



REFUGEES, MIGRANTS AND ISLAMOPHOBIA

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



In a briefing to the UN Security Council in April 2019, Mr. Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has expressed his disillusionment at the harshness of language in politics, media, as well as the social media, against refugees and migrants. Mr. Grandi also stated that this is a global crisis which needs to be addressed very seriously. “To portray this as a global crisis that is not manageable, in my opinion, ... is wrong,” he said. “With political will, which you represent here at the highest level, [and] with improved responses as they are enshrined in the Global Compact on Refugees, adopted by the General Assembly in December 2018, it is possible and urgent to address these crises, and you as Security Council have a critical role.”¹

Recent years have witnessed a steep rise in the number of refugees and migrants moving across borders. According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there were an estimated 40 million IDP's, 25.4 million refugees and 3.1 million asylum seekers in 2018.² This rise in movement across borders has brought about several problems and has also resulted in numerous deaths and other unfortunate incidents like rape, child abuse, human smuggling and more. Different states have responded to the inflows of migrants and refugees in different ways and there have been cases where the migrants have been turned away from the borders. Extended conflicts and

¹ Dana Sleiman, “UN Refugee Chief urges Security Council for firm response to record high displacement”, *UNHCR*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/neu/25867-un-refugee-chief-urges-security-council-for-firm-response-to-record-high-displacement.html>

² <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>

instability has led to these mass movements, and due to the persistent instability, this issue remains pertinent, and, it also raises several questions about the failure of the international community to act in this regard.

The rationale for migration has also been propelled by factors such as education and employment opportunities, as well as better living conditions. The recent years have also been marked by a rise in anti-immigrant and populist themes in Europe during election seasons and this, along with an increase in the presence and popularity of the far right parties, has added fuel to the fire. This has resulted in influencing public opinion as well, and with increasing unemployment and economic downslide, the fear of refugees and migrants taking up job opportunities has been a factor in this animosity against the migrant community. Therefore, an increase in the extremist mindset, as well as fundamentalist tendencies has made it very challenging for host countries to deal with migrant flows. Failure of the international community to devise effective and pragmatic measures is also a case in point.

However, there is more to the migrant crisis than apparently revealed. For example, there is a growing rise in Islamophobia across Europe, as well as in the spate of violence and conflict in the Middle East, which has resulted in mounting xenophobia and Islamophobia as major issues in some European countries. Islamophobia in Europe has been fuelled by the indigenous publics' unease by mostly Muslim immigration, and also, integration of Muslim societies in Europe. Consequently, implication of Muslims in terror attacks in Europe has also exacerbated the situation. By far, the resistance against the integration of the 'other' has contributed to increasing xenophobia in the West. Government policies have also been responsible as migrants have often complained of discrimination with regards to equal opportunities related to work.

Similarly, the 9/11 attacks have also been an important factor in altering opinions about Muslim refugees and migrants in the West. The use of religion by terrorists has further aggravated the situation, as it has come to be commonly believed that Islam promotes violence, and therefore, is a threat. Such stereotypes have been instrumental in promoting Islamophobia and prejudice in Western societies. Both these phenomena manifest themselves through different ways and have given rise to a new stigma for Muslims. Moreover, the ban on wearing certain religious symbols is an example of how Muslims have been targeted and not allowed the freedom to practice their religion. For instance, the face veil ban stirred a lot of debate in France and Denmark on the freedom of expression. Similarly, Belgium and Austria have also passed a similar ban. Apart from this, attacks on mosques across Europe have also shown how the seeds of hatred sown over the years are now reaping such negative behaviors.

The rise of identity politics has to be blamed on governments, as well as the far right nationalist politicians across Europe. The statements by senior government officials like ministers reveal that Islamophobia and the anti-immigrant sentiment stem from the same source and are rooted in the former. For example, in France, a student union leader Maryam Pougetox, appeared in a TV interview in a hijab and was described as ‘provocative’ and ‘shocking’ by the Interior Minister Gerard Collomb.³

The failure of the international community as a whole, as well as the United Nations, is evident as the world struggles with the migrant crisis. The cases concerning stranded refugees, the deportation of refugees, and their vulnerability, just goes on to compound the challenges of migration and refugees. A more robust effort is no doubt required at all levels. The fact that the Global Compact on Migration is legally non-binding,⁴ makes it weak as it only rests on the values of human rights and non-discrimination. Similarly, refugee resettlement also rests solely on the discretion of the resettling state and no other authority can prevail or dictate regarding this matter.⁵ The absence of refugee settlement in international law is also a factor which makes these compacts on migration and refugees relatively weak and ineffective. It can be said that the issue of migrants and refugees is highly complex and is a very severe challenge for the global community, and without the support of governments, this challenge remains unaddressed. In order to deal with this challenge, the governments must come forward with sound strategies and counter Islamophobes or else hatred and discrimination for fellow citizens will give rise to highly toxic societies devoid of any tolerance.

³ Sholto Byrnes, “The rise of Islamophobia in Europe is being normalised by intellectuals – but they are pushing at an already open door”, *The National*, June 4, 2018
<https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/the-rise-of-islamophobia-in-europe-is-being-normalised-by-intellectuals-but-they-are-pushing-at-an-already-open-door-1.736877>

⁴ Global Compact for Migration, <https://refugeesmigrants.un.org/migration-compact>

⁵ Adele Garnier, Kristin Bergtora Sandvick, Liliana Lyra Jubilut, What are the issues facing refugee resettlement? *World Economic Forum*, October 24, 2018,
<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/10/the-needs-challenges-and-power-dynamics-of-refugee-resettlement/>