

More Unimaginable Millions

Thought for the Day

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This week's big news is undoubtedly the outbreak of peace talks after more than 3 years of barbaric civil war in Syria. Yet most of us probably just shudder and move on, because it's a sad fact that human beings tend to suffer from the psychological equivalent of visual perspective: tiny things up close eclipse major matters abroad.

So while we're engrossed by whether £500 richer or poorer will affect September's referendum, more than 1 in 3 of Syrians have been displaced. It's reckoned that more than 100 000 are dead; 2.3 million have fled abroad, another unimaginable 14 million are homeless and starving in their own country.

As we mark the centenary of the First World War later this year, perhaps it's worth reminding ourselves that Britain has some responsibility for this. That war not only redrew the map of Europe, but also the Middle East, creating areas of British and French control that were then divided into artificial states literally by drawing lines on a map with little regard for the character of the local population.

The jingoists at the time called it "the war to end war". It may have ended empires and led to the League of Nations, but it also left at least 30 million dead, wounded, or missing. And it also fostered resentment amongst the defeated powers. In Europe the unresolved tensions led to the Second World War and the Holocaust; in the Arab world it contributed to the development of the dysfunctional states we see unraveling so painfully today.

Even in 1914 some people saw the irony – Lloyd George said "This war, like the next, is a war to end war." As Holocaust Memorial Day approaches on Monday, let's all hope and pray that these peace talks can do better