

# Europe's Refugee Predicament

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One of the most pressing issues of our time is forcibly displaced people worldwide, specifically refugees. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are more than 65 million forcibly displaced people in the world, more than 21 million of them are refugees. For UNHCR, this is the "highest levels of displacement on record." Since the outbreak of Arab uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2011, millions of people had to flee their homes due to raging civil wars, atrocities of their governments, threats of terrorism, and of ethnic or sectarian conflicts.

One of the grimmest of all human tragedies in the Arab uprisings milieu is in Syria, where more than 6 million people are internally displaced, another 5 million had to find refuge in countries like Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Germany. Given the sheer size and magnitude of the refugee crisis in our time, it is apt to call it a modern-day exodus. According to UNHCR, nearly 3 million Syrian refugees are in Turkey. On the other hand, as the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) recently stated, Germany received nearly 1.2 million refugees, the majority of whom are Syrians, during the European refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016. In 2016 alone, Germany spent €20 billion while Turkish government has recently

put the price tag of €23.5 billion for Syrian refugees since 2011.

National responses to the refugee crisis, however, are mixed. While countries like Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Germany accepted scores of Syrian refugees, countries like Hungary and Saudi Arabia, however, chose rather a negative approach to refugees, either limiting the influx and developing anti-refugee sentiments, or banning them entering to their country altogether at the very beginning respectively. In fact, UNHCR had helped to resettle 200,000 Hungarians escaped to Austria during the 1956 Hungarian Revolution. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia turned a complete blind eye to the plights of Syrian refugees despite its substantial meddling into Syrian civil war. Likewise, some developed countries like Japan also performed quite reticent in contributing to the global agenda on the refugees.

While accepting a huge number of refugees is a commendable act for countries like Germany and Turkey, it is important to note that there is of course a long list of issues and challenges. Ramifications of integrating large numbers of refugees to social, cultural, and economic life of a country are rather complex and challenging. On the one hand, the level and willingness of

refugees to adjust themselves to new environments, and embrace basic values of the host country would determine the level of their integration and adaptation. On the other hand, some of the domestic constituency in the host country may not be sympathetic to the idea of accepting refugees due to nativism, economic and cultural reasons. For example, there is a trend of rising negative sentiments among Turkish citizens that Syrian refugees would be given citizenship soon, and that refugee-owned businesses are not required to pay taxes, therefore being privileged over local businesses. According to a 2016 opinion poll conducted by Metropoll, a polling company based in Istanbul, 83 percent of people in Turkey were against the idea of granting citizenship to Syrian refugees while only 10 percent answered it affirmatively. These sentiments become more visible and agitated when local economic prospects are especially dim. Therefore, anti-refugee sentiments in part can drive host country's domestic politics, and put brakes on measures of refugee integration. European governments are facing a tricky challenge: How can they fulfill their moral obligations vis-à-vis refugees without thereby running the risk of a further strengthening of right-wing populist movements and xenophobia in their societies?

The refugee question is not a cause but rather a symptom or a result of a larger problem: Arab uprisings, as alluded above, are the prime driving force behind the swelling number of refugees in this region. Despite its initial good will of people who took to the streets demanding democracy, prosperity and dignity against the authoritarian regimes in the region, the revolts unfortunately yielded the erosion of the state apparatus, and public order in Arab states. The Arab uprisings eventually led to collapse of the state in countries like Syria, Yemen, and Libya. State collapse and pervasive instability for a significant period of time may generate the collapse of citizenship as well. Thus, people in these countries turn to their immediate identity groups like their sectarian or ethnic kin. The very idea of modern citizenship therefore fades, and ethnic and sectarian identities become the norm for daily conduct and relations. For example, what kind of social and economic engagements do Syrian refugees do in Turkey, and with whom? Do they generally converse and socialize with all Syrians or their ethnic/religious groups? How do host countries like Turkey and Germany reassure or build trust among incoming refugees on the idea of modern citizenship despite their terrible experiences in their country of origin?

Building further on the final analysis, there

is another major challenge that might augment and perpetuate refugee crisis in the future. The crises of legitimacy and governance in the MENA region seem to continue, and have the potential of unraveling even bigger crises in the years and decades to come. Therefore, dealing with the refugee crisis is one thing and an important one; but taking measures to prevent further collapse of states in the region would be crucial one. Current refugee crisis should be construed as an early reminder that Europe may face challenges of even bigger refugee flow in the foreseeable future due to chronic regional instability, weak state system, and legitimacy crises. Thus, the European Union in general, Germany in particular have vested interest in positively impacting on issues of democracy, governance, human rights, education, and economic development in the region.

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