

FAQ: Westmont and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

BE NOT AFRAID

Some brief answers to questions many people have about the refugee crisis and the United States.

Why is there fighting in Syria?

The fighting started in the spring of 2011 when Syrians rose up against the Ba'ath dictatorship as part of the tide of protests known as the "Arab Spring" that swept through the region demanding political reforms. The Ba'ath have been in control of Syria since the 1960's and led by Bashar al-Assad since 2000. The uprising against the Assad regime began as civil protests, but when the government responded with force, armed conflict broke out and has continued to the present between government forces and an ever-shifting opposition ranging from secular nationalists to various Islamist groups.



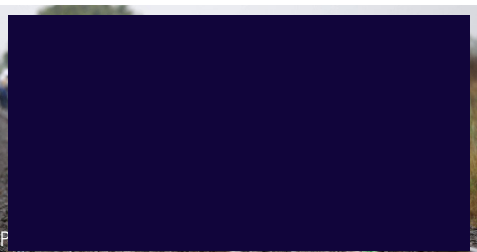
Photo Credit: Bulent Kilic/Getty

Who is ISIS?

ISIS (The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/ash-Sham) – AKA ISIL (The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), Daesh, and The Islamic State – is a Sunni Salafi jihadist group that grew out of the previously active al-Qaeda in Iraq. In 2014 it declared itself the rightful Islamic Caliphate under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, thereby claiming to represent and have authority over all Muslims worldwide. This position is generally not recognized as legitimate by most of the world's Muslims, but ISIS has succeeded in capturing territory in Iraq and Syria. Those most actively fighting ISIS, and being killed by ISIS, are Muslims.

If there has been fighting for years, why are there so many refugees now?

The people of Syria are caught between the Assad regime and armed resistance groups, including ISIS. Bashar al-Assad has unleashed the full force of the Syrian military on his own people. In August 2013 he used chemical weapons against civilians. The Syrian air force regularly drops 'barrel bombs' on civilian areas. Villages are encircled and starved into submission. Infrastructure in the country has collapsed. In the north east of the country ISIS is creating a different form of terror in which all must submit to its understanding of Islamic law and practice. Religious minorities are persecuted and killed. After years of fighting, the numbers have continued to swell as conditions within Syria have gotten worse. At least 250,000 people have been killed and 13.5 million people, half of the pre-war population, within Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance.



So how many refugees are there?

In addition to the 6.5 million internally-displaced persons (IDPs) within Syria there are over 4 million refugees outside Syria, most in neighboring counties.



Which countries are taking in refugees? Which are not?

There are (at least) 2 million refugees in Turkey, while Lebanon, a country of 4 million, has taken in 1 million, another 1.3 million are in Jordan and Egypt, and between 500,000 to 750,000 are in Europe. In October 2015 alone 220,000 migrants and refugees arrived in Europe by boat across the Mediterranean, more than for all of 2014. This is why it is the worst refugee crisis in Europe since WWII.

Europe has been a destination for many of the Syrian refugees because of its comparative economic strength: Germany has taken in almost 93,000 Syrian refugees, and will likely receive 800,000 asylum applications in 2015. Even after the Paris attacks, France plans to accept 30,000 new refugees. However, despite the well-publicized welcome from Angela Merkel, Germany's Chancellor, many Europeans are opposed to welcoming greater numbers of refugees. Last month, the European Union gave \$3 billion to Turkey in exchange for a promise by the Turkish government to help stem the flow of Syrian refugees leaving Turkey for Europe. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Russia are not accepting refugees.

How many refugees have been relocated to the U.S.?

2,174 Syrian refugees have been relocated into the US – about 0.0007% of America's total population. Before the Paris attacks, President Obama said he would like to admit 10,000 Syrian refugees next year. In the current political climate this is now under debate. Currently, over 30 state governors have said they do not want Syrian refugees resettled in their state. For comparison, Sweden, a country the size of Georgia, gets 2,000 applications for resettlement every 3 days.

How are refugees admitted to the US?

In contrast to Europe, where refugees are arriving in large numbers, people wishing to claim refugee status in the United States are more typically screened by several security agencies in a process that lasts 18 months or more. An admitted refugee is allowed entry to the U.S. and may apply for a green card. The head of the International Rescue Committee recently said that "it's harder to get to America as a refugee than any other route, short of swimming the Atlantic. If you did want to come and cause trouble in the U.S., there are many other easier ways of getting in." (David Milliband, quoted in the Washington Post, October 5, 2015).

Should we be afraid of refugees?

784,395 refugees have been accepted into the US since 9/11. In that time three have been arrested for plotting a terrorist attack -- two were not planning an attack in the US and the plans of the third were barely credible. The San Bernardino shooters were not refugees.

Homegrown Terrorism

In the United States since Sept. 11, terrorist attacks by antigovernment, racist and other nonjihadist extremists have killed nearly twice as many people as those by Islamic jihadists.

