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Britain goes its own way on refugees

Country has opted out of Europe-wide solutions, to the irritation of others

by [Griff Witte](#)

LONDON —More than a year after Ayham al-Halabi found refuge from the Syrian war in the rolling green foothills of northern England, these are the words he uses to describe his journey: “very comfortable, very easy and without any problems.”

Compared with the hundreds of thousands of migrants and refugees who have braved treacherous seas, razor-wire fences, pepper spray, tear gas, long days on foot and cold nights on the street, Halabi has an almost unimaginably idyllic rendering of the path to Europe.

But the 20-year-old Halabi took a different route, one that reflects a British approach to the refugee crisis that has placed this country sharply at odds with its European counterparts. Held up by British officials as a potential model for easing the crisis, the strategy has been blasted by critics as a dangerous abdication of responsibility at a time when Europe needs to hang together more than ever before.

Alone among European Union members, Britain has opted out of a quota system for distributing 160,000 refugees who have already arrived on the continent’s shores. Britain instead runs a parallel program under which it plans to take, over five years, 20,000 people who have fled Syria but remain in camps or other shelters in the Middle East.

Like Halabi and his family, those who are chosen for resettlement in Britain can bypass the voyages on flimsy rafts and the odysseys across borders. Instead, they simply fly here on commercial jets.

To British Prime Minister David Cameron, it’s the only way to bring some order to the chaotic flows and to reduce the pull factors that have helped to lure [more than 500,000 migrants and refugees](#) across the Mediterranean to Europe this year — 3,000 of whom have died along the way.

“There are 12 million Syrian people who have been made homeless by Bashar al-Assad,” Cameron [told CBS News](#) this week, referring to the Syrian president. Cameron pointed out that only a small fraction has crossed into Europe. “So there’s millions left in the region, and we should not be encouraging those people to make the journey.”

But to other European leaders, Britain's stance smacks of an island nation's aloof unwillingness to help its fellow E.U. members at a time of vast need. Through the end of August, Britain had [resettled 216 Syrian refugees](#) since the start of the four-year Syrian conflict. Nearly 5,000 others had been granted asylum or other forms of protection after arriving here on their own. Both numbers are far below the totals that have been accepted in other parts of Europe.

French President François Hollande has pointedly said that Britain should not be exempt "from making an effort" because it sits outside Europe's visa-free travel area. Austrian Chancellor Werner Faymann has warned that Britain won't get what it wants on other European matters if it refuses to cooperate on this one, noting that "solidarity is not a one-way street." The influential German tabloid Bild has labeled Cameron a "shirker."

Taking only the refugees who are still in the Middle East, after all, does nothing to ease the burden posed by the hundreds of thousands who are already in Europe. And it's an option for Britain only because of geography: The English Channel makes this country far more difficult for asylum seekers to access than the European mainland.

"If you're far away from the crisis, you can have the luxury of a more discretionary and more passive refugee policy," said Alexander Betts, director of the Refugee Studies Center at the University of Oxford.

Betts said there are positive aspects to Britain's approach, which is similar to that of other countries that are geographically distant from the Syrian war, including Australia and the United States.

Among the benefits: A formal refugee resettlement program can reduce the incentive for asylum seekers to embark on dangerous journeys and allows host countries to select the neediest cases while weeding out those who don't merit asylum or who pose a security risk. As the refugee crisis has worsened this year, top U.N. and human rights officials have repeatedly called for countries to expand their resettlement programs.

But where Britain errs, Betts said, is by treating resettlement programs as a substitute for what is known as "spontaneous-arrival asylum." That's when refugees reach a country on their own.

Other nations in Europe, including Germany and Sweden, [accept large numbers](#) of refugees through both methods.

The government has gone to great lengths to reduce spontaneous arrivals, such as spending millions on fences and sniffer dogs at the French port of Calais, where [thousands of migrants are camped out](#) with the hope of smuggling themselves into Britain aboard a truck or a train.

Cameron has been deeply reluctant to broaden the refugee-resettlement program and has done so under pressure. Earlier this year, 10 Downing Street had promised to limit the total number of Syrians to 1,000.

Then, in early September, photos emerged of a [dead Syrian toddler](#), Aylan Kurdi, washed up on a Turkish beach. Cameron was forced by an outpouring of public sympathy to change tack overnight, [announcing the new target of 20,000](#) .

The refugee crisis comes at a tricky political moment for Cameron, who is also trying to renegotiate the terms of Britain's membership in the European Union in advance of a referendum he has promised by the end of 2017.

That vote was forced in large part by a backlash against immigration, which hit record levels this year as migrants from other parts of Europe have poured in to take advantage of Britain's comparatively strong economy. Among other things, Cameron is seeking the right to limit welfare benefits for immigrants from other E.U. states.

Although refugees represent only a small percentage of overall immigration to Britain, the issues have become intertwined.

So far, the British approach to the refugee crisis seems to be alienating European partners and lessening the chance Cameron will get what he wants.

"I don't think it holds much water [in Europe] for the British government to be saying, 'It's not really our problem,'" said Claire Spencer, a senior research fellow at the London-based think tank Chatham House.

Domestic critics, too, have hardly been placated by Cameron's announcement that Britain will take more Syrians and say the number remains far too low.

George Gabriel, lead organizer for the advocacy group Citizens UK, said there's a reservoir of untapped support for refugees.

"People in this country stand ready and willing to do more," Gabriel said. "The question is whether the government will let them."

Halabi, for one, said he hopes it does.

The Syrian said he feels nothing but gratitude toward Britain for allowing his family to resettle here after they fled a war that claimed his father's life. They were selected for resettlement by the U.N. refugee agency because Halabi's 12-year-old brother, Hamza, suffers from leukemia, and requires costly chemotherapy treatments.

But Halabi said he knows that many others who are just as needy remain in the countries ringing Syria, and that lacking better options, they will try to reach Europe by whatever means they can.

“People don’t have any choice,” he said. “The sea is their only solution.”

Karla Adam contributed to this report.

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