

From the United Nations: REFUGEES

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It is heartbreaking watching the stream of refugees fleeing the war in Syria on TV. It has awakened in me (Sylvain Ehrenfeld) the memory of being a refugee coming to the US from Belgium a few months before the Germans invaded and saved me from being a candidate for extermination.

This crisis in Europe has promoted and provoked a range of responses from Germany's decision to accept many refugees to the anti-immigration attitude in Hungary sealing their borders. The crisis has been going on for a number of years. However, attention is focused on Europe. Yet, most of the Syrian refugees have been taken in not by Western countries but by Syria's neighboring states: Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. Lebanon has about one million, Jordan 630,000 and Turkey two million. The refugees mostly live in camps. The capacity of these countries has been overwhelmed. This situation has been written about but not covered as dramatically as the situation in Europe. WHY?

The recent **Annual Global Trends Report** by the UN refugee agency (UNHCR) states that the worldwide human displacement is at an all time high. The number of forcibly displaced persons at the end of 2014 (and maybe more now) was a staggering 60 million, half of whom are children. The report indicates the flow of refugees results from 15 conflicts: eight in Africa (Libya, Mali, South Sudan), three in the Middle East (Syria, Iraq and Yemen), one in Europe (Ukraine), and three in Asia. The worst currently is Syria.

Throughout history, people have moved fleeing persecution, war, famine, or natural disasters. Some massive examples:

- Half a million **Irish** came to the US to escape starvation and disease (1845-1850) with millions more by the end of the century. Many **Italians** came to the US to escape poverty and natural disasters in southern Italy. About two million **Jews** from Central and Eastern Europe arrived in the US between 1880 and 1920. Later the number skyrocketed after Russia erupted into deadly anti-Jewish riots and systematic discrimination against the Jewish population.
- A particularly horrible example of mass migration stemmed from is the partition in India upon independence from Britain. Violent divisions between the subcontinent's Hindu and Moslem communities led to the partition plan dividing the area into India and Pakistan. Many millions were eventually displaced and one million killed in the sectarian violence that followed partition. In total, as many as 9 million Moslems migrated from India to Pakistan and over 5 million, Hindus and Sikhs, migrated to India.
- Another example is the Great Migration of 6 million African Americans from the rural South in the US to the cities in the North from 1916 to 1970. They were driven from their homes by a lack of economic opportunities and harsh segregationist laws. They took advantage of the need for industrial workers in the North. While they found work in the North they also experienced widespread racism and prejudice in the North as well.

The media has created confusion in the use of the words *refugee* and *migrant*. Refugees are people forced to flee their home countries because of armed conflict or persecution. Migrants are people who choose to resettle to another country in search of a better life. Refugees are protected by International Law. The 1951 refugee convention defines who is a refugee and outlines their basic rights.

Absorbing many refugees in European countries will be difficult and produce a backlash—fueling the rise of Europe’s right wing. The anti-immigrant sentiment is in many ways anti-Islam. Often this religion is associated with terrorism. The recent terrorist attack in Paris will probably increase the support of the right wing. Poland has elected one of Europe’s most right wing parliaments. The Danish People’s party and the Swedish Democrats—both anti European Union and anti-immigration—have gained huge support.

In spite of the difficulties of the refugee crisis does Europe benefit or lose? The World Bank in a major new report claims that the current flow of refugees will ultimately, if handled properly, have a positive effect on the economy. If countries with ageing populations and declining numbers of people of working age can create a path for refugees to participate in the economy, everyone will benefit.

Many of the refugees are young and educated and will work hard and contribute more in taxes than they consume in social services. Money for social services is important with rising numbers of older people.

Not everyone agrees. The British home secretary in a speech at the Conservative party conference said that mass migration has close to zero economic upside. The effect of refugees will vary from country to country. For example, in Greece 25% of the population are out of a job, whereas Germany needs workers.

Refugees will also contribute to the culture. Genetically, refugees will create families within the countries leading to a more varied and stronger gene pool, known as hybrid vigor. The transition will be difficult but it is the right thing—as well the smart thing—to do.