# HOW OPERATION SYRIAN REFUGEES INFORMS CANADA'S RESPONSES TO CURRENT AND FUTURE REFUGEE CRISES

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In a record-breaking 118 days—between November 3, 2015 and February 29, 2016—Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), in coordination with other federal ministries (Kiziltan, 2020) led the resettlement of 26,172 Syrian refugees (Government of Canada, 2017b). This number grew to over 40,000 by January 2017 (Government of Canada, 2021). Known as Operation Syrian Refugees (OSR; Government of Canada, 2017), this initiative was the result of one of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's primary election promises. In this short piece, we discuss several lessons from this large resettlement effort that can inform our response to current refugee crises. Moreover, we question Canada's focus on 'signal' refugee movements—events of forcible displacement that garner international media attention—rather than endemic situations.

Canada has an established history of accepting refugees (Hamilton et al., 2020; as this special issue underlines), including large cohorts. But the only previous event comparable to OSR was in 1979–1980, with the arrival of 60,000 Indo-Chinese refugees (Alboim, 2016; Beiser, 1999; Molloy et al., 2017). Since the 1990s, Canada was resettling approximately 11,000 to 13,000 refugees annually, thus the arrival of Syrians marked a significant turn in its international commitment to supporting refugees.

In addition to the speed of this resettlement effort, this cohort of refugees differed from other groups in several important ways. About 55% of Syrians arrived as Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs), with 36% as Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSRs) and nearly 10% as Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugees (BVORs; Government of Canada, 2017a). Syrian refugees had significantly larger family sizes (especially among GARs) and nearly half were minors under the age of 18 (IRCC, 2019). Generally, this cohort tended to have less formal education and was not as familiar with Canada's official languages (IRCC, 2019). Finally, many Syrian refugees had significant health needs owing to the considerable pressures on the health system in Syria and major refugee hosting countries in the region. All these characteristics had implications for the resettlement ecosystem, including housing, the education and healthcare systems, and language training among others (Walton-Roberts, Veronisv & Hamilton, 2020).

During OSR, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC, 2016) partnered with IRCC to award 27 rapid response targeted grants examining different dimensions of the Syrian refugee arrival, resettlement and integration experience. Inspired by the recording of earlier resettlement events in important collections—such as *Strangers at the Gate* (Beiser, 1999) and *Running on Empty* (Molloy et al., 2017)—, we edited a multidisciplinary book featuring 13 of these projects. *A National Project: Syrian Refugee Resettlement in Canada* (2020) has three main objectives:

1. To document Canada's experience with OSR;

2. To provide a systems approach to highlight how the dynamic interplay between processes, structures and actors shape refugee resettlement; and

3. To assess what worked, what did not and why. Drawing on the third objective of our edited collection, OSR provided key lessons

that can inform Canada's response to current refugee crises, specifically in Afghanistan and Ukraine.

Since the collapse of the Government of Afghanistan in August of 2021, 22,915 Afghan refugees have arrived in Canada under three streams:

1. The existing permanent residence pathways, specifically for extended family members of former interpreters;

2. "Special Immigration Measures" program for Afghan nationals who assisted the Canadian government's efforts in Afghanistan; and

3. Existing humanitarian programs as GARs and PSRs (Government of Canada, 2022a).

Of note, IRCC has tried to streamline the PSR process by enabling groups of five and community sponsors to sponsor Afghan refugees who do not have a refugee status determination (RSD) document. This temporary exemption from the typical private sponsorship regulations was granted in recognition of the significant and timely barriers refugees often face in obtaining an RSD document from UNHCR or a third country. Compared to OSR—which required the mobilization and coordination of no less than 12 different federal ministries, departments and services, the resettlement plan and process for Afghans was faster and more streamlined.

This speaks to the strengths of Canada's refugee resettlement initiatives and the robust expertise it has acquired over the years, enabling it to deploy responses more rapidly. OSR tested and strengthened Canada's unique, intersectoral approach to newcomer settlement. This contributed to better collaboration and communication between providers, communities and other stakeholders, as well as the emergence of new organizations and the development of innovative programs and approaches to resettlement (including indirect services; Veronis et al., 2020). Ultimately the investments and infrastructure expansion made before and during OSR paid off (see Walton-Roberts et al., 2019 for details on how Local Immigration Partnerships factor into this). In turn, Canada's response to the situation in Afghanistan showed its readiness to rapidly support a new cohort of refugees.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the Government of Canada has created several special programs to support those fleeing Ukraine. In particular, the Canada-Ukraine Authorization for Emergency Travel (CUAET) is "a special, accelerated temporary residence pathway for Ukrainians seeking safe haven in Canada while the war in their home country continues" (Government of Canada, 2022b). This program enables Ukrainians (and their immediate family members) to stay in Canada for up to three years as temporary residents (Government of Canada, 2022b). Technically this is not a refugee program; it uses an existing temporary resident visa process to bring as many Ukrainians as possible to Canada very quickly. To date IRCC has received 628,492 applications—312,318 applications have been approved and 105,651 Ukrainian nationals have arrived in Canada (Government of Canada, 2022c). Ukrainian nationals can apply for an open work permit when they submit their application,

and they receive a one-time payment of $3,000 per adult and $1,500 per child under the age of 17. Some immigration scholars (e.g., Garnier et al., 2022) have argued this may be a new era in refugee policy. This program differs from Canada's previous resettlement efforts in several notable ways, including that it only offers temporary protection (Garnier et al., 2022). While this ensures Ukrainians can get to Canada quickly, it is not a permanent solution, rather it reflects the failure of current refugee policy (where it often takes over 2 years to bring people to Canada) to meet the needs of those facing conflict. This program continues to evolve (e.g., Ukrainians arriving under this program are now eligible for language training) and its long-term effects—for this and future cohorts of refugees – remain to be seen.

For both Afghan and Ukrainian Refugees, it will be important for IRCC to implement a robust performance measurement plan to evaluate resettlement outcomes. In its OSR evaluation (IRCC, 2019), IRCC illustrated its commitment to better data collection and dissemination. A similar evaluation strategy ought to be implemented for refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine. For the latter cohort, it will be particularly important to examine which factors (e.g., housing, labour market integration, education, healthcare) may influence return and/or onward migration decisions. Potentially, this new model may represent a promising approach to assist future temporarily displaced populations so that they are supported and prepared when the time may come to return home.

CUAET leverages some key learnings from OSR, notably that it is possible to resettle large cohorts of temporary residents/refugees relatively quickly. This can be critically important when people need to be rapidly evacuated. Nevertheless, as learned in OSR, rushed processes lead to resettlement problems (e.g., information gaps, housing issues), and place pressure on resettlement stakeholders and the system. Since OSR, the settlement sector and IRCC policymakers have quickly responded to crises in Afghanistan and then Ukraine; it is important to note that these efforts came during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022), exacerbating challenges for the immigration system and socio-economic conditions at large (e.g., housing, healthcare, inflation, and cost of living). This pace surely cannot be sustained in the medium and longer term.

One of the critical lessons from OSR was that resettling large cohorts of refugees creates inequities (both real and perceived) within and between refugee groups, and between refugees and other equity-deserving groups in Canada (Veronis, Hamilton, & Walton-Roberts, 2020). Since OSR, Canada moved quickly to resettle cohorts of Afghan refugees followed by Ukrainians, both of which were 'signal' refugee movements that received extant media coverage and captured Canadians' attention and support. Meanwhile, there are other protracted, endemic refugee crises that deserve our attention, including in North and East Africa, and throughout Central and South America. For instance, little attention has been paid to refugees living in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya which was established in 1992 to host mainly unaccompanied children and youth fleeing the war in Sudan.

It was still open in June of 2022, hosting over 160,000 refugees, many of whom have lived in

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Kakuma for their entire lives. In *A National Project*, we argue that policymakers need to be mindful of the moral and ethical implications of using policy to select certain cohorts of refugees over others. As we continue to see record levels of forced displacement year over year, there will be challenges with trying to balance resettlement needs resulting from crises with those from endemic situations. As we saw with Trudeau's election promise leading to OSR, political goals ultimately tend to determine Canada's response to global resettlement needs.

Between 1980 and 2015, Canada was resettling relatively low numbers of refugees each year. This changed at the end of 2015 when OSR led to the resettlement of over 26,000 Syrian refugees in 118 days. Building on this experience, Canada has quickly resettled cohorts of Afghan refugees and Ukrainians using a variety of temporary policies and programs. It is too early to speak to the durability of these policies, and the resettlement outcomes for these cohorts. It is clear, however, that in the last 7 years we have witnessed significant changes in Canada's refugee policies, whether it has the potential to shape a new era of humanitarian assistance remains to be seen.

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