



# A Critical Year for Humanitarianism

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February 9, 2016

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## Introduction

2015 was a remarkable year for international diplomacy and multilateralism, culminating in two major compacts on climate change and the global development agenda: The Paris agreement on climate and the U.N. Sustainable Development Goals. In 2016, international efforts will focus on an area that will likely prove even more contentious and where the international system is fraying badly under the weight of current crises: the system of providing humanitarian relief around the globe in response to both man-made and natural disasters.

Throughout 2016, world leaders and other international actors are set to participate in a number of high-level meetings and discussions to assess the state of humanitarian assistance. Their efforts will seek to improve the delivery of aid and address myriad underlying issues, ranging from how best to protect civilians in war zones to the effect of climate change on forced migration.

The global scope of forced migration has already risen to severe levels, with most forecasts suggesting that the worst is yet to come. According to U.N. estimates, some 60 million people are now forcibly displaced, either as refugees, internally displaced persons, or asylum seekers.<sup>1</sup> This is the highest level of forced migration the international community has faced since World War II, and the rate of displacement does not appear to be waning.<sup>2</sup>

This issue brief spells out the timeline of major upcoming events related to the humanitarian agenda in 2016 and discusses the scope of the major challenges the international community faces, including a lack of resources, repeated patterns of deliberate attacks on civilians, and a caseload that continues to expand rapidly. It also explores some of the issues that will likely prove most difficult to resolve given the current approach to reform, in which major structural changes—particularly to the U.N. system that helps deliver humanitarian aid—are largely off the table. Despite the enormous difficulties ahead, growing the number of actors involved in addressing humanitarian crises is the likely path to success.

## Timeline of upcoming major events

The following events are the most significant major international gatherings and commemorations related to humanitarianism slated for 2016:

**FEB**  
**4**

**February 4, 2016:** Syria Donor Conference, London

**APR**  
**15-17**

**April 15–17, 2016:** World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund Spring Meetings, Washington, D.C.

**MAY**  
**23-24**

**May 23–24, 2016:** World Humanitarian Summit, Istanbul

**JUNE**  
**20**

**June 20, 2016:** World Refugee Day

**AUG**  
**19**

**August 19, 2016:** World Humanitarian Day

**SEPT**  
**19**

**September 19, 2016:** U.N. high-level plenary Summit on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants, New York

**SEPT**  
**TBD**

**September, 2016, exact date and name to be determined:** President Barack Obama hosts a global refugees summit, New York

### February 4, 2016: Syria Donor Conference, London

The United Kingdom, Norway, Kuwait, Germany, and the United Nations co-hosted this event, which aimed to raise significant new funding to address the dire humanitarian situation spawned by the still burning conflict in Syria, which has left more than 250,000 dead and more than 1 million wounded.<sup>3</sup> This meeting was also designed to help build momentum toward the other humanitarian gatherings taking place later in the year.<sup>4</sup>

At the close of the conference, U.K. Prime Minister David Cameron announced that participants had raised roughly \$11 billion to aid Syrians—the largest sum ever raised for a humanitarian crisis in a single day.<sup>5</sup> While this is encouraging, these sums need to be taken with a certain grain of salt. Of these pledges, \$6 billion was for 2016, while \$5 billion was slated to be delivered by 2020—a long way off in humanitarian terms. In addition, history has shown that commitments at such pledging conferences often fail to fully materialize.<sup>6</sup>

Funding for the Syria crisis continues to lag well behind the level of need: The United Nations currently estimates that some 13.5 million Syrians require humanitarian assistance.<sup>7</sup> Massive numbers of Syrians have been driven from their homes since 2011, resulting in more than 6.6 million internally displaced Syrians and 4.3 million refugees.<sup>8</sup> There are also reports of increasing numbers of displaced Syrians trapped in a no man's land near Jordan, unable to cross the border.<sup>9</sup> Ahead of the donor conference, the United Nations issued a funding appeal to its member states for a total of \$7.7 billion for the Syrian crisis in 2016<sup>10</sup>—despite the fact that donors only met 56 percent of the 2015 U.N. appeal for \$7.2 billion.<sup>11</sup> If delivered in full, the \$6 billion pledged in London would obviously put the U.N. appeal for Syria well on the way to being met this year.

Under the guidance of the United Nations—and distinct from the aforementioned donor conference—a new round of peace talks between the warring parties in Syria began on February 1, 2016 in Geneva.<sup>12</sup> This follows the unanimous adoption of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254 on December 18, 2015, which outlined a roadmap for a U.N.-facilitated peace process between the Syrian government and the opposition. The resolution also called for the establishment of a “credible, inclusive and non-sectarian” government within six months, a schedule for drafting a new constitution, and the conduct of free and fair elections within 18 months.<sup>13</sup>

However, only two days after the start of this new round of peace talks, the United Nations suspended further talks until February 25. U.N. Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura remained somewhat optimistic, stating that the talks had not failed and insisting that both sides “are interested in having a political process” to end the conflict.<sup>14</sup> Given the situation on the ground, however, optimism that an ambitious peace agenda can be realized in the short term is understandably muted.

The central challenge coming out of the London conference—like many donor conferences—is to translate lofty pledges of assistance and action into reality. It was hoped that the conference would build some positive momentum for later and broader discussions on how the international community delivers humanitarian aid not just in Syria but also around the globe. However, the rocky start to the peace talks makes clear that will be no easy task.

#### [April 15–17, 2016: World Bank Group and International Monetary Fund Spring Meetings, Washington, D.C.](#)

Each spring, the joint World Bank-International Monetary Fund, or IMF, Development Committee and the IMF's International Monetary and Financial Committee meet to discuss the progress of both organizations' work. Additionally, during this time, both groups host seminars, regional briefings, press conferences, and other events focused on international development and the global economy. This year's spring meetings will be held April 15 to 17 in Washington, D.C.<sup>15</sup>

Representatives from governments, media, civil society, academia, and the private sector are invited to attend these meetings. Likely topics for this year's meetings will include discussions on the current refugee crisis; the need to make development a priority in fragile contexts; the newly detailed sustainable development goals agreed upon by U.N. member states in September 2015; and climate change—among other issues.

While humanitarian issues were not prominently featured on the official agendas for the 2016 meetings as they were being prepared, it is clear that there needs to be a better response to the increasingly large gap in humanitarian funding, and international financial institutions need to be more adept at dealing with humanitarian needs. This so-called donor gap is a recurring issue that has become more severe over recent years. The United Nations regularly issues estimates of—and for—the funding it will require to meet pressing humanitarian concerns around the globe. The donor gap—which refers to the shortfall between the U.N. request and the response from donors—has long been present. However, it has become much more pronounced in recent years. In 2005, there was \$2 billion in unmet U.N. coordinated appeals—by 2014, that figure had risen to \$7.5 billion.<sup>16</sup>

A U.N. High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing recently recommended that middle-income countries be given access to low-interest loans and grants, bilateral donors, and international financial institutions in order to help them host refugees. The panel also urged that donors be more flexible with finance, including through the use of cash in humanitarian settings.<sup>17</sup> The World Bank and IMF—not known as the most nimble of institutions—will be challenged at the spring meetings to see if they can keep pace of the growing global humanitarian problem.

#### May 23–24, 2016: World Humanitarian Summit, Istanbul

One of the most important meetings this year will be the first-ever U.N. World Humanitarian Summit—held May 23 to 24 in Istanbul, Turkey. Recognizing the urgent need to take collective stock of the humanitarian aid system and to create better dialogue among the main actors in this system, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon first raised the idea of holding the summit in 2012.<sup>18</sup> He then officially announced the summit during the U.N. General Assembly meetings in September 2013, where roughly 90 member states, civil-society organizations, and private-sector actors pledged their official support for the summit.<sup>19</sup>

The choice of Istanbul for the summit's location is fitting and discomfiting in equal measure. Few countries have been home to more refugees in recent years: Turkey currently hosts more than 800,000 refugees and is critically concerned with the conflict in Syria.<sup>20</sup> Turkey's willingness to accept refugees—and its support for them—has been widely lauded.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Turkey's government—led by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—has been far from the model of enlightened humanitarianism and

respect for human rights that the summit's planners are so eager to promote. Erdoğan's government has repeatedly cracked down on civil liberties over the past several years, and it has been drawn into dangerous brinkmanship with Syria, Russia, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, or ISIS, and even traditional allies such as the United States and the European Union over the conflict in Syria. In addition, Turkey has faced a number of terrorist attacks over the past year, and security arrangements for the summit will obviously be an area of concern.

Understanding the potential—and potential limitations—of the summit requires understanding the specific nature of its establishment within the U.N. system. The idea to hold the summit was advanced by the secretary-general, and the U.N. system has committed extensive resources in seeking public and member-state input into the summit and its preparations. Yet, the summit—unlike the processes that produced both the Paris climate agreement and a new set of global development goals—is not an intergovernmental one. In simpler terms, the World Humanitarian Summit is a conversation hosted by the secretary-general that deeply involves U.N. member states, as well as civil society, multilateral organizations, nongovernment organizations, or NGOs, the private sector, and affected individuals and communities. However, it is not a formal negotiating process between U.N. member states.<sup>22</sup> As such, there is no formal mechanism for member states to agree to any recommendations that the summit may produce; such agreements would have to be finalized or further negotiated in a different setting.

The fact that the secretary-general and U.N. agencies have largely driven the summit also signals that more profound efforts to reform the U.N. system that delivers humanitarian assistance are not on the current agenda. In turn, this may spark some frustration and resentment from member states that feel the U.N. system would benefit from considerable revamping and that significant efficiencies could be discovered through a sharper internal review.

Humanitarian crises in general have become increasingly dire since the summit was conceived. At the time of the summit's official announcement in 2013, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR, reported that there were roughly 51.2 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide—an estimated 10.7 million of whom were newly displaced in 2013.<sup>23</sup> With global forced displacement now including more than 60 million people—with at least 5 million people newly displaced in just the first half of 2015—the caseload has increased by more than 17 percent in fewer than three years.<sup>24</sup>

In the lead-up to Istanbul, the summit secretariat conducted an extensive consultation process involving discussions with more than 23,000 people in 151 countries, which included representatives from member states, multilateral organizations, NGOs, civil society organizations, the private sector, and affected individuals and communities.<sup>25</sup> As a result of the consultation process, the summit secretariat released a number of regional

and topical reports that culminated in a synthesis report highlighting major findings and key action areas to inform the summit.<sup>26</sup> The U.N. secretary-general will further explore these findings and inform the summit's agenda and his post-summit vision with the release of his own report in early 2016.<sup>27</sup>

Organizers have identified several key humanitarian concerns to address throughout the summit. These include the protection of civilians in conflict settings; building resilience to man-made and natural disasters; promoting more diverse partnerships in humanitarian relief; and developing new and more varied funding sources to expand support to local organizations and meet the current levels of need.<sup>28</sup> While the World Humanitarian Summit comes at a very important moment, division, high-profile incidents, protests, or a general lack of consensus could all imperil meaningful progress.

### June 20, 2016: World Refugee Day

In December 2000, in preparation for the 50th anniversary of the 1951 U.N. Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, the United Nations designated June 20 as World Refugee Day. This day coincides with the Organisation of African Unity's Africa Refugee Day<sup>29</sup> and will provide an opportunity to highlight the plight of refugees and raise funds to support refugees.

### August 19, 2016: World Humanitarian Day

In December 2008, the United Nations designated August 19 as World Humanitarian Day to both honor all personnel who have worked to promote humanitarianism and to increase awareness about humanitarian assistance worldwide.<sup>30</sup> Like World Refugee Day, this commemoration offers a useful rallying point to raise awareness, funds, and to advocate for reforms.

### September 19, 2016: U.N. high-level plenary Summit on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants, New York

During a U.N. General Assembly session in November 2015, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon proposed holding a summit on refugees and migrants during the 71st session of the U.N. General Assembly in the fall of 2016. The secretary-general was asked to prepare a report and recommendations to frame the discussions by May 2016.<sup>31</sup> The High-Level Summit on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants is scheduled for September 19, directly before the opening session of the 72nd U.N. General Assembly. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has appointed Karen AbuZayd of the United States to act as special adviser for the summit and tasked her with

undertaking consultations with member states and other stakeholders ahead of the summit, as well as with overseeing the secretary-general's May report on the issue.<sup>32</sup> These announcements follow the appointment of Filippo Grandi as the new head of UNHCR on January 1, 2016.<sup>33</sup>

In theory, this session could be used to cement areas of agreement reached by U.N. member states and U.N. agencies over the course of the year, particularly those advanced through the World Humanitarian Summit; those contained in the secretary-general's own report to be released in May 2016; and those forwarded by the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing. However, key member states may want to directly negotiate more far-reaching agreements or sweeping reforms—and such a process could require additional time or a more traditional intergovernmental negotiation.

September, 2016, exact date and name to be determined: President Barack Obama hosts a global refugees summit, New York

In late December 2015, Samantha Power, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, announced that President Barack Obama would host a leader-level global refugees summit on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly meetings in September 2016.<sup>34</sup> In conversations with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, President Obama stated that this summit would provide an opportunity for world leaders to make concrete commitments “to expand opportunities for refugees worldwide and support to frontline states.”<sup>35</sup>

During a keynote speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January 2016, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry discussed his hopes for the year's humanitarian agenda, including a global 30 percent increase in the funding of the United Nation's humanitarian appeals.<sup>36</sup> He also called for at least 10 additional countries around the globe to become regular humanitarian donors; 10 more countries to admit refugees; a doubling of the number of refugees resettled; the enrollment of 1 million refugees in school; an increase in the number of refugees legally allowed to work by 1 million; and increased involvement of the private sector, civil society, and religious organizations in the refugee integration process.<sup>37</sup>

The format of President Obama's global refugees summit will be similar to last year's Leaders' Summit on U.N. Peacekeeping Operations—also hosted by President Obama—which brought together more than 50 heads of state and other government officials to make new commitments and contributions to strengthen U.N. peacekeeping operations.<sup>38</sup> As a result of the peacekeeping summit, country pledges amounted to more than 40,000 troops and police; 40 helicopters; 22 engineering companies; 11 naval and riverine units; and 13 field hospitals.<sup>39</sup> The format is essentially a pay-to-play effort, with only countries and agencies that are willing to put new resources on the table able to attend. As of now, it is unclear how civil society and the private sector might be engaged in this refugee summit.

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## Fundamental challenges

The last U.N. cornerstone agreement on humanitarianism and the management of the global humanitarian system came in 1991 under U.N. General Assembly Resolution 46/182.<sup>40</sup> Obviously, much has changed since that time, and the current humanitarian system is badly overstretched and under-resourced—a condition highlighted by the fact that the United Nation’s 2015 \$19.3 billion funding appeal for global humanitarian responses was only 54 percent fulfilled.<sup>41</sup> The United Nation’s 2016 appeal has reached \$20.1 billion<sup>42</sup>—the largest to date and a nearly 950 percent increase from its \$1.92 billion appeal in 2000.<sup>43</sup>

A number of humanitarian challenges will be critical to address over the course of 2016, and all of them remain incredibly thorny.

### Civilian protection

Humanitarians, human rights groups, and global civil society all see the World Humanitarian Summit and other forums throughout the year as a moment for the world to recommit to the rights of unarmed civilians caught up in the world’s battlefields. Grueling conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and elsewhere have all too often featured the deliberate use of indiscriminate violence against civilians by both governments and insurgent groups.

In Ukraine, for example, there has been “indiscriminate shelling of residential areas” in regions controlled by both government and anti-government forces.<sup>44</sup> In South Sudan, 80 civilians—57 of whom were children—were killed in Leer County in Unity State alone from October 4 to 22, 2015.<sup>45</sup> And there has been indiscriminate killing of civilians by both sides in Syria, as well as the intentional blockage of humanitarian aid—most recently brought to international attention by the case of the besieged town of Madaya, where there have been widespread reports of malnourishment and starvation.<sup>46</sup> U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has condemned the blocking of aid in Syria, stating that the “use of food as a weapon of war is a war crime” and that “all sides, including the Syrian government, which has the primary responsibility to protect Syrians, are committing atrocious acts prohibited under international humanitarian law.”<sup>47</sup>

However, getting U.N. member states to agree on additional steps toward civilian protection will be enormously difficult. The U.N. Security Council and key member states, such as the United States, remain deeply averse to countering violations of international humanitarian law in places such as Syria through effective intervention on the ground. Insurgent groups, such as ISIS, seem to be in a contest to employ the most brutal tactics in an effort to attract the most extremist followers. And in Europe, there is a right-wing backlash against accepting refugees: Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen of Denmark recently suggested that key parts of 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention should be rolled back.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the use of drone strikes and other counterterrorism tactics utilized by member states to combat extremism have yet to be effectively reconciled with international humanitarian law.

The end result: Demand for greater civilian protection will be a crucial theme throughout the year, but acceptable action on this front would require a much more forceful—and likely risk filled—commitment from U.N. Security Council members.

### The costs of chaos

Funding concerns are very much on the minds of policymakers and the humanitarian community, and they will feature prominently in discussions throughout 2016. The funding problem, however, may be even worse than most people realize. The fact that governments, such as Sweden and Norway, are considering diverting funds from their international aid budgets to pay for domestic refugee and asylum programs compounds the issue of gaps in international donor funding. More specifically, Sweden is considering cutting its roughly \$5 billion international aid budget by 60 percent, while Norway is considering a 21 percent cut to its \$4.8 billion budget.<sup>49</sup>

Throughout the international system, the mounting cost of dealing with humanitarian crises will exert more and more pressure on traditional long-term development projects and budgets. In the United States, for example, Congress has traditionally provided supplemental funding when there was an extraordinary surge in humanitarian need. Yet almost no one expects the current Congress to approve supplemental humanitarian funding, and this will surely result in an increasingly serious squeeze on international development budgets over time.

Robbing long-term development programs to pay for short-term humanitarian ones will also make one of the core themes of the World Humanitarian Summit—conflict prevention—all the more difficult to achieve. Conflict prevention efforts often require stable, committed funding to countries, situations, and institution building that are not in the headlines. These are exactly the kinds of programs that will be squeezed most heavily by the need to provide more immediate lifesaving humanitarian assistance. Escaping this vicious cycle will require both bringing new donors and new sources of finance to the table, as well as ending the major conflicts that are currently driving such a large percentage of displacement around the globe. Most experts agree that development and humanitarian programs need to work in better concert—but that is often easier said than done.<sup>50</sup>

In addition, one of the key themes in the run-up to the World Humanitarian Summit, particularly as expressed by the High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing, has been the idea of a “grand bargain.”<sup>51</sup> Under this grand bargain, the humanitarian community would raise more money but also commit to using it more effectively by relying more heavily on cash payments to local, on-the-ground organizations in affected countries. Local partners have been under-appreciated assets in humanitarian relief for some time—and increasing their role and voice is praiseworthy.

However, there will be real challenges in operationalizing an approach where major donors make their spending more flexible, transparent, and efficient. As the U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, has come to realize as it has tried to direct a greater proportion of its traditional development programs through local governments and NGOs, such an approach is actually more labor intensive in the short term. This is because local organizations often require significant capacity-building support in order to help them comply with donor regulations and manage funds effectively and transparently.<sup>52</sup> With the current system so badly stretched, it will be difficult for all parties to find the time and bandwidth they need to effectively partner with local organizations if they wish to bring the grand bargain to fruition. Investing in capacity building is difficult when lives need to be saved in the very immediate term.

### Structural reforms are difficult

Major structural reforms to the international system are difficult even during the best of times, often requiring lengthy negotiations, extensive bureaucratic infighting, and considerable preparatory groundwork. Few would argue that the current international system of humanitarianism would not benefit from well-thought-out improvements to its foundational architecture. However, such reforms will be very difficult to secure in the current environment. The current U.N. secretary-general will finish his term at the end of 2016, and there is nothing to suggest that he wishes to tackle a major bureaucratic reform process this late in his agenda. Indeed, there is very little in the materials released by the United Nations in advance of the World Humanitarian Summit that suggests it considers transforming its own bureaucracy a major element of this year's deliberations.

Perhaps the best that can be hoped for is that member states and civil society can successfully maneuver to get these issues sufficiently on the international agenda so that they could be acted upon early in the term of the next secretary-general.

### Syria, Europe, and climate change

There is a considerable risk that much of the deliberation on the humanitarian system in 2016 will be dominated by the situation in Syria, as well as Europe's reaction to refugees reaching its borders. Syria and the European refugee situation are indeed serious, but they are only pieces of the current crisis facing humanitarianism and forcibly displaced people around the globe.

There are major displacement issues in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, South Sudan, Colombia, Ethiopia, Somalia, Myanmar, Eritrea, Pakistan, Ukraine, Libya, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, and numerous other countries. Syria and refugees are an important part of the humanitarian puzzle—but

they are only a part. And beyond refugees and the displaced, there are other major humanitarian crises to deal with—from the Zika virus to Ebola and beyond.<sup>53</sup> It is also worth noting that natural disasters—from an earthquake in Haiti to the Asian tsunami—have taken very large death tolls in recent years.<sup>54</sup>

In addition, the synthesis report on consultations for the World Humanitarian Summit notes that climate change—not conflict—may be an even more profound problem facing humanitarian efforts. The report notes that by 2050, between 25 million and 1 billion people may be permanently or temporarily displaced as a result of climate change, with up to 40 percent of the global population facing water scarcity.<sup>55</sup> The range of the U.N. displacement estimate is obviously enormous and of limited practical planning purposes. But it is telling that even the most optimistic scenario would add more than 40 percent to the global caseload of displacement.

A process that includes the voices of the global south in determining how best to promote resilience, readiness, and preparedness would be better suited to the diverse challenges facing humanitarianism. Indeed, the global south is the most vulnerable to climate change and likely to disproportionately feel its effects despite having had little to do with its causes, making it all the more vital to help develop their capacities in areas such as early warning and mitigation.<sup>56</sup>

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## Conclusion

Humanitarian efforts in 2016 will face enormous challenges, and it would be easy to be pessimistic about the prospects for humanitarianism. Yet—time and time again—humanitarian workers, aid agencies, and concerned citizens have risen up to meet the challenge of helping people at their most desperate and have worked together to rebuild shattered lives and communities.

Perhaps the greatest opportunity to sufficiently meet current demands for relief and strengthen the overall system for delivering it in 2016 comes from growing the community of humanitarians. Given the scope of crises now facing the world, humanitarian issues can no longer simply be delegated to a devoted core of humanitarians as a caseload to be managed. Not only do donors and governments need to fulfill their existing aid commitments, but new actors must also be brought to the table with new ideas, resources, and energy. The private sector helped provide more than \$1.6 billion in humanitarian funding between 2009 and 2013—the result of engagement from a relatively modest number of companies.<sup>57</sup> The private sector; governments and citizens of the global south; traditional development experts; scientists; and others need to find common ground if 2016 is going to be remembered as a year of action on humanitarianism rather than another year of business as usual.

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## Endnotes

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