The United Nations and the Refugee Crisis

J. N. Hooker
Model UN at CMU
March 2016
The Refugee Crisis

• UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR)
  – Set up in 1951 to help 1 million refugees from WWII

• Today:
  20.2 million refugees worldwide.
  – 38 million internally displaced persons
The Refugee Crisis

• Flood of refugees into Greece, destination Europe.
  – 752 arrived January 2015.
  – 60,000 arrived January 2016, 200+ deaths
  – Graphic

Refugees arriving on Greek island of Lesbos.

Island is running out of burial grounds.
The Refugee Crisis
The Refugee Crisis

Flow of refugees into Europe
The Refugee Crisis

Hungary/Serbia border closed, Oct 2015
The Refugee Crisis

Macedonia/Greece border closed, Feb 27
Beyond Europe

• About 1 million Syrian refugees in Jordan
  – out of 4.7 million Syrian refugees altogether
  – 20% in (UN) camps
  – Many find jobs.

Zataari refugee camp, Jordan, about 80,000 inhabitants
Beyond Europe

• World’s largest refugee camp is in Kenya
  – 20 years old.
  – About 600,000 inhabitants

Dadaab refugee camp, northern Kenya
Beyond Europe

• Refuge for Somalis fleeing war and famine.
  – Somalia has had no government for 20 years.
  – Camp is ruled by gangs.

In Dadaab refugee camp, “City of Thorns”
Beyond Europe

- 2.4 million Yemenis displaced by civil war since 2015
  - 6000 killed, half civilians

Refugee camp in Yemen, bombed by Saudis
Reactions in Europe

- Outpouring of sympathy from individuals
  - Governments less so
  - Except Germany & Scandinavia, until recently

Body of Aylan Kurdi, drowned when refugee boat capsized
Carried by police officer, Bodrum, Turkey
Reactions in Europe

- A boost to right-wing anti-immigrant groups

PEGIDA = Patriotische Europäer gegen Islamisierung des Abendlandes
(Patriotic Europeans against the Islamicization of the West)
Reactions in Europe

- Immigrant-led attacks in Germany contributed to backlash, borders of Schengen countries began to close.
Case Study of a Refugee Camp

• Calais, gateway to UK from France.
  – Near entrance of channel tunnel
  – 6000 inhabitants

The Jungle, Calais
Case Study of a Refugee Camp

• Much of the camp was bulldozed March 1.
  – 3500 left without shelter
Case Study of a Refugee Camp

- Camp is not administered by UNHCR
  - France has not declared it a refugee camp, to avoid international standards.
  - UNHCR normally responds to requests from affected countries.
Broader Context: Syrian Civil War

- Uprising against Ba’ath regime of Bashar al-Assad.
- Death toll 470,000+
  - As of Feb
  - Mostly civilians
- Chemical weapons used.
Syrian Civil War

Situation on the ground

January 2016
Syrian Civil War

- Sunni majority
- Alawite Shia minority is politically dominant
  - A formula for trouble?

Bashar al-Assad
President of Syria
Member of Alawite sect
Syrian Civil War

- Alawite sect
  - Twelver Shia Muslims
    - Alawite = Ali - ite
  - More ethnic identity than religious doctrine
    - As is common in Middle East
Syrian Civil War

• United Arab Republic
  – 1958-1961
  – Egypt + Syria
  – Ruled by Ba’ath party

Gamal Abdel Nasser
President of Egypt 1956-1970
and UAR 1958-1961
Syrian Civil War

- United Arab Republic
  - 1958-1961
  - Egypt + Syria
  - Ruled by Ba’ath party
  - Ba’ath party = pan-Arabist
  - Al Qaeda = pan-Islamist
  - Saddam Hussein of Iraq was Ba’athist.

Saddam Hussein
President of Iraq 1979-2003
Executed 2006
Syrian Civil War

- Instability 1961-1970
- Hafez al-Assad
  - Took power 1970
  - Hama Massacre, 1982
    - Suppressed rebellion of Muslim Brotherhood (Sunni)
      - 10,000-40,000 killed, mostly civilians
    - Resentment toward his son helps fuel civil war today

Hafez al-Assad
1930-2000
Dilemmas for UNHCR

• Refugees often result from internal conflicts.
  – Beyond UN mandate.

• Resettlement involves cross-cultural issues.
  – UN was conceived in a Western, universalizing mold.