LIBERAL STUDIES

Europe and its Refugees Paralyzed by the Emotion of Fear

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In an essay titled "The Clash of Emotions" (*Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2007), nine years ago, Dominique Mossi argued that there existed an emotional clash of views across the globe.

For instance, Europe and the U.S. were afflicted by an 'emotion of fear', propelled by fears of the 'other' and anxieties about loss of identity. Europeans, Mossi argued, were fearful that radical Islamists would take over their lands, and use them for terror basing and targeting purposes. The Madrid bombings of 2004, the London bombings of 2005, the terror attacks in Paris that targeted the Charlie Hebdo office in January 2015 and multiple terror attacks across Paris in November 2015, the Brussels bombings in March 2016, and the Nice terror attack in July 2016, have further intensified such European fears.

On one side, Europeans are afraid of a loss of control over their land, their identity and in this process, their everyday security by the growing presence of Muslims in their midst. On the other, Europe is not perceived as a stellar example of successful integration with the newly arrived immigrants or refugees; thereby principally, it can be viewed as flawed in multicultural existence. Into such a context is injected the current steady and massive inflow of refugees from conflict affected areas (predominantly Muslim) in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Syria. The resulting explosive crisis was hence imminent and to be expected.

As conflicts raged in these countries largely as a result of U.S. and European interventions in their internal matters, many from these harassed populations

are fleeing to Europe, for refuge. More than a million refugees, seeking asylum, entered Germany, facilitated by its Chancellor, Angela Merkel's "open door policy." Hungary was second, with more than 177,130 asylum seekers in 2015. Italy and Greece have received thousands of asylum applications since 2014. There are thousands of unaccounted for refugees who might have entered Europe illegally. The route that has been followed is mostly via Turkey, crossing the Mediterranean Sea into the Greek islands onto Hungary and Germany. Topping the refugee population were Syrians with 28 per cent, followed by Afghans (14 per cent), Iraqis (9 per cent), Nigerians (8 per cent), etc. It has been reported that 3,211 refugees have died in 2016 during the arduous and life threatening journey from Turkey to Europe by sea. In 2015, UNHCR estimates puts the total number of accounted for refugees in Europe at 1,015,078, while the numbers have actually gone down in 2016 (updated till September) to 300,126. Based on 2016 figures, out of the total number of refugees, 54 per cent were men, 28 per cent women, and 16 per cent children.[1] Most often, the women had a tendency to follow after the men in their family had succeeded in procuring asylum status.

Resistance to Refugees

When the refugee crisis first started in 2014–2015, Germany's Angela Merkel adopted a liberal policy of accepting the highest number of refugees in Europe. Her refugee policy was, however, resisted by members of her own party, the Christian Democrats as 10,000 Syrian refugees arrived everyday in Germany. These were followed by arson attacks on refugee shelters and rise of Neo-Nazism and the far right within Germany. The situation reached a tipping point when on 31 December 2015, on New Year's Eve, nearly 1000 drunk men, of Arab and North African origin, were involved in a mass sexual assault on women at the Cologne Central Station. This incident led to increased anxiety across Germany and heightened the anti-refugee/migrant sentiment.[2]

The biggest security concern, however, which has emerged in Europe is that of terrorist groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and al-sham (ISIS) utilizing the refugee flow across open borders to infiltrate Europe with terror cells and carry out terror strikes. A 16 year old Syrian refugee was arrested in Germany on 21 September 2016 on the grounds of alleged links to ISIS. Similarly, in the November 2015 attacks on Paris, fake Syrian passports were found on one man who blew himself up at the Stade de France stadium. It appears, Ahmad-al-Muhammad, entered Europe via the Greek island of Leros, posing as a refugee on 03 October 2015. Along with him was Mal-Mahmod, who also blew himself

up outside the Stade de France. Both arrived along with other Syrian refugees. While the other Paris terrorists were French and Belgium nationals, the spot light on the potential threat emanating from refugee flows into Europe, infiltrated by ISIS recruits, cannot be refuted and have grown potent. As a result, the climate in Europe has turned against accommodating refugees from the Middle East mainly due to a fear of the spread of radicalism but also due to concerns of changing the demographics and democratic values of Europe. Countries like the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, are strictly opposing the quota system proposed by Merkel to distribute the 160,000 asylum seekers across the 28 nation EU bloc. Slovakia's left-wing Prime Minister, Robert Fico, has declared that Islam "has no place in Slovakia."[3] Hungary will be conducting a referendum on 02 October to determine whether the country supports the EU's quota system for refugee intake. Its Prime Minister, Viktor Orban, has termed migrants 'poison'.[4] This stance is similar to that of the U.S. President-elect, Donald Trump, quoting lines from the jazz song, "The Snake" referring to Muslim migrants to the U.S.[5] Thus, all these anti-refugee sentiments have provided fuel to far right anti-immigrant parties in Europe.

The U.K.'s exit from the EU, through a popular referendum in June this year, was partly caused by a fear of refugees/immigrants flooding the UK, vindicated by EU policies. According to a PEW survey conducted in 2016 on European attitudes towards refugees, 59 per cent of people surveyed across the 10 top EU countries with refugee flow were concerned that this would lead to an increase in domestic terrorism. For instance, Hungary polled 76 per cent, while Germany polled 61 per cent. The survey preceded the terror attacks in Brussels and Nice. Many also felt that refugees were a burden as they took jobs and social benefits earmarked for citizens. Significantly, the PEW survey found that negative views of Muslims were tied to negative views of the refugees. So, religion was a major determining factor for perception on refugees. Europeans, in general, did not view growing diversity, as benefiting their countries.[6] This was actually in sharp contrast to Americans where 58 per cent believed growing diversity made the U.S. a better place to live in.

Even within Sweden, which was perceived as the most generous when it came to welcoming refugees, the mood has altered after Sweden was expected by the EU to accommodate more than 190,000 refugees into a population of 9.5 million. The Swedes blamed this growing aversion to refugees due to an intense stress on their state system, caused by the 10,000 refugees coming in everyday, when it was at its peak in October 2015.

The Push and Pull Factor

So, what has propelled thousands of refugees to stake everything to travel to Europe for refuge? For one, countries like Germany and Sweden were welcoming in the beginning. Many of these refugees, devastated by conflict in their homeland, were genuinely fleeing the ravaged conditions back home. So, there were both push and pull factors. When Merkel announced that Germany would welcome refugees and rehabilitate them, it led to thousands making the journey. Most saw countries like Hungary only as a conduit, with the hope of making it to Germany. So, by being so welcoming, and declaring a policy of "open door", Merkel started a movement of Syrians, devastated by civil war, to travel to Germany. Many within the EU now blame her for undoing the EU project of 'open borders', forcing other countries to accept migrants they do not want, as well as strengthening UK's anti-EU sentiment. Despite this, her legacy of being compassionate to millions of people in dire conditions has cemented her place in history, in an otherwise controversial past of Germany's history. There has been growing criticism against her directed by her own ministers. Yet, Merkel's refugee policy, as explained by her chief of staff, Peter Altmaier rings of pragmatism. If Germany were to close off its borders, it would lead to a demise of Schengen, would overrun Greece with refugees, and destabilize countries like Jordan and Lebanon, already hosting 2 million refugees. Ironically, when Merkel was not seen as doing enough for refugees, she was criticized as "cold hearted"! This was clearly visible from her response to Reem Sahwil, who had fled to Germany from Lebanon, at a town meeting in the northern German city of Rostock. And yet, when she opened up German doors, mobs threatened to lynch the refugee shelters that had cropped up across Germany. Some point out that it's the Chancellor's Christian roots of empathy and compassion while growing up in East Germany behind a fence during the Cold War that has influenced her refugee policies. Yet, millions of refugees have threatened to cost Merkel her chancellery even as the German population is resisting and countries like Hungary have built a fence, and to top it all, the UK has exited the EU.

There are many who go on to argue that compared to Lebanon, a country of 4 million, taking on 1.2 million Syrian refugees, Europe, a prosperous region in the world, does not face any refugee crisis. Europe's total population is 740 million; the refugee flow reached its peak last year with 1.3 million, but has dropped down to 300,000 till September 2016. Hence, refugees constitute a mere 0.027 per cent of the population, and this figure cannot possibly unravel the European project as some have alleged.[7]

ISIS Sleeper Cells

The rise of anti-refugee sentiments in Europe has more to do with terrorism, and Islam's influence in creating radical ideology than the actual refugee influx. This sentiment received further traction due to the multiple terror attacks in Europe, as well as the radical ideology propagated by ISIS. The cause of Muslim refugees into Europe is not helped much by the fact that many second generation European Muslim youth have been attracted by ISIS ideology, and have travelled to Syria to join the terrorists groups. France witnessed 1700 of its nationals join ISIS, whereas Germany and the U.K. saw 760 of their nationals join ISIS. ISIS has directed its propaganda and recruitment videos at drawing foreign fighters and resources to its cause. For instance, in one of its videos, a Canadian named Andre Poulin alias Abu Muslim al-kanadi is seen luring youth from the West to come join ISIS. Titled "The Chosen Few of Different Lands",[8] the video is crafted to attract western Muslim youths to ISIS. ISIS and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and his self-styled "Caliphate" aims to instigate the religious sentiments of their target audience, to gain support for the state that they seek to establish.

The terror attacks in Paris, Brussels, Nice, and the arrest of ISIS sympathizers in Germany have raised an alarm among Europeans and escalated their fear of Islam and its laws in their land. This fear is articulately visible in the banning of the 'burkini' by French cities especially after the Nice terror attacks. The 'burkini' is a full length swimsuit worn especially by Muslim women as it covers the entire body except the face, and confers to the religious code of 'no skin show." It was designed by an Australian Lebanese woman, Aheda Zanetti, in 2004, keeping in mind the unique requirements of Muslim women. Since its imposition in Nice, France, where authorities argued that wearing any clothing that showcase religious beliefs is traumatic to people in the aftermath of the Nice terror attacks, a Court in Nice has now designated the ban as 'unconstitutional'. Yet, the debate on whether it should be banned continues to rage on and is primarily fueled by the association of Islam with the terror attacks. There are fears in France, the country with the largest Muslim population in Europe, that the Islamic expression of religion or its laws, the rise of ISIS and radical Muslim youths, is a direct threat to liberal values that countries like France have fought so hard for over the centuries. However, banning the 'burkini', instead of curtailing the rise of radical views within France, would surely encourage more rebellion, and a deeper desire to showcase ones religion, in order to assert one's right to religion. It also offers potent material for propaganda by ISIS to draw recruits by demonstrating, now with facts, how French Muslims are treated in Europe.

To be sure, ISIS has succeeded in infiltrating the very routes that refugees take to flee the conflicts in Iraq and Syria to Europe. It is difficult to perform background checks on refugees as most systems in their own countries have collapsed or their documents are not complete. As a result, checks on prospective refugees and asylum seekers from war ravaged Syria or Iraq cannot be carried out, and most of them reach Europe where the first realistic checks are actually carried out. Given the perception that Syrian passport holders are viewed favorably in Europe for asylum, there has been a growing market of forged Syrian documents.[9] And last but not the least, given the geographic location, it is easier for refugees from Syria or Africa to travel by sea and land to Europe than it is to the U.S. For instance, the US settled about 10,000 Syrian refugees in 2016, a miniscule figure compared to that in Europe. Moreover, those applying for refugee status to the U.S. have to apply through the U.S. consulates in Jordan, Lebanon or Turkey and the vetting process can take up to two years. While the Obama administration pledged to increase the refugee quota from 85,000 to 110,000 in 2017, it is not clear how many of those are reserved for refugees from Syria.

Significantly, the NATO commander, U.S. General Phillip Breedlove stated that ISIS is "taking advantage of the paths of least resistance, threatening European nations and our own",[10] by using the refugee route, and spreading inside Europe. These fears were echoed by *Frontex*, Europe's border control agency in a report titled *Risk Analysis for 2016*. Frontex indicated that ISIS is taking advantage of the ongoing refugee crisis to infiltrate Europe by using fake documents. The report stated that "the EU external borders are confronted with three major challenges: an unprecedented rise in migratory pressure, an increasing terrorist threat and a steady rise in the number of regular travelers."[11] The report stated that *Frontex* detected 1.8 million illegal entries into the EU in 2015. It also stated that foreign, fighter recruits, coupled with migrants, is a direct threat to EU's security, as clearly shown by the terror attacks in Paris in November 2015.

Why the large refugee flows in 2014 and 2015 but a visible decrease in 2016? Notwithstanding the terror threats, the majority of migrants and refugees from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, and Syria are genuine cases of people fleeing a life of conflict and insecurity. When Germany declared it's "open door" policy, or when Macedonia legalised a 72 hours stay for those who sought international protection, the flow of people from the conflict areas multiplied, especially via the eastern Mediterranean route between Turkey and Greek islands, crossing over to the Hungarian border onto Germany. The onerous journeys

undertaken by Syrians and others, to Europe for asylum, are fatal many a times as was witnessed when 71 people were found dead in a lorry that travelled from Hungary to Austria in August 2015. Moreover, smugglers involved in transporting people would stop at nothing to earn money, including risking the lives of their customers, the refugees. The huge flow of refugees and migrants have thus tested and overwhelmed the EU border control agencies, and as a result, most of the EU countries have reintroduced internal border control. The Frontex report, in its scenario section, forecasted that the EU would adopt more restrictive policies, as well as limit migration in the future.[12]

It is interesting to note that those outside the EU view the present refugee crisis as some form of *karma* (law of consequences) that EU is now experiencing. While the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orban has described the refugees as 'poison', Tabish Khair views EU's refugee policies as racist; from his point of view, refugees are a consequence of EU's interventions in conflicts in Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria. These interventions spread all-round misery in countries like Iraq and Libya, and misery, as per the Karmic law, spreads right back.[13] Khair points out that "the involvement of these Western governments in the wars…created these refugees"[14] in the first place.

Demise of an Inclusive EU

The refugee crisis has hit at the very heart of the European project; common borders and a union of different 'polities' coming together for augmenting free movement of labor and capital, with aspirations of a stronger union with regard to defense and foreign policies. However, the divergent policies of Germany, Italy, Austria, Hungary, on the refugee crisis, have clearly indicated that the EU simply has not been able to rise to the task of a common response, when the first major crisis hit its shores. The fear of ISIS, using the refugee route by taking advantage of EU's open borders, has intensified calls for upending 'open border policies' in favor of more controlled internal borders in the Schengen area. This very act nullifies the idea of an open EU. The fear that even one ISIS recruit could pass onto EU areas along with a million refugees, is greater in the EU public imagination, since it threatens the security that EU member-states have built for themselves. It is indeed ironic that the open borders within the EU that the countries prided themselves upon, heralding a post-modern age, and hoping to incept that idea into other regional entities like ASEAN countries, seems to have been its undoing as we see images of desperate Syrians, Afghans, Iraqis, Eritreans, at borders that now showcase barbed wires and a major border police presence.

The open policies of some of the EU countries like Germany and Sweden have internally been challenged by their own populations, and this has resulted in anti-migration 'far right' parties. To be noted is the fact that Germany did accept thousands of refugees, and settled them in the country though the 'goodwill' of its population ran dry much before the 'Cologne' horror against women on 31 December 2015, and the rise of ISIS recruits within the country. When refugees arrived in Dresden, Germany, huge protests broke out mid-2015, leading to the founding of Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West (PEGIDA) and there was a gradual increasing of arson attacks on refugee centers.

Europe, as it stands today, is divided at its very core. There are those who are in favor of a more open EU, but the rise of far right governments based on fears of immigration especially from the Middle east indicate that a future EU will become more closed with its borders. This trend will become stronger as more and more EU citizens express fear of 'Islamisation' of their countries. This concept of 'Islamisation' is interpreted in European countries as a direct assault to their secular, democratic systems, based on a shared sense of belief, ecology and identity. Islamic laws, that imposes restrictions on dress, especially for women, are viewed as a threat to equality and freedom.[15]

The EU division on refugees is a clear indication that both sides have not been able to accommodate the reasonable fears expressed by those who believe that their state systems will be fundamentally changed by refugees who come from a very different value system vis-a-vis the moral obligation to welcome those in dire conditions. For instance, secular France banned the 'burqa' that represents religious 'gender' based discrimination to the French in 2011. Yet, there are voices within France that view this ban as an affront on individual liberty. The rise of 'nationalism' within EU countries vis-à-vis the refugee crisis may be termed as racism by some, but it also represents a deep seated fear that refugees from the Middle East are perceived to cherish a different value system that is a threat to EU freedoms, and the state systems which Europeans hold in high regard. This in turn, results in support for more authoritarian leaders, who the general population view as capable of safeguarding their values and freedoms.[16]

The European refugee crisis has changed the EU as we know it. It has resulted in member-countries contemplating leaving the EU, as its policies are increasingly perceived as detrimental to the liberal democratic political orders that have evolved in the member-states. We have already witnessed the U.K.'s exit. Terror attacks in France and Belgium have not helped the cause of refugee

intake there, as well. The rise of radicalism amongst EU's Muslim population, especially the younger generations, who are increasingly adopting the ISIS ideology, have further added fuel to these fears. In the near future, the EU member states will establish stronger border mechanisms, as well as become more nationalistic, as they begin to view their individual identities and state systems under a potential threat from the millions of new refugees arriving at their shores. As a consequence, the currently cosmopolitan EU will be replaced by several, individual, nationalistic member states that would obviously place their own national interests and politics above the EU.

** The views expressed in this article are solely that of the author.

Notes

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