

# Contemporary Refugee Issues in the EU and the Crises of Multiculturalism

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Brendan Cole\*

In reporting on the conflict in Syria, the media has concentrated on the refugee crisis as a key facet of the larger narrative. While the geopolitical ramifications of the conflict are pored over by political leaders, the more human consequences of this vast exodus of refugees have raised questions over the responsibility of the international community toward the millions who are fleeing. So far, it has fallen to Syria's immediate neighbors to bear the brunt of the exodus, with EU countries accepting relatively few. This has led to a discrepancy between a predominantly European call to help Syria's refugees - and how welcoming Europe is in practice. Added into the mix is the rise of anti-immigration sentiment in many European countries, where problems with the integration of immigrants is perhaps fuelling a reluctance to accept refugees. European governments are making public statements to their citizens about the rise of Islamism in Europe; the kind of anti-immigration protests seen in Germany over the last few months show how difficult it is for governments to square their humanitarian responsibilities with public doubts over the value of multiculturalism in their societies. This commentary enquires whether there is a degree of hypocrisy in the EU, given the gap between its professed concern for those fleeing violence and the help it actually offers, and asks whether this is likely to change.



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*How should Europe respond to the refugee crisis?*

A return home is at the forefront of the minds of London commuters as they scurry onto the Tube during rush hour. They may pay little notice to the advertisements plastered on underground tube stations, messages that pull no punches in portraying the plight of refugees escaping the conflict in Syria.

“She fled bombs in summer, but she can’t escape winter” is the brazen message from the children’s charity UNICEF; Save The Children’s campaign informs us that since the start of the Syrian uprising children are becoming a “lost generation”, the “forgotten victims” of the conflict who cannot be ignored.

Commuters in the British capital may have little in common with these war refugees, but as they return home from work each evening, they might do well to consider the plight of the people who may never see their homes again.

That is the thinking behind the call by charities for donations, money which can help the afflicted, the bereft and the bewildered, the number of whose victims may prove difficult for commuters in any European Union country to comprehend, such as the one million Syrian children now seeking refuge and trying to integrate into neighboring countries.

Just how wide that neighborhood spreads, and how neighborly it actually is, remains of key concern for governments and international bodies. The UNHCR says that more than 3 million have fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq, in addition to the 6.5 million who are internally displaced within Syria. Some 150,000 Syrians have sought asylum in the European Union, whose member states have pledged to resettle a further 33,000.<sup>2</sup> However, the European response is tiny in comparison with the 1.1 million that Lebanon, already bursting at the seams, has taken in.

This highlights a considerable discrepancy between a call to help refugees, with the European ‘welcome’ that charities believe is as cold as the winter now enveloping the region. In the last three days of November 2014, Turkey took in more Syrian refugees than Europe has in three years.

James Sadri, director of the Syria Campaign, says this is because politics is trumping humanity, and any sober analysis of the statistics shows they are at odds with Europe's heritage of accepting refugees fleeing violence. His campaign group emphasizes that Europe's refusal to accept refugees is 'a betrayal of our history', considering that the modern European continent was based on the principles of inclusion and justice, built from the ravages of two great wars.

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### *Refugee crisis at unprecedented levels*

Not since the second of those great wars has there been such a dire refugee crisis. The flow of refugees is also fed by crises in Iraq, the consequences of the fall of Gaddafi in Libya, and the rise of Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL). The sheer numbers who put their fates in the hands of indifferent gangs ferrying them from North Africa in the hope of a better life on the other side of the Mediterranean are adding to the masses queuing at the gates of the European Union.

Their reception is a question of politics. That is because EU governments taking in refugees must seek approval from their electorates, and within those, attitudes are changing. The increasing popularity and views of right-leaning parties such as the United Kingdom Independence Party in Britain, the Front National in France, the Party for Freedom in the Netherlands and the Freedom party of Austria can make accepting migrants from war-torn countries tricky.

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At a UNHCR pledging conference for the resettlement of refugees in December, it was made clear that resettlement numbers are still limited, with most European countries offering places in the low hundreds, and many EU states not pledging any places at all.

The concern among policy makers is that people are often not told the truth about how migrants will integrate. Former European commissioner for home affairs, Cecilia Malmström, has said that negative attitudes toward migration in Europe are influencing political decisions. This stems from xenophobia; the difficulties that migrants face include integration and hostility from local populations.

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The Migration Policy Institute Europe has welcomed recent discussions on how to develop an EU-wide policy on resettlement, while the Austrian government put forward a paper entitled ‘Saving Lives’ in October.

The document outlines how any policy would need to incorporate some agreement from EU member states as to how to ‘distribute’ the resettled refugees through the European Union. A number of different models for redistribution, known as ‘distribution keys’, have been put forward. This conversation will continue throughout 2015, although it is unclear whether an EU-wide policy would generate significantly greater levels of resettlement.

Migration Policy Institute director Elizabeth Collett said: “One of the reasons that resettlement is often so low within the European Union is because it can be difficult and costly. There are still a number of European countries, primarily in Central Europe, that have little experience with asylum, or hosting refugees in general.”

“Thus they have little existing experience or capacity to receive large numbers of refugees. In addition, some countries are experimenting with alternative means of offering asylum, from offering humanitarian visas, scholarship programs, through to allowing private sponsorship of resettlement for family members and others,” she said.

#### *Can the EU learn from the experiences of Lebanon and Egypt?*

With so few refugees entering the EU, both from Syria and North Africa, it is difficult to speculate about the European integration of migrants. Given the experiences of Egypt and Lebanon, culturally closer to Syria than anywhere in Europe, the prospects for refugees in the EU so far do not look promising.

A report by the group Refugees International highlights the difficulties faced by Syrian refugees in Egypt. They were stigmatized in the media; there were attacks on Syrian children on their way to school; and the authorities impeded the work of organizations by failing to approve the registration of international NGOs intending to set up programs for Syrian refugees.

In Lebanon, they fared somewhat better, but only initially. With the country already crowded, Lebanese authorities are increasingly referring to refugees as economic migrants rather than refugees in need of protection. Government ministries are considering whether to define those coming from regions of conflict as refugees in need of protection, and whether to term those who come from more stable areas as economic migrants. This has not been translated into policy yet but demonstrates what kinds of discussions are taking place.

The Lebanese public is starting to blame Syrian refugees for the country's woes, including declining wages, rising rents and strains on the health and education systems. Over the last two and a half years, Refugees International has found that the problems that refugees are facing there are still the same. There are questions around what they do once their basic needs are met and what prospects they have in terms of becoming self-sufficient. This requires policies that would allow them to work, receive an education and contribute to society.

The experiences refugees face in Lebanon and Egypt may not be comparable to Europe. Following the downfall of Mohamed Morsi as president, the Egyptian government, saw Syrians as connected with a Muslim Brotherhood past from which Cairo wanted to distance itself. In Lebanon, residents of a small country may more quickly come to resent the added burdens placed on their public services by refugees. However there is growing concern that integrating refugees into Europe could be problematic for other reasons.

This is because European governments are scrambling to respond to an increasing number of Western-born, radicalized jihadis going to Syria to fight against Bashar al-Assad or taking up the fight on behalf of Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL). European governments are focused on eradicating the threat of both home-grown terrorism, or that of fighters going to the Middle East, as well as those who are returning. As far as a governmental message is concerned, it is difficult to claim that you have your borders under control and square this with accepting people, however needy, from a region that is essentially in collapse.

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These processes fuel anti-Islamic sentiment in EU countries whose governments are struggling to formulate a response, making the process of accepting and integrating refugees from the region even more difficult. The British public, for instance, has been told that it is on high alert for a possible terrorist attack, and the suspicion surrounding people fleeing from that part of the world is great.

In the past two years, Germany has pledged to admit 30,000 Syrians on humanitarian grounds, a number that is higher than the quotas of the rest of Europe, Australia and Canada combined. The UNHCR has described Germany's humanitarian admission program as generous, suggesting that such initiatives, in which legal pathways to Europe for refugees are created, could help address the rising death toll along the Mediterranean Sea's human trafficking routes.

But taking in so many people in such a short time creates a challenge for the local municipalities that host the refugees. Germany's Federal Office for Migration and Refugees says it has spent around 520 million Euros on humanitarian efforts connected to the Syrian crisis, including building reception centers for refugees across the country.

This largesse has come at another cost. Just before Christmas, more than 17,000 people marched on the German city of Dresden protesting the "Islamification of Europe" as a wave of xenophobia sweeps the country. Supporters of Pegida – a growing group calling itself the "Patriotic Europeans against the Islamification of the West" has held weekly rallies around Germany against perceived rising immigration and "extremism" that started in October.

### *Europe's challenge*

Jasmin Fritzsche, the deputy director of the Swedish-based Centre for Refugee Solidarity, says it is within this difficult context that EU governments have to operate. While Germany has taken in more refugees than any other European country, it would take EU-wide political consensus to ensure the safe integration of refugees throughout the EU.

"This is always a problem when large numbers of immigrants come in, whether it be in Sweden, Germany, or France, there is

a huge problem of perception. The public don't differentiate between them and militants and fear is growing right now. They don't look at them as people in need, but as a possible threat. Lots of work has to be done to balance that perception that they pose a threat," she said.

Added into the mix is where exactly to place the refugees, she said. Often refugees are put in smaller towns in Europe, away from the big cities, in places where it is more difficult to live and in smaller communities which are less likely to give them a warm welcome. They often struggle to obtain social assistance.

Other barriers to integration are considerable, particularly for those who may have experienced trauma or bereavement.

Elizabeth Collett from the Migration Policy Institute says that refugees from certain conflict regions may also have low levels of education or literacy that might make adaptation to the host language or labor market far harder.

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"Whilst the decision to resettle is taken at national level, local authorities are responsible for finding housing, and supporting refugees beyond the first days of arrival. Ensuring that they have the capacity and resources to respond effectively is a critical challenge in many countries," Elizabeth Collett said.

So much for Germany, arguably the EU's most prosperous country. Bulgaria is the poorest of the EU's 28 member states, and it has struggled to cope with the arrival of nearly 11,000 people, most of them Syrian - even though they form only a tiny proportion of the 3 million Syrians who have fled the war since it began in 2011.

Boris Cheshirkov, spokesman for the Sofia office of the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR, told Deutsche Welle TV that within weeks, the situation became so dire that all the centers were overcrowded, people were sleeping up to 20 to a room, and that Bulgaria was completely unprepared to handle the influx.

EU countries such as these have until now been acting separately and there is not yet a collective EU-wide response to help refu-

gees integrate. This is because the EU has very limited ability to develop policies in the absence of strong commitment and willingness to engage on the part of national governments.

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Those advertisements on the London underground to help refugees do not yet include calling to open the UK's borders, and British sympathy may only extend as far as financial support. So far, the British government has only settled 90 refugees from the conflict, which Kate Allen of Amnesty International has described as "pitiful".

To this end, Amnesty, Save the Children in Europe, the Refugee Council and other leading charities have called on Prime Minister David Cameron to increase the number of Syrian refugees being settled in the UK. Their letter to the Independent newspaper applauded British aid to Syria but insisted that it was not enough, pointing out that historically, the UK has offered refuge to thousands at risk from war or oppression, reaching out to Vietnamese, Ugandan Asians and Kosovars.

However, 2015 is election year and Prime Minister David Cameron might see the need to delay any clear move to resettle refugees, wherever they are from, especially as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) is making inroads on Conservative Party support. This is because a key plank of UKIP's manifesto is opposition to immigration, in particular from Eastern Europe following the EU's expansion eastwards.

Although UKIP is focusing on immigration rather than refugees, the Tories will want to ensure that there is nothing that can add to UKIP's claim that Britain does not control its borders.

The narrative that Britain's public services are under strain from foreigners is one that will be played out in the run-up to the ballot in May, and it may not be politically expedient to offer any further



support, other than financial, to those fleeing conflict.

Political leaders in Britain and other parts of Europe will want to avoid a repeat of the protests that have beset Germany, and there may be reluctance and inertia within European capitals, at least in the short-term, to offer further resettlement opportunities. Ensuring the successful integration of those who have already arrived constitutes enough of a challenge.

The policies of European governments on immigration may be distinct from their policies on refugees, but amid heightened sensitivities over the challenges of multiculturalism and integration of foreigners in EU countries, they do risk becoming blurred in the eyes of some, making any future coordinated European response to refugees problematic.