

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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The 2015 Refugee Crisis: Realities and Solutions

The visual images and the numbers are staggering: Hundreds of thousands of desperate people are fleeing the Middle East. According to the UN refugee agency, 53% are from Syria; 14% from Afghanistan; 7% from Eritrea; and 3% each from Pakistan, Nigeria, Iraq and Somalia. About 72% are men; 13% women; and 15% are children. Although most are fleeing war, some are fleeing poverty; and the majority of them are Muslim. The bulk of them are headed for Europe, principally seeking refuge in Germany and the Scandinavian countries. The total number of refugees or economic migrants from the nations above is in the millions. The Syria civil war alone has produced 4 million refugees, most of whom have fled to Jordan or Lebanon. But, increasingly they are heading for Europe where they hope to find prosperity, stability and hope. It is the largest humanitarian refugee crisis in the Mediterranean-European area since World War II, and the European Union, and to some extent the United States, need to solve this crisis. [The wealthy Persian Gulf states and Saudi Arabia apparently want little to do with the refugees. Russia seeks to expand its influence in the Middle East by sending ever increasing amounts of armaments and advisors to Syria. It wants nothing to do with these refugees. Indeed, its policies are creating more refugees!! China has no interest in solving the crisis either.]

The Economist recently argued perceptively that policymakers in Europe especially need to think about three groups: “refugees, economic migrants and voters at home.” [1] Because of the Syrian civil war, Syrians constitute the largest contingent of asylum-seekers in Europe. Under terms of the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees, they meet the criterion of “well-founded fear of persecution.” In many ways, this is a moral issue for the world, and ending the Syrian civil war must be a part of the solution for ending this crisis. But that is easier said than done. [2] Economic migrants are a totally different group. These are individuals who are fleeing from poverty, or simply seeking a more prosperous life for themselves and their children. Mostly, these migrants are seeking better jobs and a better way of life. Nations of the world have legal processes in place to accept them into their countries, but, for the most part, they are getting on the same boats and the same trains as the refugees. It is part of the fluid and chaotic situation currently unfolding. It takes time and it takes the established legal processes in place to sort out the difference between refugees and economic migrants. However, as *The Economist* notes, “. . . the fundamental point is that Europe needs economic migrants. It has too few workers to pay for its citizens’ retirement and to provide the services they want. Migrants are contributors to the public purse. They inject economic dynamism. They are, almost by definition, self-starters.” [3] The voters in the European democracies (and the United States) are concerned about the initial public outlay to cover the immediate costs of housing,

schools and health care for these newcomers to their nations. Further, there is the concern that these newcomers will take jobs. Finally, there is the perilous fear that some might even be terrorists. This crisis has moral, legal and humanitarian dimensions to it. It will not be easy to resolve. At the end of the day, most will not be pleased with how this is resolved.

Walter Russell Mead, professor at Bard College and resident scholar at the Hudson Institute, offers a deeper understanding of this crisis. He argues that it is the failure of two civilizations. He writes: “The Middle East and Europe are both facing cultural and political problems that they cannot solve. The intersection of their failures and shortcomings has made this crisis much more destructive and dangerous than it needed to be—and carries with it the risk of more instability and more war in a widening spiral.”

1. First of all, regarding the Middle East, this crisis is more than just the breakdown of two nation states—Syria and Libya. One hundred years after the Ottoman Empire was dismembered after World War I, the Middle East (with the exception of Israel) has failed to build economies that allow people to live with dignity, and has failed to build modern political institutions. Instead, the Middle East still seethes with the bitter sectarian and religious hatreds that have characterized the region for hundreds of years. Further, the Arab world has tried many ideological solutions to its problems: the liberal nationalism of the early 20th century; the socialist nationalism of Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt; and the rigid authoritarianism we see collapsing today in the region. Finally, one cannot ignore the total failure of Islam to solve the challenges of the entire Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood, founded in the early 20th century, is an abject failure, as are the various terrorist organizations of the region. Each has done nothing but foment death and destruction. The current nihilistic, violent ISIS is a monstrous tragedy, for it promises nothing but a totalitarian caliphate built on the most fanatical interpretation of sharia law. As Mead argues, “we see a crisis of confidence in the very structures of Middle Eastern civilization, including religion . . . [The fanaticism of ISIS] is a sign of crisis and not of health in religious life and the very violence of radical Islam today points to the depth of the failure of traditional religious ideas and institutions across the Middle East.”
2. Western Europe, embodied in the European Union (EU), has an identity crisis. The actual meaning of the EU has been lost—at least it appears to be. Mead writes: “Europe today often doesn’t seem to know where it is going, what Western civilization is for, or even whether or how it should be defended.” The political, economic and especially the religious foundations are ridiculed, rejected and thereby undermined. The values systemic to Western civilization (e.g., free expression, individual self-determination and an array of human rights) are detached from their foundation and their origins in Reformation thinking. It is a civilization that has no ethical or moral foundation. It therefore is also a civilization that has no clear path to the future. It is a civilization framed around the EU that seeks some form of economic unity, but this involves monetary unity without fiscal unity—and this is not working very well (e.g., Greece). It is a civilization framed around the EU and the nebulous NATO that is almost pacifistic in its fear of military solutions. It poses no real threat to Putin’s shenanigans and seems shocked when he continues his escapades in

Ukraine. So, as Mead argues, “The EU has failed to see that refugee and asylum policy must have three distinct components: the compassionate embrace of those in great need, a tough-minded effort to reduce the flow at its source by correcting or preventing the problems that give rise to it, and an effective border-control regime that limits the number of refugees and migrants who reach EU soil.” The blunder of the EU and the United States in both Syria and Libya is not only a political and military blunder, it is a humanitarian blunder: “The feckless mix of intervention and indifference in Libya and the equally feckless failure to intervene in Syria have helped to trigger the flows of migrants [and refugees] that are overwhelming Europe’s institutions.”

That this is a humanitarian crisis unfolding before our very eyes is clear. The leaders of the West, including the United States, must meet these needs. But, these leaders must also recognize their complicity in causing this crisis. Mead has helped us understand the nature of that complicity. We must correct that. The basic disengagement of the United States is a partial cause of this crisis as well. But the feeble EU policies are shameful and the EU must realize that at some point some form of military response will be needed in Ukraine to stop Putin and in the Middle East to deal with the source of the refugee crisis, namely events in Syria and Libya. The failure of the Middle Eastern nation states is disgraceful as well. I believe that nothing more accurately demonstrates the hopelessness and dastardly evil nature of our fallen, broken world than the current Middle East. This humanitarian crisis has been caused by fallen humanity. In the end, it can only be solved by the compassion, wisdom, discernment and understanding that is sourced in and available from God. May our leaders seek Him and seek His solutions.

See *The Economist* (12 September 2015), p. 13; Peggy Noonan in the *Wall Street Journal* (12-13 September 2015); and Walter Russel Mead in the same issue of the *Wall Street Journal*.