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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**DELEGATION REPORTS**

**Parliamentary Delegation to  
Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 26 March 2015**

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## SPEECH

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**Speaker** Hayes, Chris, MP

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**Mr HAYES** (Fowler—Chief Opposition Whip) (10:11): by leave—Together with the member for Berowra, the Father of the House, I had the honour of attending this first parliamentary field visit to Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon. In fairness to the member for Berowra, his view, that he successfully argued amongst the committee considering this, is that the position in the Middle East at the moment, the conflict that is unfolding, is likely to affect decisions throughout the globe, including those of Australia, for some time into the future. Therefore, if we are to be serious in looking at issues such as asylum seekers, we should actually look clearly at those aspects that are right at the crux of this, particularly as they occur at the moment in the Middle East.

This is a conflict that started in 2011. It started as a protest movement and has developed into a full-scale civil war. It is no longer just impacting on the people of Syria or those throughout the Middle East; this conflict has implications globally. We have seen much reported about the fragmentation of the Free Syrian Army and we now see the involvement of ISIS, or Daesh as it is referred to. We have been advised by many in the UN that various remnants of the former Ba'athist-led Iraqi military are engaged. The point is that this escalation of the conflict was beyond the estimations of all the authorities at that time.

When we visited, and particularly when we first went to Jordan and visited the refugee camps there, they showed us two styles of their camps. The one that was originally established to accommodate this crisis was planned for a period not extending beyond three months because the expectations of the United Nations was that this conflict would not exceed three months. What we have now is a conflict where there is no end in sight, and certainly it probably will not involve a military solution. We particularly wanted to look at the consequences of this for the people.

In terms of refugees, Syria has a population of 12 million people. More than half of that population is now displaced. We know that there have been, by this stage, probably 200,000 people killed in that conflict. We know also, from the UN, that over half the international aid budget at the moment is directed to the displaced people and the Syrian refugees—over half of the total world aid budget is now directed there, for a conflict which would not, it was originally thought, extend beyond three months.

The other thing that was just painfully obvious to us was that the countries bordering Syria—namely, Jordan, Turkey and Lebanon—are hosting the vast majority of refugees: according to the UN, in the vicinity of 97 per cent. Jordan, I think, are hosting a little over 600,000 refugees—almost 20 per cent of their country. Turkey are hosting, I think, about 1.3 million refugees. And the Father of the House has just indicated that Lebanon, a country of close to four million people, hosts almost two million refugees. That would be, in an Australian context, like us having about 12 million refugees temporarily on our doorstep and needing education and health care and all the assistance that would generally apply.

These are countries with very limited budgets. They all indicated the economic strain that they were facing. The consequences of this development meant that, in many instances, a number of the companies in their areas were getting rid of or terminating locally engaged employees and putting on Syrian refugees because, essentially, they would work almost just for food—and I can understand that, if you were that desperate, you probably would. But it is also leading to very significant resentment in those host countries at the moment. Populations of those host countries are at the sharp end of this, relatively unassisted by the international community. I know there is assistance there, but certainly not proportionate to the load that they are carrying—a humanitarian load, for which we, in the global community, are all very much in their debt.

I will speak of one personal experience from visiting over there. We did not simply spend time in the refugee camps and see the children, which I will come back to, but at one stage we visited the Jordanian border guards and their headquarters, adjacent to the Syrian border. They were very pleasant; they were very kind to us. They were very hospitable and treated us to a nice lunch. There was fantastic scenery. They could point out the border of Syria. Here was this town, some 10 kilometres away, I think, Father of the House. Anyway, we agreed, together

with the Australian ambassador, to do a piece to camera with the leadership of the Syrian border guard. So we went outside, and they set up their tripods and got their cameras set. As we were speaking to camera, people behind the camera—the audience, if you like—started pointing behind us. They could see smoke plumes going up. And, as we turned around, we felt the percussion from the explosions. There was an artillery attack taking place on a town some 10 kilometres away. So, while we were being hosted by the Jordanian border guard, and were there, in safety, we knew that, 10 kilometres away from us, people were being killed. That really brought home to us how significant this is. This is not something you could just disengage from and say, 'This was just another visit we had, and we will report this when we get back to our parliament.' This was a visit from which you could not come away unaffected.

As the member for Berowra indicated, we did visit refugee camps everywhere we went, and one of the consistent things that was put to us by everyone we spoke to, through interpreters, was that they wanted to go home. That was all they wanted: they wanted to go home. But, as I said earlier, there is no end in sight to this conflict. The children that we visited there, the lucky children that we visited, were in tent classrooms. They had very dedicated teachers there, trying to address their issues. Many of these kids obviously come in with social and emotional baggage, so they are addressing that but also trying to continue these Syrian children's education. In Syria they had a very well established, well developed education system. But the truth is that the kids that Philip Ruddock and I saw were the lucky kids. Even though they were in tents—some sitting on floors; some just sitting at small tables—they were the lucky kids, because the vast majority of children will not be receiving an education. Their education under the former Syrian system has been interrupted, and, in many cases, discontinued. Unfortunately for a majority of these kids, they are going to be the expendable assets for some other jihadist of tomorrow. They have no hope, no education, and no prospect of being part of an effort to rebuild their towns and cities. There is nothing in sight. I have to say: for anyone who has kids or grandkids, this is something very palpable. One thing that we all must stay focused on is providing a future for them. A future has to be provided for these children.

I think the member for Berowra is right in indicating that, in the next pledging round, Australia must accept its responsibility. Part of that goes back to our having been, indelibly, part of this development in the Middle East since 2003. We were part of the coalition of the willing that went into Iraq. This has had its genesis not necessarily in the protest movements in Syria but in what occurred in Iraq. In the Middle East it is not just lines on a map. We are talking about people who probably see it as tribe and family first and then country. That is what Daesh is trying to capitalise on when they talk about a caliphate. They are not trying to recognise the borders of Syria or Iraq. They are talking about extending this throughout the Middle East. There has been an eradication of levels of authority and administration, and a power void has been established which has enabled interlopers such as IS, or Daesh, to gain traction.

One thing that that seems obvious to both the member for Berowra and me is that this will not resolve itself through a military solution. There must be a negotiated outcome and probably a political outcome. That is something we never thought about 12 months or so ago. These are things that we must apply ourselves to. If we do not, young people over there will have no future other than to become assets for someone who sees their lives as expendable. We need to accept our responsibilities not simply because of our involvement in the Middle East going back to 2003 but because we as a nation know that this particular conflict has implications for all of us around the globe. This conflict will not go away unless we can help accommodate that.

I would like to reflect briefly on the highly valued work of the various agencies of the United Nations such as UNICEF and Save the Children and the many people that we met over there. Many Australians were there working with these agencies in sometimes very squalid conditions. They were doing it because they believe in a future for these people.

The figures that the member for Berowra and I have used for this report are authoritative figures provided by various agencies. As I said, we visited many of the UN-run refugee camps and the camps run by the Turkish government. While we were in Lebanon we also went past some of the informal camps there. The more developed camps are tent cities with power and sewerage. But let me tell you what we found in the informal camps. If members go to the report, they will find a photograph there. These camps were basically bits of plastic strung together—no latrines, no toilets, no power and no water. They were just sheets of plastic drawn across a tree or across a few boxes and people were living there. As I said, you could not possibly come away from this field visit unaffected.

I commend Sophie Dunston, the secretary of the committee, for her efforts. It was a pleasure to travel with her. It was also a pleasure to travel with the father of the House, the member for Berowra. He is a man of compassion who is certainly committed to seeing a brighter outcome for the people of the Middle East.