Is Australia pulling its weight when it comes to the resettlement of Syrian refugees?

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According to the UN refugee agency, UNHCR ‘the Syrian situation is the most dramatic humanitarian crisis the world has faced in a very long time. Syrians are now the largest refugee population under UNHCR's mandate’. In fact, the UNHCR estimates there to be close to four million registered refugees who have fled Syria into neighbouring countries.

David Miliband, writing in The Washington Post has recently claimed that ‘it is well past time for the United States and other Western countries to commit to a dramatic boost in the resettlement of Syrian refugees'. Filipe Gracio from Kings College, London has similarly been crunching the numbers and concluded that ‘Germany has made by far the most pledges to shelter Syrian refugees, offering about 30,000 places’, noting that no other country is anywhere near that number. UN statistics indicate that Australia has pledged to admit 5,600 but these numbers need to be put in context.

Over the last ten years, the number of visas Australia has granted under its Humanitarian Program has remained relatively static at roughly 13,500 visas (with a one-off increase in 2012). The number of visas available for grant in the current financial year is the same as last year— that is 13,750. So how many of these visas go to persons who have fled the conflict in Syria?

In the three years immediately prior to the conflict beginning in 2011, Australia was granting on average about 1,200 refugee and humanitarian visas a year to persons residing in Syria. The majority of these visas went to Iraqi refugees living in Syria, of which there are estimated to be some 30,000. In fact, Australia has granted on average some 2,400 visas to persons born in Iraq over the last few years. The situation for persons born in Syria is a little different. In 2011—12, the Government granted only nine refugee and humanitarian visas to Syrian nationals. In 2012—13, this figure went up to 98. It was not until last year that Australia began granting greater numbers of visas to Syrian nationals. In 2013—14, of the 20,000 Syrians who applied for an Australian refugee or humanitarian visa 1,007 were granted visas. To put these figures in context, of the total 11,016 visas granted to offshore refugees and humanitarian entrants last year, 1,007 were granted to persons born in Syria. That equates to nine per cent of Australia’s offshore humanitarian intake. Of these, 297 were granted to refugees while the remaining 710 were granted humanitarian visas (SHP).

Interestingly, the number of visas granted to persons residing in Syria has halved over the last two years to about 1,000 in 2013—14. This is perhaps due to the large numbers of people fleeing the conflict to neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. Prior to the Syrian conflict, Australia was granting approximately 500 refugee and humanitarian visas to people residing in Turkey. In 2012—13, this number significantly increased to 1,350 but then last year, the numbers reduced again to approximately 1,000. This reduction may be linked to an increase in the number of visas being granted to persons residing in Lebanon, of which there were some 800 last year. More generally though, Australia substantially increased the number of visas it granted to persons born in the Middle East in 2011—12 (to 4,678), though that number has been declining over the last two years to approximately 3,850 in 2013—14.
In August 2014, the Government announced that it would increase its intake and provide a minimum of 2,200 visas for Syrian nationals. The Government is well on the way to achieving that target. As at 31 January 2015, 1,109 visas had been granted to Syrians—398 of which were granted to refugees and 711 of which were granted to humanitarian entrants (SHP). The Government also indicated that it would provide a minimum of 2,200 places for Iraqis in 2014—15.

The Government has committed to providing at least 4,500 visas to Syrians over the next three years. Though that may sound like a substantial increase it equates to about 1,500 visas per year, which is a reduction of nearly 1,000 visas from 2014—15 levels. This reduction is despite an increase in Australia’s Humanitarian Program from 13,750 in 2014—15 to 18,750 in 2018—19 and despite the dramatic decrease in numbers of persons spontaneously seeking asylum due to Australia’s regional processing and settlement arrangements in Nauru and Papua New Guinea.

Whether Australia’s contribution of resettling 1,114 Syrian nationals since the conflict began three years ago is adequate or whether its commitment to resettle 2,200 this year and a further 1,500 per year for the next three years is reasonable remains debatable. However, the undisputable reality is, the fewer number of Syrian refugees accepted by Western countries the greater number of increasingly desperate people will put their lives at risk by attempting to enter those countries via unauthorised or ‘illegal’ channels using people smugglers.