

The Syrian Refugee Crisis

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- What actions do groups who are threatened by crimes against humanity take in response to these injustices?
- What impact does mass migration have on regions where crimes against humanity take place?
- In what ways is the treatment of refugees a human rights issue?
- How do refugees demonstrate perseverance and resilience in response to displacement and human rights abuses?

Overview

In this activity, students watch video segments from the UN Refugee Agency to precisely define the terms “refugee,” “internally displaced,” and “asylum,” and consider the importance of using correct terminology when describing people who move from one place to another. Students then analyze secondary sources and USC Shoah Foundation testimonies to document key events in the Syrian Civil War and resulting refugee crisis, and complete graphic organizers describing the unique challenges of people who leave their homes abruptly to escape violence and/or persecution. Students will closely read excerpts from the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention to identify international norms for protecting refugee rights and draft an “International Bill of Rights for Refugees.” Finally, students will read case studies about efforts by international organizations to protect refugee rights and conduct a class debate on which organization they should support based on the organization’s effectiveness.

Target Audience

Middle School Social Studies

Activity Duration

Two 45–60 minute class periods

Enduring Understandings

- A common response of groups threatened by crimes against humanity is mass migration resulting in refugee crises.
- Refugee crises compound the humanitarian costs of human rights abuses.
- International laws and norms, including the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention, recognize the legal rights of refugees.

Handouts

- Refugees, Internally Displaced People, and Asylum Seekers organizer
- Country profile graphic organizer for Syria
- Cause-Event-Effect Chart: The Syrian Civil War and Refugee Crisis
- The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Testimony Notetaking Guide
- Excerpts from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and “Convention and Protocol Regarding the Status of Refugees”
- Document Analysis Form for Universal Declaration of Human Rights and “Convention and Protocol Regarding the Status of Refugees”
- Refugee Rights Agency Profile organizer
- Writing an “International Bill of Rights for Refugees”
- Quick Write: Refugee Rights Agencies

Background Information/Links

The Syrian Civil War and Refugee Crisis

Syria is a southwest Asian country bordered by Turkey to the north; Iraq to the east; Jordan to the south and southeast; and Israel, Lebanon, and the Mediterranean Sea to the west. The country's borders were imposed on its people after World War I, when France controlled the area as a colony following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The borders forced together disparate religious and ethnic groups, and tensions between these groups contributed to conflicts that continue today.

Although the majority of Syrians are Sunni Muslims, the minority Alawite Shia Muslims gained influence in Syria's government and military during French colonial rule. Alawites have dominated the country's power structure since 1970, when Hafez al-Assad forcefully assumed power in a coup and established an authoritarian regime. The minority Alawites have viewed the maintenance of power as necessary for avoiding persecution, while many in the majority Sunni community resent being excluded from the political process.

Northern Syria is also home to many Kurdish people, who reside in the region that also includes southeastern Turkey, northern Iraq, and western Iran. The Kurds are an ethnic minority in each of these countries and are often targets of persecution. Because their population in the region was broken up by the drawing of boundaries, the Kurds are a stateless people who desire a central governing authority.

Hafez al-Assad's regime imprisoned, tortured, and executed political opponents to maintain power. It also utilized military aid from the former Soviet Union to build up the country's armed forces. During the late 1970s, Sunni Muslim groups in Syria such as the Muslim Brotherhood worked to topple Assad's regime. They opposed Assad's support for Christian groups in the civil war in nearby Lebanon. In 1982, Assad's forces launched brutal attacks that ended the conflict and nearly destroyed the Syrian city of Hama. Thousands of civilians were killed and displaced in these attacks. In 2000, Hafez al-Assad died and was replaced by his son Bashar.

In early 2011, during the Arab Spring, pro-democracy demonstrations resulted in the toppling of longstanding authoritarian governments in Egypt and Tunisia. In Syria, citizens in the city of Deraa took to the streets to protest the imprisonment and torture of four youths who had been arrested for creating pro-democracy graffiti. Bashar al-Assad's forces fired



on the demonstrators, killing four civilians. As protests grew across the country, the Assad regime continued to kill protestors. In July 2011, the Free Syrian Army was formed to topple Assad's government. The Arab Spring protests soon became a civil war.

The Syrian Civil War has been complicated by the involvement of both regional actors and world powers. Shia-dominated Iran, as well as Lebanon's Hezbollah militants, have aligned themselves with Assad's Alawi regime; while Sunni-aligned Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Jordan have supported opposition groups. Russia has provided Assad with military support and launched airstrikes on Assad's opponents. In 2014, the extremist Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, also known as ISIL, took advantage of chaos in the country and seized control of large areas of territory. In addition to supporting forces attempting to remove Assad from power, the United States launched air strikes on ISIL forces in Syria.

Human-rights groups have documented evidence that multiple parties in the Syrian conflict have committed atrocities and human rights violations. The Assad regime intensified its brutal crackdown on political opponents and has bombed Syrian cities and used civilians as shields. In 2013, the regime used chemical weapons in an attack that killed hundreds of civilians near Damascus. Opposition groups attacked areas controlled by Assad without regard for residents and prevented civilians from moving to avoid violence. ISIL has publicly executed civilians and committed mass killings of rival groups and religious minorities. Nearly 500,000 people have been killed in the Syrian Civil War.

About 13 million people—more than half of Syria's 2011 population of 22 million residents—has been displaced since the beginning of the civil war. Most of the more than 6.5 million refugees have relocated to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. An additional million have sought asylum in the United States, Canada, and Europe. The remaining 6.6 million people have remained in Syria but have been displaced from their homes.

Refugees, Internally Displaced People, Asylum Seekers and Human Rights

The use of correct terminology is critical to maintaining recognition of the human rights of refugees, internally displaced people, and asylum seekers. Refugees have no choice but to flee their homes because they are threatened by conflict and persecution. They often encounter immense challenges, including exposure to extreme weather conditions; lack of access to proper food, shelter, education, or job opportunities; and a future that is often dependent on conditions improving in the areas



they needed to flee. Because of this, refugees are protected by international laws, including the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Geneva Convention. Refugees cannot be sent back to their home countries if doing so places them at risk. International law also guarantees the rights of refugees to enter and remain in other countries.

Like refugees, internally displaced people flee their homes to escape violence and persecution. However, internally displaced people remain in their home countries either because they hope conditions will improve, because they are physically or financially unable to travel to a different country, or because they are blocked from seeking safety elsewhere. Although internally displaced people

are also protected by international human rights laws and norms, they are often the most difficult to protect. Aid organizations often cannot reach them because of their proximity to armed conflicts.

Asylum seekers are refugees who have officially applied to relocate to a host country to be protected from armed conflict or persecution. Once asylum seekers begin the application process, they are protected by international law. The process of seeking asylum includes a detailed interview, presentation of identity documentation, and a vetting of information. Asylum seekers are legally entitled to food, shelter, and health care in their host countries while they wait for their applications to be processed.

Sources

- <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/07/syria-refugee-crisis-150709120935092.html>
- <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/05/syria-civil-war-explained-160505084119966.html>
- <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2015/08/refugees-terminology-matters-150831091756282.html>
- <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26116868>
- <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/teaching-about-refugees.html>
- <https://www.vox.com/2015/9/14/9319293/syrian-refugees-civil-war>
- <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html>
- <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hafiz-al-Assad>
- <https://www.cfr.org/article/syrias-civil-war>
- <https://www.cnn.com/2019/10/09/world/kurds-in-syria-explainer-trnd/index.html>

Procedure

Ask

- 1 The teacher will direct pairs of students to brainstorm a list of reasons why people move from place to place, and then record reasons on the whiteboard or blackboard in full class discussion. The teacher will announce that this lesson will focus on people who move because they are threatened by immediate circumstances such as persecution or violence. Teacher will then direct students to brainstorm the definitions of the following terms: “refugee,” and “asylum,” “internally displaced.”

- 2 The teacher will organize the class into “home” and “study” groups for a jigsaw activity. Each “home” group will have six students, for a total of three pairs of “study” groups. Each “study” pairing will view a short video segment from the United Nations Refugee Agency clarifying the meaning of one of the terms from the brainstorming activity, and record information on a graphic organizer.
 - “Who is a Refugee?” video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvzZGplGbl8>
 - “Internally Displaced People” video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DCzpVQkencw>
 - “Asylum Seekers” video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EIE_tiagn8Q
- 3 The teacher will direct students to return to their “home” groups. Each pair will share the precise meaning of their assigned term with the other members of the group, with group members completing the remaining two columns of the graphic organizer.
- 4 In a Quick Write or journaling activity, the teacher will ask the students to respond to the question, “Why is it important to be able to precisely define the terms “refugee,” “internally displaced,” and “asylum seekers?” As needed, the teacher can encourage students to share ideas in full class discussion.

Analyze

- 5 The teacher will ask students what, if anything, they might know about the country of Syria in Southwest Asia. The teacher will introduce students to the country by locating it on a map of the world and providing some basic information from [CIA Factbook](#). Students will complete a graphic organizer to document basic information about the country.
- 6 The teacher will provide news accounts of key events from the Syrian civil war and resulting refugee crisis. Possible sources include the BBC, the Council on Foreign Relations, and Al Jazeera. Students will complete Cause-Event-Effect graphic organizers documenting key events from the crisis.
- 7 The teacher will announce that the USC Shoah Foundation has collected videotaped testimonies of Syrian refugees describing their experiences. The teacher will pose the questions: “Why are eyewitness accounts from Syrian refugees valuable sources of information for learning about events in Syria? What can we learn from them that we cannot learn from news accounts?” Pairs of students will discuss responses to these questions and the teacher will facilitate a brief full group discussion of the responses, listing reasons why testimonies are valuable sources of information on a blackboard or whiteboard.
- 8 Students will view the following testimonies, completing notetaking organizers for each:
 - Wasy Mustafa Moshe describing his family’s decision to flee Kurdistan in response to air attacks on his hometown
 - Shirin Mustafa describing challenges faced by her internally displaced family.
- 9 The teacher will provide students with a scenario: “Think about all of the sources you have consulted: the news accounts and eyewitness testimonies. What are some challenges refugees must overcome?”



What legal protections do they need to overcome these challenges?" Pairs of students will brainstorm a list of rights.

Apply

- 10 The teacher will distribute or display text from international legal documents regarding human rights for refugees:
 - Article 14 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights
 - Excerpts from the UN Refugee Agency's "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees," which includes text of the "1951 Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees."
- 11 Using the supporting materials, students will closely read the excerpts, summarize the purpose of each document, identify key words and phrases from each, and evaluate the documents' effectiveness in protecting the human rights of people who move to flee violence and/or persecution. As needed, the teacher will ask groups to share ideas and clarify the meaning of each excerpt in full class discussion. *Note: based on time or preference, you may choose to distribute both or only one document for students to analyze*
- 12 The teacher will ask students to share ideas defining the term "bill of rights," and share the definition from Dictionary.com: "a statement of the rights belonging to or sought by a group." The teacher will ask members of the class for examples, and share a few, including the U.S. Bill of Rights and more specialized documents, such as the "Patient Bill of Rights" from the American Association for Accreditation of Ambulatory Surgery Facilities (AAAASF), or New York City's "Used Car Consumer Bill of Rights," which protects customers from dishonest business practices.
- 13 The teacher will distribute or display instructions and direct small groups of students to each draft a "International Bill of Rights for Refugees" addressing the challenges faced by refugees such as those featured in the testimonies.
- 14 In a Quick Write or journaling activity, students will respond to this prompt: "How does your group's Refugee Bill of Rights address the real challenges encountered by refugees in Syria?"

Act

- 15 The teacher will direct students to return to their "home" groups from the previous jigsaw activity. Each group will visit the websites of three organizations that advocate for Syrian refugees' human rights:
 - Human Rights Watch, <https://www.hrw.org/topic/refugee-rights>
 - Amnesty International, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>
 - International Refugee Assistance Project, <https://refugeerights.org/our-work/our-model/>

“Study” groups will complete notetaking organizers profiling one group at a time, with the teacher prompting students to switch sites every ten minutes until each group has been profiled.

- 16 Once the “study” groups have profiled each organization, the teacher will direct “home” groups to reconvene to share ideas about which one they think has the best plan for securing the protection of refugees’ human rights. At the conclusion of the discussion, students will rank the agencies from 1–3 in terms of which would gain their support.
- 17 As an Exit Ticket, students will respond to a Quick Write prompt in which they will identify the single organization they recommend for a community fundraising campaign and justify their choice.

Connections

Connection to Student Lives	Connection to Contemporary Events	Connection to the Future
Students will read about actions global organizations take to address refugee human rights, and decide which single organization they would support.	Students will analyze secondary sources to trace and document key events in the Syrian refugee crisis, and connect USH Shoah Foundation testimonies to these events.	Students will participate in a replicable process of analyzing alternatives for citizen actions in response to injustice.

Clips of Testimony

■ Wasy Mustafa Moshe

Wasy Mustafa Moshe describes his family’s decision to flee Kurdistan in response to air attacks on his hometown.

■ Shirin Mustafa

Shirin Mustafa describes challenges faced by her internally displaced family.

National Standards

College, Career and Civic Life C3 Framework for Social Studies Standards

D2.Civ.7.6.8 Apply civic virtues and democratic principles in school and community settings.

D4.2.6-8 Construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples and details with relevant information and data, while acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of the explanations.

D4.4.6-8 Draw on multiple disciplinary lenses to analyze how a specific problem can manifest itself at local, regional, and global levels over time, identifying its characteristics and causes, and the challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address the problem.

D4.7.6-8 Assess their individual and collective capabilities to take action to address local, regional, and global problems, taking into account a range of possible levers of power, strategies, and potential outcomes.

D4.8.6-8 Apply a range of deliberative and democratic procedures to make decisions and take action in their classrooms and schools, and in out-of-school civic contexts.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

RI.8.10 By the end of the year, read and comprehend literary nonfiction at the high end of the grades 6-8 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

SL.8.1 Engage effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grade 8 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly.

SL.8.2 Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

SL.8.4 Present claims and findings, emphasizing salient points in a focused, coherent manner with relevant evidence, sound valid reasoning, and well-chosen details; use appropriate eye contact, adequate volume, and clear pronunciation.

W.8.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

Refugees, Internally Displaced People, and Asylum Seekers



STUDENT HANDOUT

Directions: As you watch the videos, use this organizer to record notes about refugees, internally displaced people, and asylum seekers.

Refugees	Internally Displaced Persons	Asylum Seekers
Who are they?	Who are they?	Who are they?
What challenges do they face?	What challenges do they face?	What challenges do they face?
What rights do they have?	What rights do they have?	What rights do they have?

**Where is it?**

In what region of the world is it located? What countries and/or bodies of water border it to the North, South, East, and West? How large is the country?

What are the most important physical characteristics?

Describe the climate and vegetation. Are there any prominent landforms or bodies of water?

How do people make a living there?

What are the most important natural resources and industries?

Who lives there?

What language(s) is/are spoken there? By percentage, what are the most prominent ethnicities and religious groups?

What questions do you have about the country?

What would you like to know more about to understand the country better?

Cause—Event—Effect Chart: The Syrian Civil War and Refugee Crisis



STUDENT HANDOUT

As you read the news account of the Syrian refugee crisis, list causes and effects of each event listed on the organizer below.

CAUSE(S)	EVENT	EFFECT(S)
	Boundary drawing after World War I	
	The Arab Spring	
	Outbreak of civil war (2011)	
	Involvement of regional actors and global powers	
	Refugee crisis	

The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Testimony Notetaking Guide



STUDENT HANDOUT

As you read the news account of the Syrian refugee crisis, list causes and effects of each event listed on the organizer below.

<p>1. Identify the speaker Name, age or date of birth, experience group.</p>	
<p>2. Topic What aspect of the crisis is the witness speaking about in the selected segment? Summarize the content of the testimony.</p>	
<p>3. Tone What is the speaker's attitude towards the subject? What diction or word choices provide clues about the speaker's point of view?</p>	
<p>Why is this segment of testimony an important source of information for learning about the Rohingya refugee crisis?</p>	
<p>What questions does the testimony raise?</p>	

Excerpts from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights



STUDENT HANDOUT

1. Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law...

...Now, therefore, The General Assembly (of the United Nations),

Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

2. Article 14

1. Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.
2. This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Excerpts from “Convention and Protocol Regarding the Status of Refugees,” from the United Nations Refugee Agency



Excerpt 1

IV. The Conference adopted unanimously the following recommendations:

B

(Principle of unity of the family)

THE CONFERENCE,

CONSIDERING that the unity of the family, the natural and fundamental group unit of society, is an essential right of the refugee, and that such unity is constantly threatened, and

NOTING with satisfaction that...the rights granted to a refugee are extended to members of his family, recommends Governments to take the necessary measures for the protection of the refugee's family especially with a view to:

- (1) Ensuring that the unity of the refugee's family is maintained particularly in cases where the head of the family has fulfilled the necessary conditions for admission to a particular country,
- (2) The protection of refugees who are minors, in particular unaccompanied children and girls, with special reference to guardianship and adoption.

C

(Welfare services)

THE CONFERENCE,

CONSIDERING that, in the moral, legal and material spheres, refugees need the help of suitable welfare services, especially that of appropriate nongovernmental organizations [such as the International Red Cross/Red Crescent]

RECOMMENDS Governments and inter-governmental bodies to facilitate, encourage and sustain the efforts of properly qualified organizations.



Excerpt 2

Article 3

NON-DISCRIMINATION

The Contracting States shall apply the provisions of this Convention to refugees without discrimination as to race, religion or country of origin.

Article 16

ACCESS TO COURTS

1. A refugee shall have free access to the courts of law on the territory of all Contracting States...

Article 17

WAGE-EARNING EMPLOYMENT

1. The Contracting State shall accord to refugees lawfully staying in their territory the most favourable treatment accorded to nationals of a foreign country in the same circumstances, as regards the right to engage in wage-earning employment...

Article 22

PUBLIC EDUCATION

1. The Contracting States shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education...

Article 26

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

1. Each Contracting State shall accord to refugees lawfully in its territory the right to choose their place of residence to move freely within its territory, subject to any regulations applicable to aliens generally in the same circumstances...

Article 27

IDENTITY PAPERS

1. The Contracting States shall issue identity papers to any refugee in their territory who does not possess a valid travel document...

Article 32

EXPULSION

1. The Contracting States shall not expel a refugee lawfully in their territory save on grounds of national security or public order...

IN FAITH WHEREOF the undersigned, duly authorized, have signed this Convention on behalf of their respective Governments,

DONE at Geneva, this twenty-eighth day of July, one thousand nine hundred and fifty-one, in a single copy, of which the English and French texts are equally authentic and which shall remain deposited in the archives of the United Nations, and certified true copies of which shall be delivered to all Members of the United Nations and to the non-member States referred to in article 39.

Document Analysis Form



STUDENT HANDOUT

Excerpt 1: Preamble and Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In your own words, summarize the purpose of the excerpted document.

What are the most important key words and phrases in the excerpt?

In what way or ways does the document seek to protect the human rights of people who move to flee violence and/or persecution?

What are the limitations on this excerpt's effectiveness in protecting the human rights of people who move to flee violence and/or persecution?

Document Analysis Form



STUDENT HANDOUT

Excerpt 2: “Convention and Protocol Regarding the Status of Refugees”

<p>In your own words, summarize the purpose of the excerpted document.</p>
<p>What are the most important key words and phrases in the excerpt?</p>
<p>In what way or ways does the document seek to protect the human rights of people who move to flee violence and/or persecution?</p>
<p>What are the limitations on this excerpt's effectiveness in protecting the human rights of people who move to flee violence and/or persecution?</p>

Writing an “International Bill of Rights for Refugees”



Dictionary.com defines “bill of rights” as “a statement of the rights belonging to or sought by a group.” Using the examples provided as a model, draft a list of rights for refugees. Use the checklist below to help you draft your document.

Criteria	Check Box
Our bill of rights addresses the challenges confronted by people who are forced to leave their homes because of violence and persecution.	
Our bill of rights reflects the real experiences of refugees documented in USC Shoah Foundation testimonies.	
Our bill of rights reflects the guarantees in the UN Declaration of Rights and the Convention and Protocol Regarding the Status of Refugees	
Our bill of rights is easy to read and understand.	
Our bill of rights is reasonable and would be can to enforce.	

Refugee Rights Agencies Profile



STUDENT HANDOUT

Human Rights Watch https://www.hrw.org/topic/refugee-rights	Amnesty International https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/	International Refugee Assistance Project https://refugeerights.org/our-work/our-model/
What actions does this group take to promote refugee rights?	What actions does this group take to promote refugee rights?	What actions does this group take to promote refugee rights?
Does the group's work reflect the challenges faced by refugees, internally displaced people, AND asylum seekers?	Does the group's work reflect the challenges faced by refugees, internally displaced people, AND asylum seekers?	Does the group's work reflect the challenges faced by refugees, internally displaced people, AND asylum seekers?
Yes	Yes	Yes
No	No	No
Explanation:	Explanation:	Explanation:
Support ranking compared with other groups: 1 2 3	Support ranking compared with other groups: 1 2 3	Support ranking compared with other groups: 1 2 3

Quick Write



STUDENT HANDOUT

If I could select one organization to support, it would be (circle one):

Human Rights Watch

Amnesty International

International Refugee Assistance
Project

In the space below, write a paragraph defending your choice.