

CANADA

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Saudi Arabia thanks Canada for helping Syrian refugees. But how much is it doing?



By Nick Logan

World Reporter/Global National Web Producer Global News

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WATCH: Just under three months after decrying the beheading of 47 people in Saudi Arabia, Global News has exclusive pictures of Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion breaking bread with the Saudi Ambassador to Canada. Vassy Kapelos reports.

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Saudi Arabia's ambassador hosted a swanky dinner event for Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion and other government officials Thursday evening, to congratulate Canada for its effort to resettle [Syrian refugees](#).

Saudi Ambassador to Canada Naif Bin Bandir Al-Sudairy invited Global News to the event at the Saudi Arabian embassy in Ottawa, following the announcement of a \$31,000 donation by the Ambassadors of the Gulf Cooperation Council — including [Saudi Arabia](#), Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Kuwait — to assist Canada's ongoing Syrian refugee resettlement efforts.

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Saudi Arabia's [human rights](#) record has faced increased criticism recently after the [mass execution of 47 people](#) in early January, including Shia Muslim cleric [Sheik Nimr al-Nimr](#) — an outspoken critic of the ruling royal family. The Liberal government is also coming under fire for respecting a secretive \$15-billion arms deal, inked by the Conservatives in 2014. Dion said in early January the government has [no choice but to respect the deal](#), but would take the abysmal human rights record into consideration when negotiating future agreements.

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But, Thursday night was all about the refugees. At least, that's all the ambassador wished to speak about.

"[The donation is] mostly to say thank you for [Canada receiving 25,000 Syrians](#). We believe that the conflict [in] Syria needs a lot of help," the ambassador told Global News reporter Vassy Kapelos. "Maybe we can talk about Saudi Arabia and Canada at [another] event."

WATCH: Saudi ambassador avoids questions about human rights, arms deal

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Saudi Arabia [has faced criticism in the past](#) for not taking in any of the more than [4.8 million refugees registered with UNHCR](#) in countries like Turkey (2.75 million refugees there), Lebanon (one million) and Jordan (636,000).

Why? One reason is Saudi Arabia is not a signatory to the UN Convention on Refugees. But, it's not entirely fair to say Saudi Arabia hasn't taken in any Syrians fleeing the five-year-long civil war.

Saudi Arabia claims 2.5 million Syrians have taken shelter within its borders since the outset of the civil war, according to a handout given to Global News at the event.

To give an example of just how many Syrians have flooded into Saudi Arabia, [Newsweek](#), citing migration figures from the World Bank, reported 794.5 per cent hike in Syrian migrants between 2010, the year before the civil war broke out, and 2013 — increasing from 111,764 to 1,000,000 Syrians residing in the kingdom.

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Also, because Saudi Arabia isn't a refugee convention signatory and those Syrians weren't registered UN's refugee agency, they're not considered refugees. In fact, [according to Bloomberg](#), Saudi Arabia officially refers to them as "Arab brothers and sisters in distress."

That [same report from Bloomberg](#), published in September, also suggested many Syrian refugees were more hopeful about finding acceptance and a better life by travelling to Europe or other Western countries than they would in Saudi Arabia.

"In Europe, I can get treatment for my polio, educate my children, have shelter and live an honorable life," Bloomberg reported Yassir Batal, a 36-year-old Syrian refugee in Lebanon, saying at the time.

What about the money to help refugees?

The donation the ambassadors of the six oil-rich nations made to support Canada's Syrian refugee resettlement efforts amounts to \$31,000. The donation was presented to United Way CEO Michael Allen.

It's about \$6,000 more than the [maximum one-time payment of \\$25,000](#) a Syrian refugee family can get from the federal government to set themselves up in Canada and live for their first year here.

The federal government, in its 2016 budget released this week, set aside a further \$245 million over five years to resettle more Syrian refugees, on top of the \$678 million over six years for the first 25,000 refugees.

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So \$31,000 may not seem like a lot.

But Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States are contributing hundreds of millions of dollars to support humanitarian efforts for Syrians displaced by the war, according to information from the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Saudi Arabia, for its part, has contributed more than US\$780 million in humanitarian aid since 2011. United Arab Emirates, Qatar Kuwait have contributed more than US\$1 billion in relief money, including to assist with the refugee crisis.

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With files from [Vassy Kapelos](#) and [The Canadian Press](#)