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Spending part of my sabbatical during this past academic year in Europe, I saw firsthand the impact of the refugee crisis, the largest human migration witnessed on the continent since 1945. Normally open borders began restricting access, a strong military presence became visible in train stations, and the issue of asylum-seekers became a major focus of public attention. Combined with horrific attacks in France, Belgium, and Germany by terrorists in subsequent attacks, apparently inspired by the so-called “Islamic State,” it has contributed to an alarming growth in xenophobia and Islamophobia throughout Europe.

This has not only resulted in electoral gains by far right-wing anti-immigration parties in recent elections, but one of the more disturbing aspects of the dramatic and disruptive decision by the British electorate to leave the European Union was how much of it was apparently rooted in anti-immigrant sentiment. Indeed, British authorities have reported an alarming spike in anti-immigrant hate crimes since the “Brexit” referendum.

Last year’s terrorist attacks in Paris, Brussels, Berlin, and Nice—which killed scores of innocent people—were not only tragic in themselves, but have resulted in an erosion of civil liberties, increasing Islamophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment, and the risks of further Western military intervention in the Middle East.

It is important to note, however, that terrorist attacks in Pakistan, Nigeria, and Iraq during this same period have killed even more people. Despite the fact that the victims were no less innocent and the results were no less tragic, they did not receive anything close to the media attention or sympathy of Westerners, including Americans. Part of the disparate response could be attributed to racism and part due to the fact that far more Westerners have visited France, Germany, and Belgium and can therefore identify more with the victims.

Another difference is that the perpetrators, although almost all European-born, are perceived by many Europeans to be outsiders. As in
the United States and Canada, most Muslims in Europe are the children or grandchildren of immigrants. Unlike the largely middle class and assimilated Muslim community in North America, however, European Muslims are disproportionately part of the underclass, often in segregated neighborhoods, facing discrimination in employment, harassment by police, and an uncertain future.

Indeed, many of those arrested in recent terrorist attacks fit the profile of African-American and Hispanic youth in the United States who have joined violent street gangs; in addition to and largely as a result of institutionalized racism, they have tended to be poor, unemployed, from broken homes, and with a history of drug abuse and crime. They are targeted for recruitment by terrorist groups who recognize that vulnerable alienated youth are susceptible to indoctrination and desperate to find community and a mission in life—or through death. Not only is Islam not the primary motivator for their terror, these recruits generally know little about the Quran or Islam.

The poverty and related social problems in Europe’s Muslim neighborhoods are not new. What is new is the dramatic increase in terrorist cells over the past dozen or so years—which coincides with the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq. The “Islamic State,” which was behind most of the recent terrorist attacks and foiled plots, was founded and led by Iraqis radicalized by the U.S.-led counterinsurgency war during the previous decade. The vast majority of European governments, including those of France, Germany, and Belgium, opposed the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, in part out of fear that it would create a backlash by radical Salafist movements in the Middle East that could spread to their own Muslim communities. Tragically, this is exactly what is happening. And, ironically, refugees resulting in part from such U.S. policies are now bearing the brunt of the resulting racist backlash.

Unlike those involved in recent acts of terror in Europe, a disproportionate number of the new refugees from Iraq and Syria, rather than being from a poor underclass, are well-educated doctors, lawyers, and professors as well as small-business people. Many of them were forced to flee their homes in urban areas of northern Syria and Iraq when forces of the “Islamic State” seized the area and imposed their totalitarian rule. Most of the poorer, less-educated refugees cannot afford the costs of the smugglers who charge exorbitant rates to transport them from refugee camps in southeastern Turkey to the country’s west coast and place them on boats to make the crossing to Greece to begin their travel north and west.

Data show that in both Europe and North America, refugees who become permanent immigrants have a lower crime rate than the native population. When allowed to integrate into their new countries, they tend to become productive citizens, start small businesses, and put a lot more money into the social system than they take out. The large numbers of professionals among
the Syrian asylum-seekers could be an asset to the aging European population.
The birthrate in most European countries is so low that, without immigrants, the continent would actually lose population, some countries by double-digits within the next thirty years.

As a result, these are among the least likely people to become terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. So far, the only case of a Syrian asylum-seeker being arrested for terrorist-related charges came to the attention of German authorities by other Syrian refugees. And the “Islamic State” and other extremist groups have not been reticent to publicize anti-Muslim statements by European politicians and incidents of anti-Muslim violence as a means of reinforcing their insistence that there is an inherent conflict between Islam and the West.

Nearly eleven million people (nearly one half of Syria’s population) have been displaced, with close to five million fleeing into exile. However, only about 350,000—barely 3 percent of the total—have attempted to enter Europe. Indeed, as much attention as there has been on the impact of the refugee influx into Europe, the fact is that Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan—which have less resources or infrastructure to deal with such a demographic burden—are caring for far greater numbers of refugees, both proportionate to their populations and in absolute numbers, than any European country. Turkey is hosting nearly 2.7 million refugees. Lebanon, whose total population is only 4.5 million, has taken in 1.5 million Syrians. Jordan (population 6.4 million) is hosting 1.3 million. Indeed, these countries and other Middle Easter states have taken in 95 percent of the Syrian refugees.

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees, the World Food Program, and other UN agencies were totally unprepared and are seriously underfunded. Although willing to spend billions of dollars fighting the “Islamic State” in Syria and Iraq, the United States and a number of other North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) countries are far behind their pledged contributions to refugee relief.

European fears of an eventual Muslim majority in their countries are completely unfounded. For example, even if all five million Syrian refugees came to Europe and all of them were Muslim, it would raise the Muslim population on that continent from its current 4 percent to only 5 percent. And even though the birthrate among European Muslims is slightly higher than non-Muslims, birth rates decline as the standard of living and education rises. Furthermore, Syrians are already well-educated and their birthrate is comparable to that of many European countries.

Influential anti-Islamic forces in the United States, such as Fox News, are doing their best to stoke this paranoia, however. In a 2015 segment headlined “Terrorists Inbound? Taking in Refugees Could Open Doors to Jihadists,” Fox News aired what they claimed to be a “new video” that showed...
young men on a European train shouting “Allahu Akbar” (“God is Great!”). The bizarre aspect of this reportage is that not only do plenty of non-terrorist Muslims chant that slogan (e.g., they could have been celebrating a soccer victory), the film clip was actually from 2010, long before the current refugee crisis began.

Many of the refugees crossing into Europe are from Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Somalia, all countries where the violence and turmoil are attributable primarily or at least in part as a result of U.S. military intervention. The breakdown of authority in Libya and the ensuing violence following the NATO-backed overthrow of the Gadhafi regime in 2011, for example, have not only forced many Libyans to seek sanctuary, but have made that country an available exit point for refugees and migrants from impoverished and conflict-prone parts of Africa.

Syrians constitute the largest group of refugees attempting to enter Europe, however. Large numbers are escaping from the savage bombardments and political repression of the Damascus regime, but perhaps at least as many are fleeing from the “Islamic State,” the Iraqi-led Islamist cult that was a direct outgrowth of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

As a result, it would not be unreasonable to assert that the United States is ultimately responsible for much of Europe’s refugee crisis. It would not seem unreasonable, therefore, to insist that Washington—which has been willing to expend massive amounts of resources to promote war in the Middle East—be willing to provide even a modest proportion of that in support for its victims.

Despite this, the Obama administration has agreed to admit only 10,000 of the refugees, leaving other countries to face the burden of dealing with the consequences of U.S. policies. In one sense, however, this is not new. The United States is still deporting Central Americans and Mexicans fleeing north to escape the impact of other U.S. policies, including the Cold War–fueled violence of the 1980s and subsequent neoliberal economic policies and the militarized drug wars.

Despite an elaborate two-year twenty-step vetting process, Republican leaders—including new President Donald Trump—have falsely claimed that the Obama administration allowed “tens of thousands” of “unvetted” refugees to enter the country. The insistence that such refugees might actually be sympathetic to some of the very forces they are fleeing parallels the U.S. rejection of many thousands of Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler’s Germany on the similarly absurd grounds they might be Nazi spies. Among the German Jewish asylum-seekers rejected during the late 1930s was the family of Otto Frank, whose daughter Anne—author of the famous posthumously published diary—died in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.
The response in Europe to the wave of refugees has varied. The conservative German government of Chancellor Angela Merkel has welcome nearly 600,000 asylum seekers while other countries, such as Hungary and Croatia, have only allowed refugees to pass through en route elsewhere, even rejecting suggested quotas by the European Union (EU). Regardless of the policies of individual governments, there have been many outstanding examples of human compassion. Thousands of Greeks, despite struggling under desperate economic conditions themselves as a result of EU-imposed austerity measures, have been extraordinarily generous.

In 1956, when 200,000 Hungarians fled their country following the Soviet invasion and became refugees seeking asylum, the world opened its arms. Today, however, Hungary’s right-wing government is engaging in severe repression against refugees seeking asylum there. They have insisted that what it calls “illegal migrants” are after Hungarian jobs, are security threats, are possibly allied with the “Islamic State,” and likely to “threaten our culture.” Such racist positions have encouraged a number of cases of immigrants and even ethnic minorities being attacked, and the government has engaged in wholesale deportations of refugees. Despite this, thousands of Hungarians have donated food and clothing to assist the refugees and pro-asylum protests have taken place in a number of cities. A Jewish youth organization, made up largely of descendants of former deportees from the Nazi era, has hosted fundraisers for Muslim refugees. A referendum in support of the government’s policy of rejecting the EU’s suggested quota for refugee acceptance did not pass when a majority of voters ended up boycotting the ballot measure.

Meanwhile, Pope Francis has called for every Catholic parish on the continent to provide support for at least one refugee family. Indeed, the outpouring of support throughout Europe has been inspiring.

One of the ironic effects of the terrorist attacks has been increasing advocacy by some of the more hawkish elements in both Europe and the United States for increased Western military intervention in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. That, however, would simply play into the hands of extremists, who would try to portray themselves as the defenders of the Islamic world continuing the battle against Western imperialism they have been waging since the Crusades. This would not only likely increase the number of refugees, but increase their ranks further and the vicious cycle of violence would continue.

It is not surprising that the majority of scholars and analysts of Middle Eastern origin living in the United States and Europe have been among the most skeptical about Western military intervention in the region. While highly cognizant of the humanitarian disasters unfolding in the greater Middle East, they recognize that there are no simplistic military solutions
to complex political, economic, and social problems. Among the advantages of the more diverse societies emerging in Europe and North America is the opportunity to hear from perspectives that challenge the jingoistic and simplistic understanding of these countries and their suffering. It would behoove us to listen.

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