The Syrian refugee crisis has attracted Western attention largely because of its modest spillover into Europe. But this spillover represents a mere fraction of the misery caused by mass displacement today: only around 15 percent of Syria’s 5.8 million refugees have attempted to reach Europe, and the Syrian refugee surge is itself only one of several around the world.

The challenge of mass displacement is largely one of geographical concentration: nearly 60 percent of the world’s refugees are hosted by just ten haven countries, each bordering a conflict zone. It is in these countries—Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, in the case of the Syrian civil war—where new approaches are most direly needed: policies that are sustainable and scalable and that allow displaced people to learn, work, and flourish until they are able to return to their homes and rebuild their societies. With European leaders focused on keeping Syrian refugees out of the continent, such policies have so far been lacking.

It is tempting to suggest that refugees become temporary citizens in host countries, with access to education, work, and other rights for the length of their stays. But with few exceptions, such as Uganda, host countries that neighbor conflicts are generally unwilling to open their labor markets to refugees, let alone integrate them socially or politically. In countries where this is the case, what kind of alternatives might be available?

By reducing the need to repeatedly mobilize for emergency responses, SEZs would help policymakers focus on providing higher-quality assistance.

In October, Foreign Affairs published our proposal for a new approach to the Syrian refugee crisis. By allowing displaced Syrians to work in special economic zones (SEZs) in
Jordan, we argued, Amman could provide displaced Syrians with the jobs, education, and autonomy they need while advancing its own industrial development. We focused on the King Hussein Bin Talal Development Area (KHBTDA), an SEZ into which the Jordanian government has already invested more than 100 million dollars in infrastructure and which lies a short distance from the Zaatari refugee camp, which houses some 83,000 refugees. By allowing Syrian refugees to work and receive training in the KHBTDA alongside Jordanian nationals, we suggested, the Jordanian government could transform refugees from a burden into an advantage, all the while preserving their autonomy and incubating a Syrian economy in exile in preparation for the civil war’s eventual end.

Since our article was published, our idea has gained political traction. Over the course of the winter, Jordanian King Abdullah, British Prime Minister David Cameron, and World Bank President Jim Yong Kim developed the idea into a full-fledged proposal, formally launching it at the London Conference on Syria in February 2016. A pilot program that will grant some 150,000 refugees the right to work will likely begin in Jordan this summer.

TIME FOR A CHANGE

A fresh approach to mass displacement is needed now more than ever. Since April 2015, when waves of refugees started arriving on European shores, the responses offered by EU states have been ever-worsening failures. Not only are the politics behind the European response to the refugee crisis dysfunctional, the policies they have produced have neglected the West’s obligations to come to the aid of the displaced.

Consider the recent deal negotiated by German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, which aims to reduce the number of migrants making the dangerous trip across the Aegean from Turkey to Greece. Under the deal, the European Union has promised to give Turkey some six billion euros and assured Ankara that it will speed up the talks surrounding the country’s accession to the European Union, granting Turkish citizens the right to visa-free travel in the European Union in the meantime. In return, Turkey has agreed to a “one-in-one out” policy, under which European governments will return nearly all the migrants and refugees who arrive in Greece to
Turkish soil; Turkey will then send an equal number of Syrian refugees, but no more than 73,000, directly to Europe.

The logic of the deal, in the words of David Cameron, is “to break the link between getting on a boat and getting settlement in Europe.” But for a number of reasons, the pact is already unraveling.

It has always been unclear, for one, whether Greece has the capacity to forcefully deport thousands of refugees and migrants to Turkey. Turkey, for its part, lacks the asylum system needed to effectively protect non-Syrian asylum seekers, as it is obligated under the deal, and reports from Human Rights Watch suggest that Turkish authorities are already returning non-Syrian refugees, including some Afghans, to danger in their countries of
origin. Nor is this all. EU countries have not yet committed the necessary resettlement places for Syrians coming out of Turkey; European authorities, fearful of backlash against violations of human rights committed under a plan that UN agencies have opposed, will probably drag their feet on the deportations to avoid bad press; and given Turkey’s authoritarian drift, the European Union will probably struggle to fast track Ankara’s push for membership anyway. But perhaps most disconcerting is the fact that the deal was born of fear and hatred, not of a recognition of the West’s moral obligations. The result is a coercive, exclusionary policy that will do little to help the dispossessed.

Perhaps because it has sensed the need for a more comprehensive approach, the European Commission has announced a new initiative: one that would transform the European Asylum Support Office from an advisory body into a regulatory entity, setting pan-European asylum rules and requiring countries to take quotas of refugees. Apart from the fact that the treaty change required to enact such a policy is probably impossible in the European Union’s current political climate, the fact that the European Commission’s response to its failures so far is to suggest further centralizing its power shows that it has misdiagnosed the problem.

A pilot program that will grant some 150,000 refugees the right to work will likely begin in Jordan this summer.

If Europe really wants to help displaced Syrians, it should start by helping to provide opportunities for employment and education in the host countries bordering Syria. The governments of those countries should not have to threaten to expel refugees to Europe in order to attract European support: instead, the European Commission should set rules that distribute the financial burden of such assistance among EU countries. The European Union needs to encourage European firms to bring jobs to development zones in the host countries so that refugees can restore their autonomy by earning a living. And the European Commission needs to reform the European Union’s market access rules so that goods produced by refugees can be sold in Europe without impediment. Once such policies are in place, the need to reach pan-European agreement on migration and refugee policies, which should be only a minor component of Europe’s approach to mass displacement, will be more manageable.
ZONAL DEVELOPMENT’S NEXT STEP

We first developed the idea that special economic zones could offer employment opportunities for Syrian refugees during a visit to refugee camps and urban areas in Jordan in April 2015 (our trip was supported by the WANA Institute, a Jordanian think tank). As we developed our essay for *Foreign Affairs*, the Jordanian government prepared an internal white paper that reflected and developed the approach.

Abdullah introduced the plan to Cameron in September, during the British prime minister’s visit to Jordan and Lebanon. Over the following months, the UK government convened a series of technical discussions with the Jordanian government and within its own Department for International Development, exploring, among other issues, the possibilities that the World Bank might finance infrastructure projects in the SEZs and that the European Union might grant trade concessions to the exports produced there. At the World Economic Forum in January, Queen Rania of Jordan promoted the idea and a number of manufacturing company CEOs began to express interest.

The formal launch of the pilot project came the next month, at the London conference on Syrian refugees on February 4. Both Abdullah and Cameron spoke about the pilot, as did a number of business leaders, among them Andy Clarke, the CEO of Asda, the UK subsidiary of Wal-Mart. Cameron argued in his opening remarks that, in addition to the $11 billion in aid that governments pledged at the conference, the meeting’s “mold-breaking” contribution would be the investment it secured in jobs and development in host countries neighboring Syria. The idea drew widespread support: Former British Prime Minister Gordon Brown, for instance, wrote that “economic zones should be created in Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey” in an op-ed published in *The Guardian* on the day of the conference. A number of governments agreed to provide Jordan with around $2 billion in assistance and investment, in return for which Jordan would grant 150,000 work permits to Syrian refugees. Those Syrians would find jobs alongside Jordanian nationals in five SEZs Amman planned to improve, building on existing development areas such as the KHBTA.
We are confident that pilot programs will begin in the summer of 2016. But a number of uncertainties remain. First, there is not yet a consensus within the Jordanian government on the number of work permits that the country will provide for the pilot programs (an initial figure of 150,000 has been suggested) and the portion of those that will be reserved for Jordanian nationals. (The extent of Jordan’s enthusiasm for the project may depend on the willingness of European firms to demonstrate their own interest in it.) Next, questions remain about the extent to which funds pledged by donors will support public-sector jobs instead of private-sector employment in the SEZs. The project still needs to secure EU trade concessions, an end toward which its organizers are now making progress, and it needs to attract more interest from manufacturing companies, although Asda and Ikea, for
example, have offered some initial support. Some major European states have yet to put serious effort into encouraging firms to play a role: the German government, for instance, has been preoccupied with the refugees who are already in Germany. Finally, the extent to which the World Bank will be able to invest in infrastructural development related to the pilot programs remains unclear.

These uncertainties aside, the pilot now seems likely to go ahead. Once that happens, the world must pay close attention to its strengths and weaknesses—both to ensure the success of the program in Jordan and to consider how the model of zonal development employed there might be applied to the other countries hosting refugees.

That won't be as simple as rolling out the model used in Jordan elsewhere. In some countries, such as Uganda, where refugees have a number of socioeconomic freedoms, refugees may be able to gradually gain rights to employment and political participation equivalent to those of citizens. In countries that resist the full participation of refugees in their economies and societies, incubation, rather than integration, could be the focus: refugees, along with their jobs, could be relocated to their countries of origin after the end of the conflicts that have displaced them. Nor need all such programs involve manufacturing, as Jordan’s will: the logic of zonal development could also be applied to economies that seek to develop other sectors. No matter which industries they support, however, SEZs can permanently offer infrastructure to assist the displaced in countries that repeatedly take in large numbers of refugees, as so many haven countries do. By reducing the need to repeatedly mobilize for emergency responses, SEZs would help policymakers focus on providing higher-quality assistance.

The purpose of refugee protection should be to provide people with rights and opportunities until they can go home or integrate into their host societies. States need to fulfill this mission in a way that benefits host societies even as it promotes human flourishing. The key to doing so is to shift from a purely humanitarian approach to a development approach, with jobs and education at the center.
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