Millions of Syrians have been traumatized by violence and privation due to fighting in their country. U.S. foreign policy has been ineffective in stopping either the carnage or the exodus of refugees. What can philanthropists do to help?

The past provides some perspective. A century ago, these same territories in the Middle East were also the scene of war and atrocities. One in four inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire died of famine, state violence, or disease between 1914 and 1923. Millions more became refugees. The genocide against Armenian Christians alone resulted in the deaths of up to 1.5 million people. Photos of young victims shocked the world then, as they do today.

America responded to this distant catastrophe with unprecedented generosity. Charitable, business, and religious leaders provided valuable humanitarian assistance starting in 1915. Key backers included real-estate investor and U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau and copper magnate Cleveland Dodge. By 1919, the organizers received a Congressional charter to operate under the name Near East Relief.

NER electrified and mobilized the American public by emotional appeals for victims in “Bible lands.” Volunteers ranging from Sunday-school students to Hollywood stars chipped in. They raised an astonishing sum of approximately $2.5 billion in today’s dollars. NER pioneered now-common fundraising methods like child sponsorships. Partner organizations representing over 73 million Americans promoted “Golden Rule dinners” in which guests ate simple meals like those served in orphanages and made donations in solidarity with victims. Saving the “starving Armenians” became a common household refrain. The money raised funded medical care, emergency food distribution, agricultural supplies, and other lifesaving services to millions of victims of many ethnicities in the Near East.

NER sent more than a thousand relief workers to the region. At least two dozen of its agents died in the line of duty. By 1930, it reported saving a million lives and rescuing 132,000 orphans.

Phanethic heroines
Dr. Mabel Elliott, a graduate of the University of Chicago’s Rush Medical College, was one of the NER aid workers. She accompanied several thousand refugees as they escaped on foot through the Taurus Mountains in blizzard conditions. She barely escaped alive. Elliott cared for refugees in the coastal city of İzmit while “bullets were zipping across our compound and striking into the plaster of the walls…. We put patients on the floor, out of range of the windows.” Moving to Armenia, Elliott took charge of the world’s largest orphanage, where she battled trachoma, favus, scabies, typhus, smallpox, and other diseases afflicting 25,000 displaced children.

Another brave American charity doctor, Olga Stastny of Omaha, Nebraska, stepped into the breach. She established a system to register and temporarily care for refugees on the tiny barren Greek island of Macronissi. Within four days of her arrival, 5,500 refugees disembarked from the SS Ionia. Smallpox and typhus were rampant among the passengers. They had no water or food on board. Stastny and her staff assisted over 12,000 refugees in the next five months. All arrivals were bathed; vermin-infested hair was shaved then burned to stop typhus; remaining clothes were steamed and sterilized.

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Much of the region was overwhelmed with hungry, exhausted, sick refugees. Another brave American charity doctor, Olga Stastny of Omaha, Nebraska, stepped into the breach. She established a system to register and temporarily care for refugees on the tiny barren Greek island of Macronissi. Within four days of her arrival, 5,000 refugees disembarked from the SS Ionia. Smallpox and typhus were rampant among the passengers. They had no water or food on board. Stastny and her staff assisted over 12,000 refugees in the next five months. All arrivals were bathed; vermin-infested hair was shaved then burned to stop typhus; remaining clothes were steamed and sterilized.

Susan Billington Harper, a scholar with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, writes and lectures about American humanitarianism in the Middle East.
Refugees waited in long lines to receive a 1,000-calorie daily diet. “Cooking for 6,000 people is no joke,” Stastny wrote. Stastny contracted malaria, and her chief assistant died of typhus fever. “By the end of June we had buried 796 in graves at one end of the island and passed the rest on to the cities of Greece,” she reported. Elliott and Stastny eventually returned to medical practices in the United States, disillusioned by the unwillingness of Western governments to protect Armenians and other victims of ongoing conflict in the region.

A replay today
There are now more refugees and displaced persons than at any other time in history. Though the process of international relief has been bureaucratized to a considerable degree, it’s not hard to find today’s equivalent of Elliott and Stastny. Not-for-profit organizations such as Doctors Without Borders, the White Helmets, and Speed School Fund support many heroic first responders, physicians, and teachers. Near East Relief operates today as the Near East Foundation. Private philanthropy still plays a vital role in reducing war-related suffering. Likewise, the inability of governmental authorities to end the chaos that is killing and wounding frantic innocents continues to be a tragic, but not surprising, reality.

Writer David Rieff counsels aid workers not to expect or seek utopian outcomes of “perpetual peace, the universal rule of law, or...a fairer world.” He urges, “Let humanitarianism be humanitarianism.” Charitable aid can still save lives, lift up victims, and relieve at least some of the misery that tyrants and failed politics often create. When relief workers imagine they can banish evil altogether, the result is often just to distract from humanitarian efforts, muddling outcomes.

Today, donors can provide much-needed help to people fleeing nightmares of war and suffering. A humble humanitarianism freed from “mission creep” is worth donor support. History teaches that those who brought aid and care for survivors generally did more good than those who imagined they could banish cruelty altogether by remaking the world into a progressive American paradise. Political failures have tormented the angry lands of the former Ottoman Empire for more than a century. Throughout those upheavals, tough, fearless, and dedicated humanitarians, including many Americans, managed to care for the hurting in spite of the worst kind of obstacles. That suggests possibilities for lifesaving good that still exist today.