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A New Approach to the Refugee Crisis – A Sponsorship Scheme for Syrians

We are currently witnessing the largest global humanitarian crisis the world has seen since the end of World War II. Over 65 million people are displaced worldwide. Europe is at coalface of this crisis as over one million asylum seekers and refugees have entered Europe in the last year and a half alone, seeking protection and safety. People are making this journey via dangerous sea crossings and relying on people smugglers, resulting in the deaths of almost 3,000 thousand of men, women and children in the first half of 2016 alone.

While other European countries close their borders in response to the current crisis, Ireland, in the true spirit of our history and heritage, has stepped up to the plate by deploying our Navy in the Mediterranean on lifesaving missions, and voluntarily committing to take 4,000 refugees and asylum seekers under the EU Resettlement and Relocation Programme, with a focus on those fleeing the Civil War in Syria. Although we are expected to exceed our resettlement target of 520 refugees in 2016, the numbers entering Ireland through relocation have been staggering low – to date (July 2016) only 38 Syrians have been relocated to Ireland since the programme's inception in 2015. At this rate, there is little chance we will be able to meet our relocation target of 2,600 asylum seekers. As well, it remains unclear how and when the residual 600 of the total commitment will be allocated under the programme.

In many ways, it is easier for a country to accept higher numbers of refugees under resettlement, as they have already been formally recognised under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. Asylum seekers seeking to be relocated, i.e. those fleeing persecution but yet to be officially recognised as refugees, must go through the application process when they eventually arrive in Ireland. Both resettlement and relocation put a high financial burden on the State to provide the necessary supports and accommodation for refugees and asylum seekers entering the country. In the meantime, many Syrians already resident in Ireland or naturalised here are desperately seeking to bring family members out of Syria and the surrounding territories, and are experiencing significant delays and refusals in the processing of their visa applications for family unity. These Syrians are willing and able to provide for their family members when they arrive with no additional cost to the State.

More must now be done to bring these families together in a safe and legal way, to remove the need for them to undertake dangerous crossings, and to stop the smugglers profiteering from this human misery.

Nasc have a pragmatic, cost effective and efficient solution to this problem, that ensures the safety of those seeking protection while also promoting integration and reuniting families – a true cornerstone of our national identity enshrined in our Constitution and idealised in the 1916 Proclamation, which we commemorate the centenary of this year. Potentially hundreds of people could be welcomed to Ireland under this proposal, going some way to filling our commitments under the Irish Refugee

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Protection Programme. Our proposal is based on our 16 years of experience providing legal advocacy to refugees, asylum seekers and migrants, and our direct work over the past several years with Syrians applying for visas to bring their family members to safety here in Ireland.

Nasc proposes:

1. **Reintroduce an enhanced Syrian Humanitarian Admission Programme (SHAP)**, similar to the programme introduced by then Minister for Justice Alan Shatter in 2014. This programme, which ran for a limited time, granted permission to 111 Syrians to come to Ireland to join their families who were settled here. By reintroducing a new programme, we have an opportunity to build upon the SHAP and develop a programme that is more timely, effective and efficient for the state and families alike. The enhanced programme would include a 'co-sponsorship' element, which would allow Irish citizens, community and faith based groups, charities and NGOs to support a Syrian person's SHAP application, providing financial, social and institutional backing and thus improving a person's opportunities for integration. This co- sponsorship aspect allows the Irish government to harness the outpouring of support and goodwill coming from Irish society in support of those fleeing the conflict in Syria, while also easing the financial burden on the Syrian community in Ireland and on the Government to provide for newly arrived Syrians.
2. **Take a stronger humanitarian approach in decision making on all Syrian family reunification applications.** This would include the use of positive discretion when adjudicating applications for extended family members of refugees. It would also include the implementation of the provision in the non-refugee family reunification policy, which gives decision makers the discretion to grant family reunification in cases where the requirements are not met. This already existing policy can be triggered in exceptional cases of a humanitarian nature – all that is required here is for the State to implement its own policy. The current and ongoing conflict in Syria and resultant profound impact that this war has had on upon the civilian population would, in our view, constitute an exceptional case of a humanitarian nature.

About Nasc:

Nasc (the Irish word for *link*) is an NGO and a registered charity based in Cork. Nasc works for an integrated society based on the principles of human rights, social justice and equality. One of the key focuses of Nasc's work is reuniting families. In the past two years, Nasc has worked with over 30 Syrian individuals and families seeking to bring family members to safety in Ireland. As a result we have developed knowledge of the issues and barriers that this community is facing when seeking to bring family members to safety. This proposal was developed in consultation with the Syrian community and has the support of the Irish UNHCR office.