

Europe's Refugee "Crisis"*

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If you read or watched or listened only to the mainstream media in the North, you could be forgiven for believing that the current influx of refugees into countries of Europe is not just an important concern, but actually even the single biggest crisis in that continent. You might also think that the flow of desperate refugees escaping from terrible conditions is mainly confined to that region, and that their numbers are so large that the societies will be simply unable to cope, because of the hugely increased burden on basic infrastructure and facilities in those countries.

Every day television screens show images of people pouring into towns and cities, crowding up border crossings or landing at sea (if they are lucky) and filling up transport hubs in certain European countries. International and national newspapers carry stories of some compassion, along with greater instances of more xenophobic responses of local populations. Government leaders (particularly in eastern and central Europe) are shown declaring that their country cannot possibly take in so many people, many of whom may not even be "real" refugees but simply economic migrants. Borders are being reinforced and aggressively policed; walls and barbed wire fences are being put up; desperate groups of travellers are even being shot at in the attempt to prevent further influx.

Yet this tragic phenomenon that is receiving so much global publicity is but a small trickle in the huge flow of people displaced globally by wars and conflicts in the areas where they live. According to the [UNHCR](#), in 2014 alone, nearly 14 million people were forcibly displaced due to civil war or other violence. Most of these moved within their own country – 11 million people, who are internal refugees losing everything, and often retaining only the most uncertain of citizenship rights precisely because of the internal conflicts.

The 3 million who were cross-border refugees added to the estimated global total of 60 million displaced people, 19.5 million cross-border refugees and 1.95 million asylum seekers in 2014. Obviously in 2015 the numbers have gone up further, and the conflicts in many countries of origin have only intensified. But most of these displaced people – 86 per cent of them, in fact – are hosted by developing countries. The Least Developed Countries, with some of the lowest per capita incomes in the world and very poor conditions of infrastructure available to their own previously resident populations, were home to a quarter of the world's refugees in 2014.

Last year Turkey became the country with the largest number of refugees, with 1.59 million refugees. It was followed by Pakistan (1.51 million), Lebanon (1.15 million), Iran (982,000), Ethiopia (659,500), and Jordan (654,100). In terms of population, Jordan was the most affected, with 1 refugee for every 3 local residents, followed by Lebanon with 1 refugee to every 4 Lebanese. Some of the poorest countries in the world, like Chad and South Sudan, provide refuge to large numbers of displaced people who are significant in number in relation to the local population.

Put these huge numbers in the context of the much smaller number of people trying to enter Europe (still in their thousands), and there is really no comparison in terms of burden on the host society. This is especially so as all the countries of Europe (including those that see themselves as poorer and economically struggling at present) are far better off not only in terms of per capita income but also in terms of provision of basic amenities and services for the people.

Coping with large numbers of refugees is obviously much more difficult for poor countries. In areas that are already drought-prone, water-starved and with large hungry populations,

consider the burden of ensuring water and food access to many newly displaced people. Where medical facilities are already very inadequate, imagine trying to provide even minimal medical services to refugees who are probably in even greater dire need. In societies where even all the local children are not in school, think of what adding large numbers of refugee children who probably do not share the language and also are likely to be traumatised and so may require therapy, will entail in terms of public costs.

The material implications of having larger numbers of refugees are clearly being felt in many of these countries, whether in terms of increased rationing of electricity and water, or greater burden on health services, or pressure on other infrastructure. Yet we do not hear of these countries closing their borders on people who are desperately fleeing to save their lives, nor is it the case that rightwing tendencies in these societies have gained huge public support by attacking these helpless migrants. It is also significant that somehow the huge and growing numbers of refugees across the developing world are never treated as crisis situations by the global media.

So it is worth asking why the European response (and the US attempt to look away from the issues as one of no direct relevance to themselves) has been, in the main, so very churlish and self-obsessed. The most relevant question, of course, is of how the establishment in both the US and Europe has been able to deny any responsibility for the current movement of displaced persons across borders – and how complicit the mainstream media has been in this process.

At the end of 2014, according to the UNHCR, more than half (53 per cent) of all refugees worldwide came from just three countries: the Syrian Arab Republic (3.88 million), Afghanistan (2.59 million), and Somalia (1.11 million). Since the start of the current year, the number from Syria has increased greatly, and just the number of asylum seekers from Syria in the developed countries has more than doubled in the first six months of 2015 compared to the same period last year. Large numbers of refugees have also come from Iraq and Libya, all countries now devastated by internal conflicts arising from the clumsy western imperialist attempts to force political change in these countries through the use of external force.

Not for nothing have many observers like James Paul and [Vijay Prashad described](#) these unhappy people as “regime change refugees”, fleeing countries that are now in the throes of dreadful civil wars driven by very extremist forces, including those that are particularly oppressive to women. Yet the overt accountability of the governments of countries that went to war and thereby created these huge instabilities is certainly acknowledged by themselves, and rarely alluded to in the media coverage of all this. It is true that this is somewhere in the back of many minds: in recent weeks an official of one of the least welcoming East European countries [is reported to have asked](#) “Why should we provide homes for these refugees when we didn’t invade their countries?” Yet the essential culpability and therefore responsibility of those who did invade those countries is not pointed to when the issue of dealing with the refugees comes up. And so the leaders in the US and the UK, for example, can simply look the other way since the migrants are not washing up against their own shores.

The petty selfishness of western leaders – and, unfortunately, far too many in their societies – has thus been most thoroughly exposed. The horrific conditions and direct threats to life and security in the countries that people are fleeing; the extremely dangerous and life-threatening journeys that must be made (almost daily confirmed by the appalling accounts of deaths in transit); the knowledge of the highly precarious existence in largely unwelcoming countries of destination – all of these suggest that such migrants are truly desperate and deserve the greatest compassion. Yet this most basic human empathy has been sadly lacking for the most part.

Indeed Germany has been praised for its relatively generous response. Yet this too has been more churlish in recent weeks, and it pales into insignificance compared to the much greater generosity of countries that are far less materially equipped to handle such inflows, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Pakistan. Asylum seekers do not have an easy time anywhere, but the richer countries have without question been meaner, more oppressive and more restrictive in their dealings with them.

So then the question must be: why such a difference in social and public response? It is hard to think that this is largely because of racial or cultural differences alone, because the refugees do not come from homogenous societies, nor do they necessarily enter similar ones in other developing countries. One possible explanation could still be a cultural one, though: the deep penetration of the ideology of neo-liberalism, which celebrates individualism and generates a Darwinian sense of competition and struggle for survival, in which one's own success ultimately depends on someone else's failure. It is worth noting that even in Europe, the formerly socialist countries that have become the most eager adherents to "free market" principles have also turned to becoming the most aggressively rightwing, even fascist, in their approach to less fortunate outsiders.

It is as if all principles of social solidarity were thrown out along with any vestiges of economic socialism. Countries that have in addition been exposed to a long period of public austerity that has undermined living standards of the masses seem to be even more prone to such resentful swings. Sadly, the celebration of the market seems to have done more than generate patterns of unequal growth and reduced respect for human rights: it also seems to have undermined the basic principles of solidarity and ethical behaviour without which human societies will find it hard to function.

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