

Syrian refugee crisis: Are wealthy Gulf states doing their part?

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([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) As the number of migrants flooding Europe's shores and borders swells, wealthy Arab Gulf states have come under increasing scrutiny for their perceived reluctance to open their borders to those fleeing Syria.

Amnesty International reported late last year that six Gulf states have offered "zero" resettlement places for Syrians and that the region has taken in a total of eight registered Syrian refugees.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar face particular scrutiny because of their support for combatants in the Syrian conflict, now in its fifth year. They are major backers of several predominantly Sunni Syrian rebel groups that oppose President Bashar al-Assad, micro-managing their battlefield strategy and hosting rebel commanders. Qatar reportedly has funneled billions into Sunni Islamist militias.

But Arab Gulf states are repudiating the criticism, saying they have done their fair share to bankroll the international response to the refugee crisis. They say they have taken in hundreds of thousands of Syrians as visitors, guest-workers, and pilgrims—allowing them to overstay their visas and seek unofficial refuge in their countries.

Saudi Arabia says it has taken in more than 2.5 million Syrians since the outbreak of the conflict, while the UAE says it has granted residency permits to 100,000 Syrians.

Yet those claims are difficult to confirm. Under Gulf states' regulations, foreign workers and visitor statistics are not categorized by their nationality or country of origin. Due to loopholes in labor laws and visa enforcement, tens of thousands of foreign guests who overstay tourist or Hajj visas go unreported, migration experts say.

From mid-2011 to mid-2014, Saudi Arabia's Central Department of Statistics reported that foreigners residing in the country increased from 8.97 million to 10.06

million, while the number of UAE foreign workers featured a modest bump, according to the Florence-based Migration Policy Center. Yet the increases do not account for the claimed influx.

“A massive arrival of Syrian refugees is not accounted for in official population figures,” said Francoise De Bel-Air, director of the center’s Gulf Labor Market and Migration program.

The Palestinian example

UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, reported this month that 500,000 Syrians had taken up residence in Saudi Arabia since 2011. The Saudis classified them as “Arab brothers and sisters in distress” rather than refugees or Syrians.

Observers say Gulf states’ reluctance to officially recognize refugees stems from the legacy of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict, which left Jordan and Lebanon with more than 2.5 million Palestinians nearly six decades later.

“There is a sense that if you let people in as refugees rather than visitors, their temporary stay becomes permanent,” said Gregory Gause, a Gulf scholar and professor of international affairs at Texas A&M.

Gulf states are already inundated with foreign labor. Ten million expatriates work in Saudi Arabia, which has a local population of 30 million, while foreigners outnumber nationals in UAE five to one. In recent years Gulf states have resorted to imposing penalties to encourage industries to replace foreigners with Gulf nationals.

More than \$4 billion for global response

Although restricted by laws and the political ramifications of recognizing refugees, Gulf states have made several exceptions and used their complex guest visas to grant Syrians “unofficial asylum.”

Saudi Arabia has exempted Syrians from deportation or fines during crackdowns on illegal foreign workers, while Kuwait has granted long-term visas to Syrian residents who have overstayed their work contracts, according to the Migration Policy Center.

On the financial front, Gulf states say they have collectively pumped more than \$4 billion into Syrian refugee support since 2011.

Saudi Arabia says it has provided more than \$700 million, with its National Campaign to Support Brothers in Syria donating more than 3,600 residential trailers for Syrian refugees in Jordan and health clinics that have given free health care to more than 100,000 Syrians.

The UAE says it has given \$530 million in aid to Syrians, and has even funded and operated Majreeb Al Fhood, its own refugee camp in northern Jordan that offers 4,000 Syrians housing with “five-star” amenities, including 24-hour food service and a team of specialized cooks and doctors.

Key support for the UN

Kuwait has been by far the most generous of the Gulf states, donating \$1.5 billion to the humanitarian response since 2011, including \$500 million in 2015 alone. Qatar says it has provided \$1.6 billion.

Gulf states have also been key supporters of UNHCR, with Gulf states excluding Kuwait donating \$144.8 million since 2013. Kuwait’s \$120 million pledge for 2015 makes it the second-largest donor, behind the US.

“The Gulf countries have been major sources of support for our regional response; it is hard to get the full picture of the extent of their support as many ... provide direct support to host states and local NGOs,” said Helene Daubelcour, UNHCR Jordan's external relations officer.

Dozens of local NGOs in Jordan and Lebanon say they continue to rely on Gulf funding to compensate for World Food Programme and UNHCR cutbacks.

“The Gulf states were the first to act to help Syrians fleeing war and bloodshed and their help has not wavered,” said Khaled Ghanem, whose Jordanian NGO, Together We Build for Development and Rehabilitation, relies almost solely on support from the Kuwaiti and Saudi governments.

Public opinion shifting

Observers say the policy of providing aid rather than asylum is not exclusive to the Gulf.

“Gulf states have believed that the best approach is improving Syrians’ situation in host countries such as Jordan and Lebanon—a policy which mirrors US policy and the policy of European countries until a short while ago,” Gause said.

However, just as the shock over graphic drownings pushed Europe into action, observers say public opinion is turning in the Gulf.

“In relation to other states, US, and Europe, the Gulf has done more than its fair share—much more than has been advertised,” said Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a UAE professor of political science and commentator. “But it is clear that we have all failed and must be ashamed—we all must do more and will do more, the Gulf included.”