox Christian man who was turned back at the Nasib crossing without explanation when he tried to cross in October 2012.

In April 2013, more than 40,000 Syrians crossed the border into Jordan; by August 2013 that number had dropped dramatically to just 1,809 refugees. Based on our analysis of the circumstances, we believe this decline is due primarily to tightening border restrictions

by Jordanian officials in the form of denial of entry to young men traveling alone, delays of up to 40 days before an individual is allowed to cross, daily “quotas,” as well as denial of individuals arbitrarily deemed not to be in need of protection. The number of refugees entering Jordan has increased more recently thanks to attention by donors and United Nations agencies, but restrictions remain in place and very few Syrians are crossing through the western border at present. As a result of those restrictions, most Syrians are now crossing into Jordan through the [eastern desert at Hadalat](#), a 3-4 day journey through harsh conditions. This escape route is extremely difficult for particularly vulnerable groups (e.g., those with serious injuries, older persons without accompanying families, and persons with disabilities) to cross, and unless Jordan removes restrictions at other points along the border, these vulnerable people will essentially be trapped inside Syria. Reports suggest that some Syrians pay smugglers up to \$2000 just to reach the Syrian desert near Hadalat; those unable to pay remain trapped inside the country. Single men traveling without family have been routinely denied entry (ostensibly out of security concerns) without individualized protection assessments.

Since January 2013, Jordan has enforced a blanket ban on Palestinian refugees from Syria entering the country. As a result, Palestinians have few means of escape from the violence. Last month, the [Washington Post](#) reported that people were starving to death in Yarmouk, the Palestinian refugee camp in Damascus. Jordan promulgated the ban on Palestinian refugees out of a desire to maintain a delicate political balance within the Hashemite Kingdom between Jordanians and Palestinians. The Jordanian government also shares with certain other Arab states the position, [expressed](#) by Prime Minister Abdullah Ensour in January 2013, that allowing Palestinians from Syria to enter Jordan would “exempt Israel from the repercussions of displacing the Palestinians from their homes” and would belie the principle that Palestinians in Syria “have the right to go back to their country of origin.” This is unconscionable. The consequence of this ban is that Palestinians are trapped and increasingly vulnerable. I urge you to press King Abdullah to lift the ban on Palestinians’ entry into Jordan. Should that be unattainable, I encourage you to suggest that Jordan at least permit entry to mixed Syrian and Palestinian families – some of whom are currently being turned away – as well as Palestinian refugees who hold lapsed Jordanian passports.

While those who have been able to cross borders are safe from the violence, many face dire conditions. In November 2013 Human Rights First met a number of Syrian refugees in Amman who face particular risks or vulnerabilities. For many of these refugees, resettlement is the most appropriate durable solution:

- Luqa is an Orthodox Christian living alone in Amman. Though Luqa was content with life as a Christian in Syria before the war, he, like many Syrian Christians, now feels threatened by growing numbers of opposition supporters who he believes consider all Christians to be supporters of Assad. He also fears violent retaliation by those loyal to the regime for his refusal to fight in Assad’s army.

- Manal is a single head of her family's household. She is caring for eight children and her elderly mother-in-law. Six of her children have leprosy, and she is unable to access appropriate care for them through the hospital and clinics to which United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) registration grants access. She is unable to pay for the children's medicine and care.
- Anas, a Syrian man with limb ischemia, has had all of his limbs amputated and fears losing more of his body during Jordan's coldest winter in decades. He has been unable to access help from Jordanian hospitals as the doctors he has spoken to do not recognize his disease. He lives on the fourth floor of a dilapidated apartment building with no heat and no door. Anas and his wife and their four children receive no cash assistance and have no income.

The United States has the world's most generous resettlement program. By welcoming the most vulnerable Syrian refugees, the United States would accomplish two important goals: rescuing those at severe risk and relieving host countries of the disproportionate costs associated with caring for individuals whose needs cannot be addressed by existing infrastructure. The UNHCR has called for the international community to take in 30,000 vulnerable Syrian refugees by the end of 2014; so far this fiscal year the United States has resettled 22. The United States usually takes in more than half of those resettled by UNHCR each year. So far, other countries have pledged to take in a total of more than 18,000 Syrians but the United States has not yet made a numerical commitment. Jordan and other host countries have expressed support for generous resettlement programs, but have raised concerns that merely symbolic resettlement efforts might cause more problems than they solve by falsely creating expectations among refugees in Jordan and even serving as a magnet for refugees to come to Jordan who might otherwise go elsewhere. By announcing a meaningful resettlement initiative of at least 15,000 each year, the United States would demonstrate serious support for Jordan with real burden sharing.

The United States is uniquely positioned to raise with Jordan these concerns in a constructive and cooperative manner, both because of its broad-based relationship with Jordan, and because the U.S. is capable of launching a supportive and meaningful resettlement initiative. Congressional leaders on both sides of the aisle have expressed an interest in increasing the resettlement of Syrians – most recently in a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing last month - as well as support for specific classes of Syrians, including vulnerable minorities such as Christian Syrians, to see to it that they are not denied access to protection.

King Abdullah deserves support and appreciation for his courageous efforts to date. To build on that, I urge you to use your meeting with King Abdullah to:

- Urge the Jordanian government to remove restrictions and bans along the border limiting the ability of Syrian and other refugees to reach safety in Jordan;

- Request the Jordanian government to allow UNHCR to conduct regular monitoring at the formal ports of entry as well as at locations where screening is done to determine who is allowed entry into the country;
- Offer support for training of border officials to perform individualized protection assessments so that Syrian nationals of a particular profile, such as young men traveling alone, are not unfairly denied access to protection if they pose no risk to Jordan's security; and
- Offer further support for Jordan including by stepping up the resettlement of Syrians to bring at least 15,000 Syrian refugees to safety in the United States each year.

This will be in Jordan's interest because while the Kingdom will retain sovereignty over its border controls and continue to screen those who may present security concerns, it can respond to international criticism of border restrictions by demonstrating that security screening processes are based on individualized assessments in accordance with international standards and with UNHCR monitors present. As reports of the suffering in Syria persist and the media continues to broadcast pictures of those trapped inside (such as those who starved to death in Yarmouk), Jordan's restrictions at the border will increasingly come under scrutiny and donors may become less willing to support the country's current generous efforts to host Syrian refugees.

By standing up for all who are fleeing violence, the United States will be championing key human rights principles such as non-discrimination and protection of vulnerable minorities as well as upholding the United States' proud tradition of protecting refugees.

By launching a meaningful resettlement initiative, the United States will put its principles into action demonstrating to the Syrian people that not only will it support their protection in the region but also bring some of the most vulnerable to safety in the United States. Receiving a considerable number of refugees currently in Syria's neighboring countries will send a clear sign of solidarity and will also encourage other resettlement countries to receive larger numbers of Syrians.

While a political solution to the war remains elusive at present, the protection of Syrian refugees who are trying to flee to safety is a practical and immediately achievable objective. Your meeting with King Abdullah is a critical opportunity to stand up for the protection of thousands of Syrian refugees who remain in danger and demonstrate American leadership in upholding the human rights of all.

With respect,



Elisa Massimino
President and CEO

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