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EUROPEAN REFUGEE CRISIS: THE RISE OF INTOLERANCE

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In the past few weeks Europe has been faced with a challenge of unprecedented magnitude. Refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from Syria and Iraq, have rushed in large numbers to European borders, and the numbers are rapidly increasing. More than 3,50,000 asylum seekers have arrived in Europe¹. The brutalities of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) have compelled people of West Asian countries, particularly Syria and Iraq, where ISIS has gained control of large portions of territory, to leave their homes and homeland. The European response to this crisis has ranged from largely positive to increasingly negative over the course of a few weeks.

Initially, the response of major European Union (EU) countries was overwhelmingly positive, barring a few Eastern European nations such as Hungary. Even Greece, with its severe ongoing economic crisis, opened its borders to refugees. Germany, which has now estimated a figure of 1.5 million refugees to arrive there by the year end², has shown immense empathy towards migrants. Images

of Aylan Kurdi, a three-year old Syrian boy whose body washed ashore in Turkey, created outrage against the inhumanity of the refugee crisis and sparked positive reactions among a majority of Europeans. This year alone, more than 2,600 people have died while attempting to cross the Mediterranean³.

What has brought on a spate of negativity from European states and citizens is the sheer numbers. The ever-increasing influx of Syrian and Iraqi refugees have raised alarm bells for the European states, which have grown increasingly concerned about sustaining aid along with ensuring that the local economic and social structures cope with the pressure and do not breakdown completely. At the same time, there is an increasing fear of an outbreak of anger from the European citizens who are concerned about the threat to their national resources, and who, as a consequence, are fast turning hostile. Some countries have taken extreme measures, such as Hungary, where refugees coming from Bulgaria, have been met with tear gas and water cannons. Hungary is also building an anti-

migrant fence along its borders with Bulgaria and Serbia.

A problem that compounds the refugee crisis and poses a major obstacle to any resolution is that refugees have specific choices in destinations for seeking asylum. In order to ensure a better social and economic environment which ensures safety and is conducive to the realisation of their aspirations for security, a better and prosperous life, they are moving to specific destinations such as Germany, France and the Scandinavian countries. This has led to a concentration of asylum seekers in these countries, creating immense pressure on their economies. Further, the influx of people from Syria, Iraq and Eritrea is only a recent development. Since before this, Europe has already been grappling with the refugee issue posed by the incursion of refugees from Central and South Asia, particularly Afghanistan, Pakistan and Bangladesh. The pressure on the economies of these countries is now being cited as a major reason for turning hostile to refugees.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has condemned the attitude of European nations and has called upon them to make better legal, economic and social provisions for the refugees. A new proposal has been approved by European Union interior ministers to relocate 1,20,000 refugees from Italy, Greece and Hungary across the continent⁴. This is seen as an attempt to avoid concentration of refugees in Western Europe.

Even countries which have played a major role in aiding the refugees have been voicing

concerns about the situation. Countries like Germany and Austria cannot manage the refugee crisis on their own and feel that all the countries of EU should be united in their efforts to help refugees. This is directly aimed at countries like Hungary and Poland where asylum seekers are being treated extremely harshly as these countries do not want to encourage them to come to their borders. Another approach being taken to this problem at present is to aid and fund refugee camps in West Asia including those in Jordan⁵ and Lebanon (presently hosting over 1.3 million refugees)⁶ in order to stem the flow of migrants to the European borders.

The appeal of Europe as a safe haven to people from Syria and Iraq as well as other areas afflicted by ISIS terror in West Asia and North Africa has compounded the refugee crisis that Europe is facing. For over a decade it has been struggling not only the economic challenges of providing asylum to refugees in such numbers, but also in attempting to indigenise and synchronise different national, religious, ethnic and linguistic identities with local politics and society. Some of these attempts have been viewed as authoritarian by refugees attempting to establish foundations in a foreign culture. The French government's banning of the veil among Muslim women and the turbans for Sikhs is case in point.

The more recent movements like PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident), which has been accused of openly propagating hatred against minority communities, especially Muslims, are cited as reactions to the

imagined “Islamisation” of European culture. Beginning with posts on social networking sites, this movement has progressed to rallies and occasional mob violence. Having been widely attacked for its communal propaganda, this particular movement had a setback when its leader Lutz Bachmann resigned. However, the very existence of such violent ideas and strong communal reactions precludes the possibility for cultural and religious co-existence. The emergence of such ideas and movements has further jeopardized the situation for refugees coming from West Asia, predominantly Muslim by faith.

The recent developments in Europe have raised concerns among the European citizens regarding the impact of the economic and social consequences of the refugee crisis. In particular, there is a strong fear of altering the social landscape. Countries in the Central European region, such as the Czech Republic, are currently going through an “anti-refugee hysteria”⁷. Slovakia, on the other hand, had earlier agreed to take in 200 refugees, that too, preferably Christian. Such attitudes towards the refugees, especially towards Muslim refugees from Syria and Iraq can easily translate into hostility towards them even if they are granted asylum in European countries. Indigenisation and localisation of refugees is not even being discussed right now as the entire focus is on allocation and relocation of refugees across Europe. These concerns have left both the people and the governments of European countries divided on the issue.

Tendencies of terrorist profiling of Muslims have only increased over the years. This problem is now compounded by the ongoing refugee crisis and the negative attitudes towards the refugees. These attitudes are visible on the government level in most European countries, justified by concerns of the economic implications of the crisis, and on the societal level, pertaining to extreme perceptions of Muslims. Further, concerns have been cited regarding the possibility of the ISIS fighters infiltrating European borders in the garb of refugees. The potential threat from such a development has been cited as a vital reason for the European states being opposed to granting refugees asylum⁸. In the face of such harsh attitudes, it is difficult to envisage a long term peaceful resettlement of refugees in Europe. Effective resettlement for refugees can only be predicated on complete elimination of racial and communal attitudes. European nations must realise that protection of their sovereign territories, domestic economies and cultural heritage does not necessarily translate into exclusion of non-Europeans from the same. They need to therefore respond to the humanitarian crisis with more sympathy, rather than giving in to local racial and cultural prejudices.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Rachel Clarke and Catherine E. Shoichet, “Image of three-year-old who washed ashore underscores Europe’s refugee crisis”, *CNN*, 3 September 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/09/02/europe/migration->

[crisis-boy-washed-ashore-in-turkey/](#) accessed on 6 October 2015.

² Alexander Sehmer, "Germany warns influx of 1.5 million refugees this year will place extreme burden on it", *Independent*, 5 October 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/migrant-crisis-germany-expecting-15-million-refugees-by-end-of-year-a6680386.html>, accessed on 10 October 2015.

³Op. cit.

⁴"Migrant Crisis: EU Ministers Approve Disputed Quota Plan", *BBC News*, 22 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34329825>, accessed on 23 September 2015.

⁵ UNHCR Country Operations Profile- Jordan, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486566.html>, accessed on 6 October 2015.

⁶ UNHCR Country Operations Profile- Lebanon, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486676.html>, accessed on 6 October 2015.

⁷ Rob Cameron, "Migrant Crisis: Why Central Europe resists refugee quota", *BBC News*, 22 September 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34313478>, accessed on 6 October 2015.

⁸Micheal Kaplan, "Refugee Crisis: ISIS Fighters in Europe? Islamic State Extremists Exploit Refugee Flow, Waiting To Launch Attacks, Militant Operative Says", *International Business Times*, 7 September 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/refugee-crisis-isis-fighters-europe-islamic-state-extremists-exploit-refugee-flow-2085787> accessed on 6 October 2015.